

Introduction to Jonah

Author

Unknown

The prophet Jonah is clearly the subject of the book of Jonah. However, the book does not identify him or anyone else as its author (Williams 1114; Baldwin 544). It is not unreasonable to suggest that Jonah might have shared his testimony about his mission to Nineveh, and that the author of the book, whoever he was, used this information as a source. Nevertheless, this assumption is untestable.

As for Jonah, he was the son of Amittai (1:1) and a prophet from Gath-hepher, a locale in the northern kingdom (2 Kings 14:25). Most readily known for warning Nineveh of imminent divine judgment, he also foretold the territorial gains that were achieved under the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (2 Kings 14:23-28).

Date

Unknown

- Merrill asserts that “the most likely time for the mission of Jonah to Nineveh was in the reign of Aššur-dan III (772-755)” (388). Similarly, Geisler dates Jonah’s prophecy to 780-760 BC (231).
- Noting that “nowhere does [the prophet] Jonah claim to have written the book, or any part of it,” Williams concludes that “there is no clear indication of when ... the book was written” (1114).
- According to Baldwin, “the majority view is that the book is postexilic” (545). Nevertheless, she does not find the evidence of a late date thoroughly convincing: “On linguistic evidence there is no reason why the book should not be preexilic, even eighth century, in origin” (546).

Kings Mentioned

Judah

None

Israel

None

Nation(s) Targeted

Primary

Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was the target of the prophetic mission narrated in the book of Jonah (1:2; 3:6; 4:11; etc.). However, it would be incorrect to conclude that the book of Jonah had Nineveh or Assyria as its original audience. The book actually diminishes the significance of identity and nationality in order to emphasize the possibility of “total repentance by those who are least expected to exhibit it” (Ferguson 427).

The primary audience of the book of Jonah seems to be the people of God, who were prone to misjudge the basis on which they enjoyed God’s favor. This was certainly true of the book’s original audience: “Israel’s nationalistic outlook needed correcting, hence the emphasis on God’s concern for the people of Nineveh” (Baldwin 546). The book’s missionary emphasis speaks with continuing relevance to the church today.

Secondary

None

Representative Texts	1:1-4; 1:7; 1:11-12; 1:15; 1:17-2:2; 2:10-3:5; 3:10-4:3; 4:5-7; 4:10-11
Core Message	<p>Yahweh commissions Jonah to travel to Nineveh and denounce its residents' evil ways. Blatantly disobeying the call, the prophet flees by ship in the opposite direction. A violent storm ensues, and in an effort to appease the Lord's anger, the other voyagers throw Jonah into the sea, where a giant fish swallows him, sparing his life.</p> <p>After three days, the fish vomits a more pliable Jonah onto dry land. When the Lord reiterates his commission, the prophet obeys. Arriving in Nineveh, Jonah announces that the city is subject to imminent judgment. The message is effective, evoking a widespread response of faith and repentance that God honors by suspending his judgment. Jonah is dejected by God's display of mercy toward seemingly unworthy subjects. As the narrative concludes, the prophet exhibits deep spiritual insensitivity, seeking his own comfort and failing to appreciate Yahweh's interest in sparing a wicked city.</p>
New Testament References¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1:17 (Matt. 12:39-40) • 3:4-10 (Matt. 12:41) • 3:3-10 (Luke 11:29-30, 32)
Features	In regards to literary form, "the book is a satire—the exposure of human vice through ridicule. ... The object of satiric attack is the kind of nationalistic zeal that tried to make God the exclusive property of Israel, refusing to accept the universality of God's grace" (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 458).
Sources	<p>Baldwin, Joyce. "Jonah." <i>The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary</i>, edited by Thomas Edward McComiskey. Baker Academic, 2009, pp. 543-90.</p> <p>Beale, G. K., and D. A. Carson, eds. <i>Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament</i>. Baker Academic, 2007.</p> <p>Ferguson, Paul. "Jonah, Theology of." <i>Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible</i>, edited by Walter A. Elwell, Baker Books, 2000, pp. 427-28.</p> <p>Geisler, Norman L. <i>A Popular Survey of the Old Testament</i>. Baker Book House, 1977.</p> <p>Merrill, Eugene H. <i>Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel</i>. Baker Books, 1996.</p> <p>Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III. <i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i>. InterVarsity, 1998.</p> <p>Williams, William C. "Jonah, Book of." <i>The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>, edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, fully revised, vol. 2, Eerdmans, 1982, pp. 1112-16.</p>

¹ New Testament allusions to the book of Jonah were identified in part by consulting Beale and Carson's *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.