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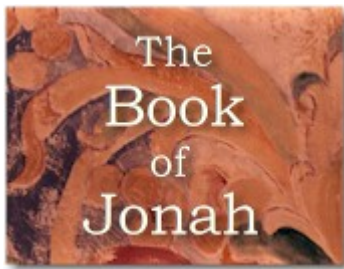
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## The Book of Jonah

by Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D., May 1997

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Read the accompanying [Newsletter for May 2013](#)



**No prophet in the Bible has more information about the rationale for prophecy and the doctrinal teachings of God than the prophet Jonah. This prophet is 5<sup>th</sup> in the series of the Twelve Minor Prophets. Jonah prophesied in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. This article discusses Jonah in his Old Testament context. Nonetheless, Jonah is important to comprehend not only prophetic issues as they pertain to modern times, but his experience is fundamental because it has a New Testament theme as its foundational basis.**

This prophecy of Jonah contains what we might call, “the gospel according to Jonah.” It is referred to by Jesus as a foundational prophecy which relates to Christ Himself, the Messiah, His mission, and particularly His death and resurrection from the dead. Jonah is very important for understanding the New Testament teachings of God.

First I will deal with the historical and prophetic aspect of Jonah. In another article I will focus on the doctrinal theme of the prophecy as it relates to New Testament teachings. This prophecy confirms the role of Christ Jesus in all its Biblical characteristics whether in an Old Testament or New Testament sense. To begin, we need to understand the Old Testament context in which this prophecy came to be written.

Jonah was written when the Assyrians were in the ascendant in the Gentile world, and when northern Israel was still a nation with its capital at Samaria, and Judah was in the south with its capital at Jerusalem. The Book of Jonah has been dated by normal chronologies to around 760 BC.

The book concerns a mission which the prophet Jonah was given to go to the ancient Assyrians. Assyria was northeast of Palestine, located in the northern area of Mesopotamia between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, and in the area of what today is northern Iraq. The nation of Assyria bridged over the Taurus Mountains into the area of the Black Sea. This region, which we know today as eastern Turkey, northern Iran and the mountain regions of Ararat, is the region where the ark came to rest in the time of Noah. The whole region was settled by the ancient Assyrians, who came from Asshur, a son of Shem. But many other people became Assyrians and some of them were Abrahamic. We find that Abraham’s children by Keturah, many of them journeyed to the east and became “Ashurim.” They became Assyrians.

In this region they created a majestic and wonderful kingdom. It was almost an empire by this time

because the Assyrians were the #1 military power on earth. There were others, of course, the Egyptians in the south, Edomites in the east, and other areas such as India. But in the region of prophetic importance we find the Assyrians, who were Gentiles and uncircumcised, in the ascendancy.

### Who Was Jonah?

You see, Jonah was an Israelite. Jonah was concerned about what the Assyrians were going to do to ancient Israel. In fact, Jonah was the only prophet of which we have record who came from Galilee in northern Israel, the only one who came from the region where the apostles were selected in the time of Jesus. Jonah was a northern Israelite who lived to the west of the Sea of Galilee, an area known as Gath-Hepher (2 Kings 14:25).<sup>1</sup> He would have been concerned about some of the northern neighbors who were beginning to flex their military might against the power of Israel in the north. The major empire developing at this time was the Assyrian empire.<sup>2</sup>

Jonah's name actually means "dove," like a pigeon. It signifies peace. He was not a peaceful prophet in the sense he understood that war was on the horizon for Israel. He could look around and see his nation disobeying God. Many were going over to Baal. We have the prophecies of Hosea, a little later perhaps, and parts of the prophecies of Joel uttered about the same time. They were indicating how Israel was going astray from God. We are talking about the northern kingdom of Israel, the northern 10 tribes (not the southern kingdom of Judah). In fact, they had about 100 more years to go.

Jonah was under the impression that God would punish the Israelites, his own people, very profoundly by the Assyrians. Prophecies were being uttered by other prophets who were saying the Assyrians were going to punish Israel for their evil and sinful ways. Yet Jonah was told by God to go to Gentiles, the Assyrians, and preach repentance to them.

This whole prophecy of 4 chapters is rather unique because it shows a prophecy very different from the other prophets, whether they be Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or the other 11 Minor Prophets. Jonah had the specific and unique commission to go to the Gentiles. He went to Israel, that is quite true. He continually prophesied to Israel, to his own people in the north, and to the people of Judah. He prophesied to them all. However, Jonah's commission in these 4 chapters was to go to the Gentiles, specifically the Assyrians.<sup>3</sup>

The notable thing about Jonah is he did not want to do the job which YHWH told him to do. All of us have learned from childhood about Jonah and the "whale," a special great fish actually, which God prepared.

