

JONAH

WRITER

The writer of the book does not specifically name himself as the writer. We assume he is the writer from the statement that is made of the writer in 1:1. He was the son of Amittai. His name means “dove.” He was from Gath-hepher in the territory of Zebulun in northern Israel. His ministry took place during the reign of Jeroboam II who was king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

The ministry of Jonah began after Elisha. He was contemporary with Amos and Hosea who prophesied in the northern kingdom, and Isaiah and Micah who ministered in the southern kingdom. The contents of the book point out that Jonah was very patriotic to the Israelite people. However, his patriotism led him to be somewhat prejudiced in relation to concern for the salvation of other peoples. By this time in the history of the northern kingdom, the Israelites had long forgotten their responsibility of being a light to the Gentiles. Instead of reaching out to the nations with their belief in the one true and living God, they had become very introverted culturally.

DATE

The reign of Jeroboam II began around 782 B.C. Since Jonah’s ministry was during the reign of this king, then Jonah’s ministry took place at the end of the northern kingdom. The north would fall to the Assyrians in 722/21 B.C. The book was possibly written, therefore, during the latter part of the reign of Jeroboam II.

BOOK

Since the ministry of Jonah to Nineveh took place in the latter years of the northern kingdom, then we understand why God sent Jonah to Nineveh. Through the prophets Isaiah, Amos and Hosea, God revealed that He was sending His people into Assyrian captivity. In order to prepare the way for them, He wanted Jonah go to the Assyrian people and preach repentance toward the one true and living God. Jonah was the religious cultural bridge to bring the hearts of the Assyrians closer to God in preparation for the coming of the Israelite captives. It seemed that Jonah did not understand this mission, and thus he manifested this resistance to God’s call to go to Nineveh. Though Jonah knew that his fellow prophets had stated that the northern kingdom was going into Assyrian captivity, he did not want to give the Assyrians any opportunity to escape the impending threat that was coming within forty days of his arrival in Nineveh. He did not want to give Israel’s enemies any

advantage of salvation by giving them the opportunity to repent. Nevertheless, God accomplished his mission through the reluctant prophet, and thus spared the inhabitants of Nineveh from the approaching danger of destruction.

The irony of the story of Jonah is that the Assyrian king and people repented in sackcloth and ashes in response to the message of Jonah, while at the same time the kings and people of the northern kingdom of Israel would not repent in response to the preaching of Jonah, Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. At this time in history, God's people had digressed so far away from the knowledge of God that the pagan nation of Assyria to whom Jonah was sent to preach was more responsive to the message of God than God's people (See comments Hs 4:6). The lesson of the book of Jonah is that God's people can become so arrogant and withdrawn, as they were in the years of Jeroboam II (See comments of Am), that they are beyond repentance. In the case of Assyria, God had to raise up people who would carry on with the message of the one true and living God in order to bring Israel out of idolatry. Jonah is an example of the preachers of God's people who become so self-consumed with their ministry with the people of God that they, as Jonah, fight against God's mission to go out to those who would be sincerely repentant if they only had an opportunity to hear the message of the good news of God. There are many lessons we reap from the book of Jonah. But this important lesson is evident throughout the book, teaching us that as the people of God we must never become so consumed with ourselves that we withdraw from those to whom we are sent to preach the gospel.

The Flight of Jonah

(1:1 – 2:20)

Outline: (1) Flight from responsibility (1:1-14), (2) Overboard and overpowered (1:15 – 2:10)

Chapter 1

FLIGHT

FROM RESPONSIBILITY

1:1-3 Though the mission of Jonah that is revealed in the book was specifically to the city of Nineveh, his ministry as a prophet extended over several years (2 Kg 14:25). **Go to Nineveh:** This capital of the Assyrian Empire has been estimated to have had a population of almost 650,000 people at the time of Jonah's

ministry. The administrative district of the city with all its suburbs was at least 75 kilometers in circumference. The inner city was surrounded by a wall that was approximately 30 meters wide at the top. There was a great temple in the city and a library that is believed to have contained over 10,000 tablets of ancient writings. **Wickedness:** The sinful actions of the Ninevites were evidently well known among the Near East nations (See comments Nh). We would assume that Jonah had some apprehension about going to this city because of her wickedness. Since he was a prophet from Israel, he may have felt threatened by those of this foreign nation that would in the years to

