

Jonah #1

The Book of Jonah is one of the most carefully and artfully composed of all the Bible books. Just 1300 words long, its four chapters take less than 10 minutes to read.

It has inspired other much longer books, including Pinocchio (40,000 words) and Moby Dick (216,000 words!).

Like the Book of Ruth that we studied previously, it has many layers of meaning, some of which we'll explore during this series.

And I want us to read it how we read Ruth, listening to it in the way you would listen to any other story, and doing our best to imagine what it would have been like to be the original hearers.

It is set in the eighth century BC, just before Israel's northern kingdom (the blue one) was destroyed by its Assyrian neighbours.

Jonah, the only named human in the book, is an Israelite prophet. But unlike other Old Testament prophets he spends most of his time disobeying and being angry with God.

All the other characters in the story are not Israelites, and yet they are regularly portrayed as being more sympathetic to Israel's God than Jonah is.

We don't know much about Jonah's background, except for a brief mention in the second book of Kings...

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria... He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.

2 Kings 14:23-25 (abbreviated text)

We know this is the same Jonah, because his father, Amittai, is mentioned. And it would appear that Jonah was a ‘respected’ prophet, having correctly prophesied that Jeroboam would reclaim land that had previously been captured by one of Israel’s many enemies.

Jonah’s home town was Gath Hepher, 3 miles away from a place you may have heard of, Nazareth.

And so let’s begin our journey...

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’

Jonah 1:1-2

Like many of the Old Testament prophets, the Book of Jonah opens with God telling him what his mission is to be.

Jonah’s job description is to go to the city of Nineveh and ‘preach against it’ because of its ‘wickedness’.

It is at this point that you would have heard the original audience draw a deep collective breath. They would have known that a Hebrew prophet’s job was to bring God’s words to Israel, not to visit other nations.

And this was not just any nation. At the time the Book of Jonah was written, Assyria was Israel’s most feared enemy.

In the British Museum you can view a magnificent black obelisk that depicts a number of victories of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, including one panel that shows the Israelite King Jehu, or one of his officials, kneeling at Shalmaneser’s feet following an Assyrian victory over Israel (2 Kings 10:32-33?).

Nineveh was one of Assyria’s biggest cities, about 600 miles from Jonah’s home town.

Nineveh was dominated by a large temple devoted to Ishtar, an important goddess associated with love, fertility, storm and war (yes, they seem to go together well).

Portrayals of Ishtar often show her with a tamed lion, demonstrating her ability to control the forces of nature, chaos and danger.

And yet God is telling Jonah to travel to Nineveh, and preach against it.

It's a fool's mission, like sending a Jewish rabbi to denounce a Nazi rally.

And yet, despite the risk, the faithful prophet Jonah packed his saddle bags, loaded up his camel and headed off to Nineveh... oh... no...

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Jonah 1:3

God tells Jonah to get up and go. Jonah gets up and flees.

God tells him to go east. Jonah goes west.

God tells Jonah to go overland. Jonah heads for the sea.

He travels 70 miles to the sea port of Joppa (modern day Jaffa, near Tel Aviv) and books himself on a boat to Tarshish. The precise location of Tarshish is debated, but the best guess is that it was on the coast of Spain, 2,500 miles away from Israel.

Now Jonah is a Hebrew prophet, he knows that the God of Israel is not like the other gods, limited to their home territories. Are we really supposed to believe that he thinks he can run away from the true God, the God who created and sustains the universe?

But when you think about it, we do similar stuff.

We know that God is with us at all times. In fact, as Christians we know that he indwells us by the power of his Holy Spirit. And yet we still do things that we know God doesn't want us to do.

Knowing something is true doesn't always affect the way we behave.

What Jonah does is what people of faith often do when they don't like the way that God seems to be working (or not working) in their lives.

When you've prayed faithfully for something and it hasn't happened.

When bad stuff happens in your life that you don't think you deserve.

You don't say it to other Christians. You probably don't even say it to yourself, because you know it's stupid. But deep down, you decide that you know better than God, and take things into your own hands.

And when you do this, you put as much distance as you possibly can from anything that is *associated* with God. You stop reading the Bible. You stop attending church. You avoid your Christian friends.

In fact, you would travel to the end of the earth to avoid any association with God. Just like Jonah did.

The narrator wants us to know that this is not a moment of madness. Jonah has set his face against obeying God. Verse 3 opens and closes with Jonah running away from God and heading for Tarshish.

And he's going by sea. This is significant.

Apart from a brief period during Solomon's reign (1 Kings 9-10), and a disastrous venture by Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:48) Israel was never a seafaring nation.

In the Old Testament, the sea is portrayed as a place of chaos and danger. It's the place where the legendary creature Leviathan lives, a huge, terrifying aquatic dragon which became the symbol of anything that threatens Israel's security.

The original hearers of this story will be looking at one another with knowing looks, nothing good is going to come of this.

And sure enough...

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

Jonah 1:4-5

You can run from the God of Israel, but you can't hide. God sends (literally 'hurls') a great wind at the sea creating a storm that batters and damages the boat.

Notice how Jonah is trying to ignore the true God who has spoken to him, while the instinct of the sailors is for each of them to cry out to their false gods to ask them to pay attention to their situation.

But the sailors' gods stick their fingers in their ears.