Table 1: Structure of the Twelve Prophets

1	<i>Assyrian Period</i>	}	Hosea
2			Joel
3			Amos
4			Obadiah
5			<b><u>JONAH</u></b>
6			Micah
7			Nahum
8	<i>Babylonian Period</i>	}	Habakkuk
9			Zephaniah
10	<i>Post-Babylonian Period</i>	}	Haggai
11			Zechariah
12			Malachi

<sup>1</sup> Jonah probably gave this prophecy before Amos began his ministry. See Dr. Martin's "[The Book of Amos](#)," 2 Kings 14:25:

**"He [King Jeroboam II] restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of YHWH God of Israel, which he spoke by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gathhepher."**

Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria) for 41 years (2 Kings 14:23), although part of this time he may have had a co-regency with his father Jehoash. Jonah prophesied that Jeroboam II's kingdom would expand to the former extent of Israel during the united kingdom (excluding the southern portion of Judah and Benjamin). This is the only mention of the prophet outside of the Book of Jonah. Jeroboam fulfilled God's prophecy given through Jonah (2 Kings 14:28). Israel became rich. DWS

<sup>2</sup> I mentioned previously that the first 7 of the Twelve Minor Prophets all have to do with the period of the Assyrians when they were in ascendancy and the next 2 have to do with the Babylonian ascendancy and the last 3 of the Twelve Minor Prophets have to do with events after the Babylonian captivity. See Dr. Martin's article, [Minor Prophets for Today](#). ELM

<sup>3</sup> It would be like during the height of the Roman Empire having a Jew be given the commission to go to Rome, head of the world empire at the time. This was the way it was in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC when Jonah, the dove, the prophet from Israel was told to go to the Assyrians and tell them to repent. DWS

## The Reluctant Prophet

Jonah is known in history and in the Bible as the reluctant prophet. He is the prophet who fled from his duty which God told him to perform. He did not want to go and prophesy to the Assyrians, to tell them to repent. It is an extraordinary series of circumstances when you think of a prophet of God, who does not want to obey God, when he is sent to tell a group of Gentiles to repent of their sins. Jonah wanted to take the consequences of disobeying God on his own shoulders rather than have his people Israel be punished by these Assyrians, already determined by God to take place in the future.

Jonah took matters into his own hands and he should have not done it. He was reluctant, even rebellious, but he was still a prophet of God, and God honored him tremendously for what he did. We will find that this prophecy of Jonah figures prominently as a major theme when the New Testament was written and Christianity began to develop in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. He figures in as a most important type, a symbol, typologically Jonah was the symbolic prophet for the spread of the gospel after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jonah's home of Gath-Hepher was just north of Nazareth.<sup>4</sup> Jonah figured in very prominently as being like the Apostle Peter, as we will see when we get to the New Testament themes.

Most of us already know the story. I will read much of it and comment so you might comprehend it better than you thought. It is an exciting story; it is a true story. When you get the prophetic and doctrinal themes of the revelation of God, which are essential to understand what this is all about, it takes on a more profound meaning than what you might have learned before.

**“Now the word of YHWH came unto  
Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ...”**

• **Jonah 1:1**

Jonah did not feel it was necessary to note in his prophecy that he came from Gath-Hepher, but it is important to realize where he was from. He lived on the northern edge of Israel, and just over the horizon to the north was mighty Assyria, with Nineveh as its chief city, a country in existence well over 1,000 years, which was beginning to flex its muscles around the Mediterranean world at the time. When Jonah was prophesying, Assyria would have been considered the number one Gentile power in the world. So this word of YHWH comes to Jonah. Here is what He told Jonah:

**“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up unto me.”**

• **Jonah 1:2**

This is not surprising. Nineveh was a Gentile city. It had very little knowledge of God. But here is God saying to Jonah, an Israelite prophet, do not go to Israel but go north and go to Nineveh the chief city of Assyria. God says, **“their wickedness has come up to me”** and He wants them to repent of their ways.

At the very end of Jonah, God even admitted they **“cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand”** (Jonah 4:11). They had very little knowledge of God. They were wicked in their natural sense.



<sup>4</sup> Nazareth was a New Testament city. We have no evidence that Nazareth existed in Old Testament times. By New Testament times it is thought to be a priestly city but recently raised up. Gath-Hepher was just about 4 miles north of Nazareth where Jesus was reared. It was also about 1 mile west of Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine. *ELM*

Everybody in the world, whether they have the Gospel given to them, or whether they are part of Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism or whatever, we all by nature understand the basic rules of social existence do we not? We all know we should not be killing one another or stealing from one another. We all know we should practice righteousness, goodness, joy and happiness to others. To have a happy society obviously people should be walking in the rules of life which makes it pleasant for a social existence. Civilization as we call it. This is what God was talking about here. The Assyrians, however, were beginning to be wicked in other ways, and God wanted them to repent.

This was an extraordinary type of request from God for a prophet of YHWH, to abandon Israel and go to Nineveh, which was a great city. In the book of Jonah it says Nineveh was (when you get the geographical parameters correct) a city along the river Tigris, about sixty miles long. Nineveh was not wide but it was along the river. It took a three day journey, as we will see, to go through that city, walking about 20 miles a day. So it was a great city.

Look at verse 3. It starts out with the big word “but”: **“But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish.”** He was going in almost the opposite direction. Tarshish was the western part of the Mediterranean. It included North Africa but particularly it meant Spain. We have historical records to show there were many Jews in Spain, who established themselves there since the time of King Solomon.

Jonah wanted to go in a different direction than he was told to go by God. So what did he do? He fled from the **“presence of YHWH”** (Jonah 1:3, 10). Do you know what the phrase, **“presence of the Lord”** means? It means where God had His presence in Judah at this time, in the Temple at Jerusalem. What he wanted to do was go the opposite direction with his back to the Temple in Jerusalem. Jonah went down to Joppa.