come, bring down destruction on the northern kingdom of Israel. **Jonah rose up to flee:** Jonah later confessed that he fled because he feared that Nineveh would repent (4:2). The Assyrians were the future captors of Israel, and thus Jonah did not want to give the Assyrians the opportunity to repent and be saved by a gracious God. If they repented, then God would spare the city from destruction. During his ministry to the northern kingdom of Israel, the northern kingdom under Jeroboam II prospered greatly. It may have been that Jonah was living in a time when he did not want to be seen as a prophet who encouraged any of the enemies of Israel. His prophecy to a foreign nation would possibly have been viewed by those in Israel as unpatriotic, and thus disadvantageous to the well-being of Israel. Through the prophets, the Israelites had been warned of their future fall to a nation that would invade from the north. It may have been that Jonah did not want to be a part in aiding any nation to the north of Palestine. The reasons for Jonah's flight from his commission were complicated, but great enough to make this prophet of God to flee from his responsibility to all those who would be responsive to the message of God. **From the presence of the Lord:** Jonah certainly knew that he could never escape the presence of the God who is everywhere. Whatever his reasons for going to Tarshish to the west, it was in the opposite direction from where he was commissioned to go to Nineveh to the east. **Tarshish:** This may have been a Phoenician colony that was in Spain (See

Is 23:1-12; Ez 27:12,25).

1:4-9 Sailors were afraid: These sailors had experienced storms before in the Mediterranean Sea. However, there was something more severe about this storm, for the ship was about to break up. The situation was so perilous that each sailor began to plead to his own god for deliverance. They then threw overboard the cargo in order to lighten the ship. While all this turmoil was transpiring, Jonah was fast asleep. **O sleeper:** Jonah was not only sleeping, he was in a deep sleep, totally unaware of the danger in which all on the ship were in. **Your God:** The Hebrew word here refers to all gods in general. The sailors were all religious, believing in the gods of their imagination and particular nations. To them, the God of Israel was only one god among all the gods of the nations. **Cast lots:** The fact that sailors cast lots indicated that they did not believe that this was an ordinary storm (See Nm 26:55; Ja 7:14; 1 Sm 10:20,21; At 1:26). We would correctly conclude that God determined the results of the casting of the lots, for the lot fell on Jonah. **Made the sea:** The One who was the creator of all things was at this time creating a situation wherein His prophet would repent of his lack of submission to His will (See Ps 8:1-4; 65:5-7; 107:23-32; 139; compare Mk 4:35-41).

OVERBOARD AND OVERPOWERED

1:10-17 Exceedingly afraid: They concluded that if the God of Jonah could cause such a great storm at sea, then cer-

tainly He was a God that must be feared. They thus could not understand why Jonah would have offended such a God. During the time of the casting of the lots, and the questioning of Jonah, the storm increased. **Cast me out into the sea:** It seems that Jonah also realized that there was no hope. His valiant request manifested that there was no hope for anyone lest he sacrifice himself for them. He knew that God was the cause of the storm. **Cried out to the Lord:** The sailors at this time changed in using a generic term in reference to the God of Jonah, to the specific reference that the Jews used, Jehovah God. The response of the sailors reveals that God used the flight of Jonah and the storm to convert a ship of sailors. At least the sailors realized that no one could flee from the God in whom Jonah believed and had been commissioned (See Ps 139:7-10). **Cast him into the sea:** Though they were reluctant to fulfill the request of Jonah, they obviously realized that they were all going to perish. **The sea ceased:** See comments Mt 14:22-33. These sailors had the same response to the calming of the sea as the disciples of Jesus when He calmed the sea. They realized that the God of Jonah had control of the seas. Regardless of Jonah's flight from his missionary responsibilities to Nineveh, he here became a witness to the wonders of God among a group of sailors who had previously believed in pagan gods. **Prepared a great fish:** It is not necessary to compare this great fish with any known whale that exists today. The record states that God prepared a special fish for this mission.

The God who created all things could certainly create a dwelling for Jonah in order to give him time to come to his senses. And since Jesus confirmed this event as a historical fact, then we cannot deny the facts of the event itself (Mt 12:40).