So, as the waves relentlessly pound and break over their ship, the sailors do what they can to prevent the boat from sinking, including lightening it by throwing the cargo overboard.

But where's Jonah?

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.'

Jonah 1:5b-6

Jonah's still hiding from God. The Hebrew word translated as 'deep sleep' can also mean 'stupor' or 'unconsciousness.' It's possible that he has been attempting to drown his sorrows with alcohol.

The captain starts going around the ship to make sure that all the passengers are OK. When he comes across Jonah, slumped and snoring on the floor, he is amazed that Jonah is so unaware of the danger they are in, and tells him to get up and call on his 'god' for help.

The Hebrew words translated ‘get up and call’ are the same words God used when he told Jonah to go to Nineveh. First God called Jonah to speak to pagans, now a pagan is calling Job to speak to his God.

Now some of you may be thinking, ‘hmm... where else have I heard about someone sleeping during a storm, woken up by a terrified crew?’

And, yes, a similar story appears in three of the four gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew we read...

Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!’

Matthew 8:24-25

And this is probably no coincidence.

A while back we looked at the life of David, and how the Old Testament often foreshadows the New Testament, in particular the way that David was a ‘type,’ a foreshadowing, of Jesus.

As unlikely as it seems, Jonah is also a ‘type’ of Jesus. And yes, I know, Jonah disobeys God. And, spoiler alert, things don’t get much better as the story progresses. Remember, David wasn’t perfect either.

But at least David had a tendency to turn to God when he’s in trouble. Jonah doesn’t even pray. Jonah has turned his back on God, and has no desire to resume communication with him.

And so back to the story...

Then the sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.’ They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, ‘Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’

Jonah 1:7-8

The story shifts back to the sailors. As none of their gods have stopped the storm, they assume that someone on the boat must have upset one or more of them. And so they decide to ‘cast lots’ to find out who’s to blame.

‘Lots’ were used for making decisions in many ancient cultures, they were sticks, or small pieces of pottery, often marked with symbols.

They would be thrown onto the ground, and depending on how they fell, decisions would be made. Think ‘heads or tails’.

And so the lots are cast. Possibly using an either/or system.

‘If it’s from the crew, heads. If it’s from the passengers, tails.’

‘OK, tails... so it’s a passenger.’

‘Now, if it’s a male, heads. If it’s a female, tails.’

And so on, and so on.

And knock me down with a feather, the guilty party is Jonah.

The crew’s terror turns to anger at Jonah. They want answers as to why they’re in this situation, and they ask him a flurry of questions which reflect their fear and confusion...

— Who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?

— What kind of work do you do?

— Where do you come from?

— What is your country?

— From what people are you?’

At root these are identity questions. They want to know Jonah’s purpose, where he’s from and his race.

And for the first time in the story, Jonah speaks...

He answered, ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’

Jonah's reply answers most of the sailors' questions. The only one he doesn't answer is what kind of work he does, probably because he's not sure right now!

Jonah says he worships the LORD, the God of heaven who made 'the sea and the dry land.'

As the words leave his mouth, he must have cringed inside. Yes, he's a Hebrew. But is he worshipping the LORD? The all powerful God who has control of the sea that is threatening to drown him and the rest of the boat's crew? The all powerful God that he was stupid enough to try and run away from?

And so Jonah stands there, bedraggled and terrified, probably nursing a hangover, possibly the most miserable man in the entire world.

This terrified them and they asked, 'What have you done?' (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

Jonah 1:10

At this point, the crew are putting two and two together. The author lets us know that Jonah has already told them he is running away from God. They probably took this with a pinch of salt at the time. In their line of work they would have come across many people who were on the run from something.

But now their lives were in danger. They now know which 'god' is angry, and at who. And, understandably, they're curious as to what great crime Jonah has committed to bring this disaster upon them.

Jonah doesn't answer their question. He knows this is his fault. He realises how stupid it was to try and run from God. And in doing so he's endangered the lives of many people. So he simply stares back at them.

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?'

Jonah 1:11

Realising that he wasn't going to answer their question, and knowing that time was running out, the crew desperately ask what they can do to placate Jonah's God.

Jonah decides he's had enough.

'Pick me up and throw me into the sea,' he replied, 'and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.'

Jonah 1:12

We're not told whether Jonah knows that the crew throwing him into the sea will stop the storm. If he is thinking rationally at all, he probably believes that, one way or another, his life is over. He's turned his back on the one true God. He's responsible for the storm that is threatening the lives of all the people on the boat.

If the ship doesn't survive the storm, he'll drown. If the ship does survive the storm, his best guess is that the crew will kill him.

Jonah has run out of options. He believes that his death is inevitable.

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.' Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Jonah 1:13-16

Whether out of compassion, or doubt that Jonah's plan of action will work, the crew decide to make one last attempt to reach land.

But the storm gets even worse, and in desperation they decide to do what Jonah has told them.

Jonah refused to pray, but the crew pray to Jonah's God, and the wording makes it plain that they want to make sure that what they are

doing won't anger him even further. They then grab Jonah and throw him into waves.

And the storm calms.

The crews' response is awe at Jonah's God's power. What Jonah said would happen has happened.

They don't understand who this God is, but they do know that he has answered their prayers.

And they respond by offering a sacrifice, and make vows to Jonah's God, probably of continued allegiance to him.

And so, that should be the end of the story. But as you probably know, it's not. So, we'll continue our adventure in a month's time.