Now Joppa is the port city of Jerusalem, located on the eastern part of the Mediterranean. If you went north some 100 miles you would come to Tyre and Sidon, the Phoenician cities mentioned in Obadiah.<sup>5</sup> Notice what Jonah did at Joppa:

**“He found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of YHWH.”**

• *Jonah 1:3*

### *Jonah and the Gentile Mariners*

He turned his back on God. There were Jews in Tarshish and Israelites in Spain, but Jonah had no intention of going to Nineveh for any reason in the world. He was a rebellious prophet.<sup>6</sup> Jonah gets on board and starts out. They were going westward, he should have gone northward:

**“But YHWH sent out a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea so that the ship was like to be broken.”**<sup>7</sup> [It was very tempestuous] **The mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god.”**

• *Jonah 1:4–5*

This shows that most of these mariners were Gentiles, Phoenicians. They were going to Tarshish, and were merchants.

**“... they cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it [the ship was heavy with goods]. But Jonah had gone to the sides of the ship and lay and was fast asleep.”**

• *Jonah 1:5*

<sup>5</sup> See Dr. Martin’s article [“The Book of Obadiah.”](#) DWS

<sup>6</sup> Notice that Jonah went to Joppa. Joppa will figure prominently in the New Testament story which has a theme relating to the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the rest of the world. ELM

<sup>7</sup> Keep in mind that in the book of Acts (27:27–31) when the apostle Paul was on his way to Rome and the ship was reeling back and forth for two solid weeks. Paul said if you stay in this vessel **“every one of you will be saved,”** and they were. ELM

Jonah did not seem to be concerned about the great tempest outside which caused havoc with this vessel in the middle of the Mediterranean. The ship must have been just south of Greece by this time. Jonah was fast asleep.<sup>8</sup> Most people would have been terrified, but not Jonah. Jonah was not terrified, because he knew the consequences of being a rebellious prophet to YHWH were not going to be pleasant.

He deliberately bought his ticket at Joppa. He deliberately got on board. Every step he took along the way was rebellion to God. He turned his back on the Temple of God. Who ever heard of anyone who has done such a thing? Well, actually many people do it, but here is a prophet of God doing it. He was in a position of great administrative power and authority. Jonah knew who he was, he had a long history of 30 years of prophesying in Israel. Yet he was fleeing. This was most remarkable. He was fast asleep. It goes on:

**“So the shipmaster came to him and said unto him, ‘What mean you, O sleeper? Arise, call upon your God, if so be that God will think of us, that we perish not.’ And they said every one to his fellow, ‘Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know whose cause this evil is upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.”**

• *Jonah 1:6–7*

They got him all right, yet they even wanted to save him. Look what happened.

**“They said unto him, ‘Tell us, we pray you, for what cause this evil is come upon us; What is your occupation? And whence come you?’”**

• *Jonah 1:8*

They asked him, where do you come from? What is your country? What people are you from? Why did they ask these questions?

**“And he said unto them, ‘I am an Hebrew [an Israelite]. I fear YHWH, the God of heaven which had made the sea and the dry land.’ And the men were exceeding afraid when they heard that.”**

• *Jonah 1:9–10*

Who was YHWH? He led the Israelites out of Egypt and caused mighty miracles including the ability to cross the Red Sea without their feet ever getting wet. They knew those stories and they were afraid.

**“And they said unto him, ‘Why have you done this?’ For the men knew that he fled from the presence of YHWH.”**

• *Jonah 1:10*

They knew it, because he told them. He said I am fleeing from YHWH. I am going away from my responsibility. They were saying (in paraphrase), “Oh my God, what are we in contact with here? Here is a rebellious prophet who is fleeing and we are being afflicted.”

**“Then said they unto him, ‘What shall we do unto you, that the sea may be calm unto us? For the sea wrought and was tempestuous [like a hurricane]. And he said unto them [notice, Jonah knew the answer from the beginning, and he knew the consequences], ‘Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea.’”**

• *Jonah 1:11–12*

Just as calmly as anything he had already made up his mind that he was going to die. Why? Because you do not go contrary to YHWH’s teaching, His commandments, His commission, and get away with it. Jonah full well knew what he was doing. He knew he was going to be cast overboard and drown. He was willing to do so rather than go to the Assyrians.

Ask yourself the question, Jonah may have been a rebellious prophet, but where was his heart? When Jonah compared what would happen if the Assyrians came down, then Israel would be put under great

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<sup>8</sup> Jonah’s sleeping during the tempest is reflected by Christ’s sleeping during the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; and Luke 8:23–25). DWS

punishment, hardship — and horror. Jonah surmised in his mind, if I do not do my job and the Assyrians do not repent, then God will punish them and not my people. He was willing to endure the punishment himself as a rebellious prophet in order to save his people. This was his idea. It was a false idea, but it was how Jonah looked at things.

Jonah was fast asleep when this storm was full blown in the middle of the Mediterranean with this ship being tossed from pillar to post. They were all terrified. But Jonah himself was fast asleep. They came to him and the lot showed Jonah was the one God was angry with. They then asked Jonah what to do. He said,

**“Take me up, cast me forth into the sea, so shall the sea be calm unto you. For I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.”**

• *Jonah 1:12*

Note that Jonah knew the consequences of disobedience to God. The blood was upon himself. He knew God was going to kill him. He made no appeal to God to save him. He was willing to bear the necessary consequences of his disobedience, for his sin. He wanted to flee from the presence of YHWH and from his responsibility of going to the Assyrian to tell them to repent.