Chapter 2

2:1-10 In confessing and promising obedience, Jonah praised God for His deliverance from the depths of the sea. His prayer in the belly of the big fish, while entangled with sea weeds, was a prayer of repentance. He realized that his life meant nothing if it was not given in obedience to the will of God. **Sheol:** In Hebrew theology, this was the realm of the dead. The situation in which Jonah was at the time of his prayer of lamentation, was as if he were dead (See Ps 88:3-12; 120:1; 142:1; compare Lm 3:55-58). **You had cast me:** These statements were written after the events that led up to Jonah being vomited out on dry land. Jonah concluded that all his ordeal was the work of God. He realized that God used his ordeal to bring him to repentance and acceptance of his mission to Nineveh. **Out of Your sight:** Because of his disobedience of the commission to go to Nineveh, Jonah realized that he was cast out of favor by the omnipresent God. **I will look again:** Repentance was in his heart. It was as if he were saying that he would obey the mission if delivered from the situation. **I remembered the Lord:** When in a time of despair, Jonah did not accuse God of some injustice. He acknowledged his sin that brought him to the calamity in which he was. **Forsake**

their faithfulness: Those who have given themselves over to the imaginations of their own misguided knowledge of the God, will not in the time of calamity, know the God to whom they should voice their repentance (Compare comments Hs 4:6). **Voice of thanksgiving:** Because he realized that he was the victim of his own disobedience, Jonah voiced thanksgiving to God for His deliverance. **I have vowed:** We would conclude that Jonah was delivered from the belly of the fish because he repented, and thus promised God that he would assume his commission to go to Nineveh. He thus did not go back on his word, for from the dry beach he headed for the destiny that God had given to him.

Recommissioned

(3:1-10)

Outline: (1) Obedience to the mission (3:1-4), (2) A nation repents (3:5-10)

Chapter 3

OBEDIENCE TO THE MISSION

3:1-3 Go to Nineveh: This was Jonah's destiny. His ministry of preaching was without social challenges within his own homeland. However, God's commission that he go into a foreign culture and preach to Gentiles at first seemed too great for a culturally introverted Jew. Nevertheless, the bigoted Jew made his way to Nineveh, fulfilling his calling to preach repentance to a people whom God also loved. **Exceedingly great city:** Jonah would have certainly been impressed with the size of Nineveh. Archaeological investigations have revealed

that the inner walls of the city were about ten kilometers in circumference, having about 1,500 towers. In this context, reference was to the complete administrative area of Nineveh. Including all the suburbs, the city expanded to an distance of at least 75 kilometers in circumference. **Three days' journey:** It is difficult to determine the correct understand of the Hebrew text at this point. Some translators have suggested that the size of the city given in this contexts meant that it took three days to walk around the city. Others have suggested that the meaning here is in reference to the time that Jonah spent in preaching within the city. If this is the meaning, then Jonah would have probably stopped at different locations within the city in order to preach his message during the three days.

A NATION REPENTS

3:4-10 Yet forty days: This would not be the totality of Jonah's message, but the overview of the message that he said to the people. Nineveh was a vile city of wickedness. Since the judgment was to come within forty days, then certainly there must have been some impending threat by foreign powers that was about to overrun the city. With the stimulus of the prevailing threat, and the message of Jonah, the king and people knew that there was only one recourse, and that was repentance. **The people of Nineveh believed:** More is involved in this repentance than what is said. Jesus said that they "*repented unto the preaching of Jonah*" (Mt 12:41). They not only repented of their vile wickedness, but

turned in obedience to that which Jonah preached. Their repentance involved a change in behavior, not simply a change in thinking. Thus the Israelite prophets, whose message would not change the lives of their own people, changed the lives of those who were not God's chosen people. The nation that would eventually become the captors of God's people were more receptive than those who were God's chosen people. For this reason, the testimony of the Ninevites' repentance would rise up in judgment against all those who would refuse to repent (See comments Mt 12:38-41). At this time in history, the northern kingdom of Israel had become so resistant to the preaching of the prophets that they were more hardened to the word of God than those who took them into captivity. Restoration movements to the word of God, as was Israel when delivered out of Egyptian captivity, can sometimes move so far away from their dedication to the word of God, that they become less receptive to God's word than those who have never had the opportunity to hear the truth of God's word. **Turn from his evil way:** The mission of Jonah was not only to manifest God's concern for the Ninevites, but to prepare the way for God's people. If we accept the early date of Jonah's ministry, then the purpose for Jonah's mission was to prepare the way for the captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel. Later in history when God took the southern kingdom into Babylonian captivity, He also prepared the way. He sent Daniel and his three friends to Babylon several years before the fall of Jerusa-