You know, Jonah knew the Assyrians would repent. In Jonah 4:2 he even says he knew YHWH was gracious and that the Assyrians would repent. That is correct. It is most remarkable that a prophet of God would not want Gentiles to repent. If they would not repent then God would have to judge them. Jonah was thinking about his own people Israel.

Let us face it. God was in all of this from the very beginning. He motivated Jonah to do those things because this episode has instructive realism for you and me in the matters of theology and the understanding of doctrine. God knew what He was doing. Jonah said: **“Take me up, cast me forth into the sea. Nevertheless, the men rowed hard ...”** (Jonah 1:12–13). They would not do what Jonah told them to do. They wanted to save him. They had no reason to toss him overboard. They rowed for their lives:

**“... but they could not, for the sea wrought and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto the YHWH [to Jonah’s God, the true God], and said, ‘We beseech you, O YHWH, we beseech you, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood for you.’”**

• *Jonah 1:13–14*

They said, as far as we can see Jonah is innocent, but we will have to toss him overboard.<sup>9</sup> Jonah was shown to have, as far as the people on board ship were concerned, innocent blood. They did not want to throw him overboard. But Jonah said, throw me overboard, everything will be fine. What are they to do?

**“They took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. Then the men feared YHWH exceedingly, and offered sacrifice unto YHWH, and made vows.”**

• *Jonah 1:15–16*

This shows they were Gentiles because sacrifice of animals could only be done in the Temple at Jerusalem. These people in the middle of the Mediterranean offered sacrifice. They had little knowledge of God, but they thought it was what God wanted them to do.

### *Jonah and the Son of Man*

**“Now YHWH had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”**

• *Jonah 1:17*

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<sup>9</sup> When Jesus was before the Roman governor, Pilate said Jesus was innocent. He washed his hands of the whole thing: **“he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person”** (Matthew 27:24). Pilate represented the Romans at that time. The Romans were like the Assyrians of the earlier time. *ELM*

It was not a great whale; it says YHWH **“prepared a great fish.”** It may have been as big as a whale. It could have been a whale, but it says “fish.” The **“three days and three nights”** is most important. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 12:40:

**“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”**

• **Matthew 12:40**

The circumstances of Jonah here apply to Jesus in many ways. The Jews looked upon Jesus as a blasphemer,<sup>10</sup> as someone going contrary to God like Jonah was, fleeing from God, and would not go by the dictates of the Sanhedrin, the senate of God's representatives here on earth.

**“Jonah prayed unto YHWH, his God out of the fish's belly [at the end of three days and three nights], And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto YHWH, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell [sheol, a grave], cried I and you heard my voice.”**

• **Jonah 2:1–2**

Jesus said that as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth. Since Jesus was actually dead, I have no doubt Jonah also died and was dead for three days and three nights. At the end of those three days and three nights period Jonah came back to life. God then caused him to cry out of the belly of the fish.

**“For you have cast me into the deep [the ocean], in the midst of the seas; the floods compassed me about: all your billows and your waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy Temple.”**

• **Jonah 2:3–4**

Jonah finally got the lesson. He now will look to **“the presence of YHWH”** (Jonah 1:3). He will turn toward the holy Temple. He will do as he was told to do.

**“The waters compassed me about, even to the soul [to the death of the soul. He actually died.] the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever [olam, for the age].”**

• **Jonah 2:5–6**

To Jonah it was forever (*olam*). This is like a death scene. It only lasted for three days and three nights but as far as he was concerned, it was an experience he would never forget. And he said,

**“Yet have you brought up my life from corruption [it was not life, but now it is a life]. O YHWH, my God.”**

• **Jonah 2:6**

This is a clear signification that he was dead for three days and three nights and resurrected from the dead.<sup>11</sup> He was not resurrected like Christ was, to eternal life with the Father. He was brought back to just ordinary life. But now he knew what the circumstance was.

**“When my soul fainted within me I remembered YHWH: my prayer came in unto me, into your holy Temple [he looked toward God's holy Temple]. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. ...**

**And YHWH spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.”**

• **Jonah 2:7–8, 10**

<sup>10</sup> Jesus charged with blasphemy, see Matthew 9:3, 26:65; Mark 2:7, 14:64; Luke 5:21; John 10:33–36. DWS

<sup>11</sup> Commentators have noted links between Jonah 2:2–9 and Psalm 30, both are thanksgiving psalms. See James Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea–Jonah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), p. 428. See [“The Tomb of David and Psalm 30.”](#) DWS

## *Jonah Spewed Out by the Fish*

Now he was on the way from Joppa to Tarshish (Spain), in the middle of the Mediterranean when all of this took place. Three days and three nights later when he was vomited out on dry land, where was that dry land? We are not told exactly in the scripture but Josephus the Jewish historian, who recorded a great amount of information of what the early Jews believed, he said Jonah was vomited out in the Black Sea just opposite to the land of Assyria, the only way you could go would be directly across the mountains into the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates to Nineveh itself. He could not have gone in any other direction.

If Josephus is telling us the truth, which I have no reason to doubt, do you know that fish, in three days and three nights, must have been going about 30 or 40 miles an hour through the water to take him out of the Mediterranean, through the Aegean Sea, through the Dardanelles, into the Sea of Marmara, through the Bosphorus, and into the Black Sea. Like a submarine, it took him into the southeast corner of the Black Sea. It must have gone at least a 1,000 miles under the ocean. It vomited him out right on the seashore, on the northern border of Assyria.

When the Assyrians saw Jonah come forth, they must have been amazed. Here is a man coming forth from a fish. Some way, somehow, they must have seen that he was vomited out of the fish. We have a record cited by Diodorus Siculus (a Greek historian who wrote in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC), who said the ancient Assyrians believed in a God called Oannes, the very name of Jonah. He would come forth, and did come forth from the Red Sea, in this case. He was the first to establish the civilization of ancient Assyria. (The Assyrians had that as one of their founding traditions.) In fact, there were priests in ancient Assyria, who dressed like fish with fish caps on and with fish tails coming out like a bridal veil which brides have today. If you will go to the Pergamum Museum in Berlin, you will find pictures of ancient Assyrian statues showing Oannes and the priest of the Oannes, for the fish god who gave rise to the ancient Assyrians.

When Jonah came forth from that fish, he must have had gastric juices or acids on his body. He came forth out of the sea and the Assyrians on the shore must have seen him come forth. For some reason God must have put it in their hearts to ask who he was. He said I am Jonah, to them he was Oannes, one of the chief Assyrian gods.

This being the case, they would have said, who is this person coming to teach us Assyrians? Is it no more than a representative of Oannes, our ancient god who gave rise to the Assyrian nation in the first place? It is most interesting that their god was Oannes.

**“And the word of YHWH came to Jonah the second time saying, ‘Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid you.’ So Jonah arose, and went into Nineveh [across the mountain ridge to it] according to the word of YHWH. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey.”**

• *Jonah 3:1–3*

To travel from one end to the other took three days. As soon as he reached the outskirts of the city he began to preach. It took him three days to preach through the city. The fourth day he went up the mountain-side to see what would happen. This is important to the New Testament story, because on the fourth day, he goes up to see what will happen to the ancient Assyrians.

Verse 5, **“So the people [of Nineveh], believed God ...”** They may have thought this was Oannes, they might have made a wrong judgment, but they certainly believed Jonah. Did they believe this Hebrew prophet? They did. They even had their cattle fast because of the teaching of Jonah. They:

**“... put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For the word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and he sat in ashes.”**

• *Jonah 3:5–6*

They must have had an understanding that this was a representative of their chief god coming back to them what they had to do. He had exactly the same name as the chief god of the Assyrians, according to the



Roman and Greek classical historians.

**“And he [the king] caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, ‘Let neither man or beast, herd nor flock, taste anything: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth [they were repenting of their sins] ...**

**Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?”**

• *Jonah 3:7–9*

This Gentile nation of the Assyrians was the top nation, just like the ancient Romans in the time of Jesus and Paul were the top nation. Here was Nineveh and all the Assyrian people were repenting and listening to Jonah who came from Joppa, in the Mediterranean. Verse 10:

**“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.”**

• *Jonah 3:10*

This is most remarkable. The Assyrians repented. How did they repent? Did they accept the God of Israel and all the teachings of God He gave to Moses? No. That was not the point. They repented of the things which they knew in their own hearts were wrong. It says in the last verse of Jonah, that these people could not discern between their right hand and their left hand. They did not have basic knowledge of God or His revelation thru Moses or the prophets. But they knew what was right and wrong like most people do. They had a conscience and they repented. They repented as best as they could.

### *The Basis of God’s Judgment*

This is a good lesson for all of us because there are many people in the world who do not understand the gospel in its full mature teaching, but they have gone a little way and they understand a little bit. Do you know that God looks on the heart? This is the point. If God looked at supreme knowledge as a criterion, none of us would ever get there, because none of us have such supreme knowledge.

God judges on the knowledge which you have. That was what He did here. The Assyrians had limited knowledge, they heeded what Jonah said, and they repented according to that knowledge. You would think this result would have made Jonah happy, after all they repented. The only trouble was, Jonah knew they would repent. He did not want them to repent in this case. He wanted them to continue in their ways because if so, they would have been punished, and Assyria would not have been able to fulfill the prophecies of later chastising Israel. Jonah was willing to take the consequences of disobedience to God, and to die in the place of Israel. Do you see the point?

### *New Testament Typology*

Now we come to New Testament teaching. It is symbolic. There is typology here, but Jonah was a type of Christ. He was willing to die and take all the sins of judgment upon himself so his people Israel would be saved. The Assyrians, however, repented. So what happens to Jonah?

**“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly [not a little, but “exceedingly”], and he was very angry. And he prayed unto YHWH, and said, ‘I pray you, O YHWH, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country?’”**

• *Jonah 4:1–2*

Jonah knew they would repent, which was why he fled to Tarshish. He did not want them to repent. Jonah thought to take upon himself the consequences of disobedience to God. He wanted to die so his people Israel, whom he loved with all his heart, would not suffer the punishment which the Assyrians would inflict on them in the future.

The whole scenario is typology, symbolic in the extreme, to show that Jonah was a type of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus said, **“As Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, so shall I be in the heart of the earth.”** (Matthew 12:40) The situation was to be very similar, because after Jesus was resurrected, you know what He did? He gave to Peter and the others the responsibility to go to the world and teach the gospel. To whom? Not only to Jews but to Romans, who were the type of Assyrians in that day.