lem in 586 B.C. (See comments Dn). God cared for His people while they were in Palestine, as well as while they were in the lands of their captors. **Nineveh will be overthrown:** The Ninevites were shocked by the possible fall of their empire, and thus the receptivity of the people was made possible by the work of God to bring them closer to the world view of the Israelites. Their repentance, therefore, paved the way for the coming of many captive Israelites into their culture after the 722/21 B.C. conquest of the northern kingdom. **Sackcloth ... ashes:** Sackcloth was a coarse garment made of goat's hair. The garment was worn by those in mourning (See 1 Kg 20:31; Is 15:3; Jr 49:3; Ez 27:31). When an individual was in deep mourning, he would sit in ashes, indicating the worst possible emotional condition in which one was at the time of mourning. **God relented of the calamity:** On this occasion, the Ninevites turned from their wickedness. They were thus spared the calamity that God was going to bring on them within forty days. However, this would not be the case when the city eventually fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. Both Nahum and Zephaniah prophesied against Nineveh before the 612 destruction. At that time, they did not repent, and thus they fell, never to rise again. It is for this reason that the early date of Jonah's ministry is to be preferred, since Nineveh was spared in reference to the threat at the time, from which threat of destruction they were spared because of their repentance.

Conversation With God

(4:1-11)

Outline: (1) Displeasure of Jonah (4:1-3), (2) Counsel of God (4:4-9), (3) God's world mission (4:10,11)

Chapter 4

DISPLEASURE OF JONAH

4:1-3 From what Jonah states here, it would seem that he believed his fellow contemporary prophets Amos, Hosea and Isaiah who said that Israel would fall to an invading nation from the north. He surely identified this invading nation to be the Assyrians (See Hs 9:3; 11:5,11; Am 5:27). What he did not understand was the purpose for his mission. Because of his resentment against the Assyrians, he failed to understand that his mission was to prepare the culture of Assyria for the arrival of the Israelite captives who would come less than forty years from the time of his preaching. The saving of the Assyrians from the unknown impending threat that would come upon them within forty days was, to Jonah, the condemnation of his own people to destruction. He believed the prophets who said that Israel would go into captivity because of their wickedness. ***Please take my life:*** In his bigotry and resentment of the repentance of the Assyrians, Jonah pouted. Simply because one was inspired to preach the word of God did not guarantee that the preacher's character would be changed by that which he preached (See comments G1 2:11-13). Jonah possibly felt embarrassed before his own countrymen because he had preached to the nation that the prophets in Palestine,

Hosea, Amos and Isaiah, said would be the nation that would conquer them. He possibly thought that his own life might be in danger when he returned to his homeland, and thus requested that he die before returning home.

COUNSEL OF GOD

4:4-9 God asked Jonah if he had any right to be angry. In asking the question, God was stating His displeasure with Jonah's attitude. In order to illustrate the childish behavior of Jonah, God caused a gourd to grow up in order to give him shade. Once Jonah enjoyed the shade of the gourd, God caused a worm to smite the gourd. Then Jonah again wished to die. He had not created the gourd, but was displeased when it was taken away. Jonah's anger was based on his inability to separate the sinner from the sin. He should have been angry with the sin of the Assyrians, not the Assyrians themselves. In the illustration, the gourd was not the problem, but the worm. The Assyrians were people God wanted to repent. They too were people He wanted to bring into eternity. It was their sin that brought moral decay to their society. God hated the sin, but loved the sinners.

GOD'S WORLD MISSION

4:10,11 God wanted Jonah to see himself in the destruction of the gourd. He was more concerned over the withering of the gourd than over the sinful state of the thousands of people in the city of Nineveh. ***Should I not spare Nineveh:*** The question of verse 11 is not answered by God. He expects Jonah to answer the

question, and thus give the correct answer. Would God be just in condemning a nation to destruction that would repent upon the preaching of His word? The answer would certainly be that He would not be a just God. On the other hand, Jonah's homeland must face destruction

because they had the blessing of the preaching of the prophets, but they did not repent. God would not have been a just God to allow them to go without punishment in their unrepentant state of sin. God is not willing that any should perish (See comments 2 Pt 3:9).