Did Peter go to the Romans? Did Paul go to the Romans? They did. Did the Romans repent? Basically they did. They did not repent entirely, but they repented in their own way, according to the extent of their knowledge. We who have come from Europe basically, and we who have the teachings of Paul who went to Western Europe. Where did Paul go to receive the mystery of God? In Tarshish! He was in Spain when he received the mystery, the very place which Jonah wanted to go. See how these things are linked together?

We find that God has a plan in history. God’s plan for the development and spread of Christianity around the world was conceived by God before the foundation of the world. He gave type and anti-type long before Jesus ever came on earth in the example of Jonah. Jonah goes on to say that he knew this would happen and:

**“I knew you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness and repent you of the evil. [I knew you would do it] therefore now, O YHWH, take, I beseech you, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.”**

• *Jonah 4:2–3*

Jonah was saying he did not want to live. Since the Assyrians repented, the Israelites would not repent. If he continued to live he would see Israel punished. Verse 4:

**“Then said YHWH, ‘Does it do you well to be angry?’ So Jonah went out to the city, and sat on the east side, [the fourth day, he sat on the east side] of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city [maybe the destruction would happen after all]. And YHWH God prepared a gourd [a kind of a castor oil plant], and made it to come over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd [it put shade over him].**

**But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass when the sun did arise that God prepared a vehement [hot] east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’ And God said to Jonah [by this illustration], ‘Does it do you well to be angry for the gourd?’ And he said, ‘I do well to be angry, even unto death.’**

**Then said YHWH, ‘You have had pity on the gourd [because it protected him], for the which you have not labored, neither made it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein there are more than sixscore thousand people that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?’”**

• *Jonah 4:4–11*

This ends the narrative and the story of Jonah. The Ninevites as far as knowledge were concerned were just like cattle. They had no knowledge of even basic principles. But do you know what God did to Jonah? In one day by a miracle He brought up a gourd, a castor oil tree, and by another miracle He brought a worm and destroyed the gourd in one day, right in front of Jonah. He was saying, can I not bring protection and can I not bring evil at the same time? Who is in authority here, Jonah?

Jonah needed to realize who was in charge. God can bring evil. God can bring good. When God tells a prophet to do something, whether it is evil or good, go and do it.

### ***God Is in Charge***

God is saying, I am in charge. I will protect the people of Israel with a gourd or with a castor oil tree if I

choose to. I will create a worm to destroy them if I need to. The worm represents the Assyrians destroying Israel, the castor oil tree. Your efforts Jonah, have no relevance in these matters. A prophet should go do the job I give him to do. If he does the job I give him to do, he will be blessed.

Jonah was blessed, because he was able to understand that God is in charge. This is the end of the story; it ends abruptly. It ends so abruptly that it compares the Assyrians with cattle, who cannot discern on one side and the other. Jonah was not the one who is in charge of the world. God is.

When you look at this whole story you find that God was in it from the very beginning. The Apostle Paul says that our wills, even our ability to do the things which we do, are inspired of God. This story was inspired of God to give a relevance, a foundational basis for, a New Testament message.

Furthermore, in Old Testament times it showed that whatever a prophet was assigned to do, he was to go and do it whether he wanted to do so or not. He was not to take matters into his own hands. However, the motives of Jonah were good, because he would have rather have taken all the consequences of sin and die, so Israel would live and not be punished, so his own people would have salvation and he himself would die. Do you realize this is exactly what Jesus Christ did and not only for Israel but for mankind? He took the punishment of God. When He took the punishment on the tree of crucifixion, He was tried and convicted as a blasphemer against God.

Pilate, who represented the Romans (the Assyrians of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, so to speak), said that this was innocent blood. He tried to get Jesus off the hook. But God's people, the Sanhedrin and the Jews, by design, went ahead and convicted Christ Jesus of being a blasphemer. The interesting thing is this, before they crucified him on the Mount of Olives, they stripped Him of all His citizenship of Israel. They excommunicated Jesus as being an Israelite and even the ancient Jews in the Talmud mention this as a fact.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus died without any relevance to God whatever. While on the tree of crucifixion the last thing He said was, **“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). In other words, He died as a complete and abject sinner, but with the sins, not just of Israel, but of the whole world upon Him.

You know how long He was in the grave? He died, it is true, just like Jonah died. But He died so others might live. He took all the punishments upon Him. He was in the grave for 3 days and 3 nights, 3 daylight periods, 3 night periods. This does not necessarily mean 72 hours at all like some people have imagined, because the ancient Jews and Israelites reckoned inclusively. It meant that the time Jonah was in the belly of the fish, it was like being in hell, in *sheol*, in the grave. As far as Jonah was concerned, he said, I was there for *olam*. *Olam* in Hebrew means a long period of time, like age lasting, like the Greek *aeon*.

Jonah was in a grave in the fish's belly. I have not the slightest doubt that Jonah, himself, in type, died just like Jesus Christ Himself died, and that he was resurrected from the dead. This is a New Testament message that is extraordinary. It fits in perfectly with typological information which makes the story of Jonah come alive as never before, when we look at the New Testament itself. We have to realize that the rebellious prophet, the prophet who fled from God to have his own life extinguished so his people Israel might live, is typical of Jesus who died for the world so the world might live.

Ernest L. Martin, 1997  
David Sielaff, May 2013

### ***Addendum by David Sielaff***

Once again here is an outline from *The Bible Remembrancer: Containing an Analysis of the Whole Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd., 1848). This book by Rev. Ingram Cobbin was published without author attribution. Cobbin's outline does not try to determine what God's thoughts are, but it describes the obvious topics that are in each chapter. Here is Cobbin's introduction to Jonah:

**“Jonah was one of the first — if not the first — of the prophets whose writings have been preserved. He appears to have been prominent in the early days of Jeroboam II, king of Israel.**

<sup>12</sup> See Dr. Martin's article [“The Strange Ending to Sotah”](#) where Jesus' excommunication from Israel is discussed. DWS

The events of which the Book bearing his name treats probably occurred late in life. His unwillingness to go to Nineveh will be partly understood if we suppose that he probably recognized that the 'great city' ... of a great empire, was even then looming large as the future enemy of Israel. The opinion that the event of being sent to Nineveh occurred at the latter part of his career is, it has been thought, implied by the manner in which the Book of Jonah commences: 'Now the word of YHWH came unto Jonah,' or, more properly, 'And the word of YHWH came.' It is as though this were a continuation of a previous history of the acts and words of Jonah (now lost to us). The Book of Numbers (as a continuation to Exodus and Leviticus) commences in a similar manner; as does also the Book of Joshua."

• *Bible Remembrancer*, p. 72

### *Cobbin's Outline of Jonah*

<b>Reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel</b>	<b>Ch. 1</b>	Jonah sent to Nineveh.	<b>Jonah's prayer.</b>	<b>2</b>	Jonah's prayer, and deliverance
		Attempts to flee to Tarshish.		<b>3</b>	Jonah's second commission.
		A tempest arises.			Nineveh repents.
		Lots case for the guilty cause of tempest.		<b>4</b>	Jonah's anger.
		Lot falls on Jonah.			His gourd withers.
		He is cast into the sea, and swallowed up.			God's mercy to Nineveh

### *David Dorsey, The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*<sup>13</sup>

According to David Dorsey the Book of Jonah is broken up into seven "episodes," like scenes of a play. Aside from Jonah each scene has a different set of characters. Here is Dorsey's outline:

	<u>Setting</u>	<u>Characters</u>
<b>Jonah's commissioning and flight</b> (1:1–3)	Israel	YHWH and Jonah
<b>Jonah and the pagan sailors</b> (1:4–16)	at sea	Jonah and sailors
<b>Jonah's prayer</b> (1:17–2:10)	fish's belly	Jonah (addressing YHWH)
<b>Jonah's recommissioning and obedience</b> (3:1–3a)	somewhere on dry land	YHWH and Jonah
<b>Jonah and the pagan Ninevites</b> (3:3b–10)	Nineveh	Jonah and Ninevites
<b>Jonah's prayer</b> (4:1–4)	(not given, near Nineveh)	Jonah (addressing YHWH)
<b>YHWH's lesson for Jonah</b> (4:5–11)	Outside Nineveh	YHWH and Jonah

Note the commission to Jonah is nearly identical in Jonah 1:1–3 and in 3:1–3 in Hebrew. I use the Concordant Literal Version because in these verses it better reflects the Hebrew. The difference is that in the first instance Jonah disobeys, and in the second He does what YHWH commands:

<b>Jonah 1:1–3</b>	<b>Jonah 3:1–3</b>
<p>"The word of Yahweh came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying:</p> <p><b>'Rise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, for their evil ascends before Me.'</b></p> <p>Yet Jonah rose <u>to run away to Tarshish</u> from before Yahweh ... away from before Yahweh."</p> <p>• <i>Jonah 1:1–3, Concordant Literal Version</i></p>	<p>"The word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time saying,</p> <p><b>'Rise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out to it the message which I am speaking to you.'</b></p> <p>So Jonah rose and <u>went to Nineveh</u>, according to the word of Yahweh."</p> <p>• <i>Jonah 3:1–3, Concordant Literal Version</i></p>

<sup>13</sup> David Dorsey, "Chapter 31: Jonah: A Lesson on Mercy," in *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grant Rapids: MI, Baker Books, 1999), pp. 290–295.

Dorsey has an interesting comparison of Jonah to a saying of Jesus:

**“One should compare the message of Jonah to Jesus parable of the prodigal son. That parable develops the same two themes found in Jonah; [1] hope for the repentant sinner and [2] a plea for understanding on the part of the (self-)righteous faithful — who like rebellious Jonah also need to repent.”**

• Dorsey, “Jonah,” p. 295

### **James Nogalski’s Understanding of Jonah**

Readers of these pages have noted that I greatly admire James Nogalski’s 2-volume work *The Book of the Twelve* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011/12). (See note 11 above.) His analysis of Jonah is also interesting, although he does not believe Jonah was written near the time of the events presented. While there is great allowance for later substantial editing and even major additions by authorized writers, I have no doubt that the events portrayed actually occurred. Nogalski does not. Nevertheless, his textual analysis is first rate. He begins his analysis by emphasizing that the central focus of the Book of Jonah is the portrayal of God, and not the person of Jonah or any other characters.

**“It [the Book of Jonah] portrays a God who is not only interested in the well-being of all creation but who is in complete control, who can act unilaterally, and who can reverse course when deemed appropriate.”**

• Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea–Jonah*, p. 403

In particular Jonah 4:2 obviously cites Joel 2:13 (which itself cites Exodus 34:6). Then too Jeremiah 18:7–10 also refers to YHWH’s total freedom of action and will, whether repenting of evil He seeks to do in punishment, or repenting of intended good when evil is committed. This applies to any people and not just to Israel or Judah. According to Nogalski, Micah 7:18–19 has long been connected with Jonah in Jewish worship. The bottom line is, God cannot be put in a box. **“God’s actions are inscrutable, and God’s reason often lie beyond human comprehension (see Job 38:4–40:2).”**<sup>14</sup>

Jonah is not a collection of prophetic sayings, but it is a narrative about the prophet Jonah and his relations with YHWH. Nogalski understands the Book of Jonah to be composed of four “scenes,” each relating to where the action occurs: Jonah at sea in the ship (1:1–16), Jonah in the sea in the fish (1:17–2:10), Jonah at Nineveh (3:1–10), and Jonah outside Nineveh (4:1–11). This understanding of the text has as good merit to it as do Dorsey’s 7 “episodes.” Nogalski also notes information which is missing from the Book of Jonah, marking differences of Jonah compared to other books of the Twelve:

- (1) There is no end-time focus
- (2) There is no reference (stated or implied) to the Day of YHWH
- (3) There are no promises about the future fertility of the land
- (4) There is no message about political judgment on either Israel or Judah<sup>15</sup>

The God of Jonah (the God of the whole Bible) interacts with humanity, albeit in ways we do not often realize or understand. The Ninevites were oblivious to what or why God was doing what He was doing — but they heeded His message and saved themselves for several years. Indeed, the problem of evil in Jonah is similar to that expressed in the Book of Amos: God does not condemn nations because they fail to worship YHWH, He condemns nations because they mistreat other human beings (Amos 1:2–2:3).<sup>16</sup> It is ironic that Jonah prophesied the expansion of Israel by the evil King Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:24), yet Jonah tried to stop YHWH’s compassion for foreigners (Jonah 4:2).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea–Jonah*, pp. 405–406, 408.

<sup>15</sup> Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea–Jonah*, p. 405.

<sup>16</sup> Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea–Jonah*, p. 408. This basis for judgment does not only apply to human beings (the children of Adam), it also applies to celestial beings, **“the sons of the most high”** in Psalm 82.

<sup>17</sup> Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea–Jonah*, p. 413.

## Other Information about Jonah

The concept of evil is represented starkly in the Book of Jonah, considering the book's small size. The common Hebrew word for evil (*ra'ah*) occurs 9 times in Jonah, expressed in a variety of ways:

- 1:2 Nineveh is designated by YHWH as a city of great evil.
- 1:7 Gentile sailors cast lots to determine who is the cause of the evil storm. The lots indicate Jonah is the cause.
- 1:8 The sailors interrogate Jonah as to what he has done to bring this great evil upon them.
- 3:8 The king of Nineveh decrees the people change from their evil ways. (They have already done so).
- 3:10 "Evil" occurs twice in this verse, first when God saw the Ninevite's repentance from evil and second when God repented of the evil He proposed to do to Nineveh.
- 4:1 Jonah calls God's repentance "**a great evil**" in Hebrew.
- 4:2 Jonah's prayer complains that YHWH will repent of the evil proposed against the people of Nineveh.
- 4:6 Jonah is thankful for the gourd plant which shades him from the evil heat and wind.

The evil of the Assyrian city of Nineveh is the beginning cause of the Book of Jonah. The future evil they shall do to the northern kingdom of Israel is the object Jonah is trying to avoid. Jonah is willing to suffer evil unto death from YHWH upon himself in order to save his people from God's punishment by Assyria. Surely, the evil which people do to other people is a major concept in the Book of Jonah.

The destruction of Nineveh (and Assyria) is the object of Jonah's actions. Yet it is important to understand that there were other prophecies about the destruction of Nineveh. Zephaniah is the 9<sup>th</sup> book of the Twelve Minor Prophets and contains this prediction against both Assyria and Nineveh:

**"And he [YHWH] will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like a wilderness. And flocks shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: ...**

**This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passes by her shall hiss, and wag his hand."**

**• Zephaniah 2:13–15, KJV**

The repentance of Nineveh did not last because the Book of Nahum also predicts the fate of Assyria, the rapid fall of its empire, and the conquest of its greatest city Nineveh. This 7<sup>th</sup> book of the Twelve was written near the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC before the city was destroyed around 607–606 BC (the date of Nineveh's destruction is unclear). Nahum chapters 2–3 describe the destruction of Nineveh. More than 100 years after Jonah, Nineveh receives the punishment which Jonah desired would strike that city in his day.

God's redemptive love is not reserved to just one special people. There are two prayers in the Book (Jonah 1:17–2:10 and 4:1–4). In the first Jonah is deeply grateful to God for his physical salvation from death. In the second Jonah expresses passionate anger to Gentiles who threaten his own people.

As we have seen, the Book of Jonah has many facets and is worthy of your deep study. Next we will consider "[Jonah and the New Testament](#)" which will be a companion article to this one. It will provide even more fascinating biblical teaching.

David Sielaff