

JONAH

Introduction

The book of Jonah is so brief, so well known and so misunderstood; and it has given rise to many false interpretations. Some, naively, read it as history, and of course they find it unbelievable and even ridiculous.

Others include it among the Prophets as if dealing with a personage that really existed.

The book of Jonah is a novel about adventures, completely fictitious, with a religious, moralizing intention: its thesis is to show God's goodness, who is worried about each person's life. It is a God that threatens and announces his punishments with the aim of not having to punish anybody. Jonah is his speaker, a person who is not worthy of that mission, neither, in his mediocrity, capable of understanding the forgiving heart of God.

1¹The word of Yahweh came to Jonah, son of Amittai:

²—Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach against it, because I have known its wickedness.

³But Jonah decided to flee from Yahweh and go to Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, found a ship bound for Tarshish, and paid the fare. Then he boarded it and went into the hold of the ship, journeying with them to Tarshish, far away from Yahweh.

⁴Yahweh stirred up a storm wind on the sea, so there was a sea tempest, which threatened to destroy the ship.

⁵The sailors took fright, and each cried out to his own god. To lighten the ship, they threw its cargo into the sea.

⁶Meanwhile Jonah had gone into the hold of the ship, where he lay fast asleep. The captain came upon him and said:

—How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god. Perhaps he will be mindful of us and will not allow us to die here.

⁷The sailors said to each other:

—Let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this disaster.

So they did, and the lot fell on Jonah.

⁸They questioned him:

—So you are responsible for this evil that has come upon us? Tell us where you are from. What is your country, your nationality?

⁹And Jonah told them his story:

—I am a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh, God of heaven who made the sea and the land.

¹⁰As they knew that he was fleeing from Yahweh, the sailors were seized with great fear and said to him:

—What a terrible thing have you done!

¹¹—What shall we do with you now to make the sea calm down?

The sea was growing more and more agitated.

¹²He said to them:

—Pick me up and throw me into the sea. It will quiet down, for I know it is because of me that this storm has come.

¹³The sailors, however, still did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea had grown much rougher than before. ¹⁴Then they called on Yahweh:

—O Yahweh, do not let us perish for taking this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of shedding innocent blood. For you, Yahweh, have done this as you have thought right.

¹⁵They took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm again. ¹⁶At this the men were seized with great fear of Yahweh. They offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows to him.

2 ¹Yahweh provided a large fish which swallowed Jonah. He remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

²From the belly of the fish Jonah prayed to Yahweh, his God:

³—In my distress I cried to Yahweh,
and he answered me;

from the belly of the netherworld
you heard my voice when I called.

⁴You cast me into the abyss,
into the very heart of the sea,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your breakers and your billows
passed over engulfing me.

⁵Then I thought:

I have been cast out from your presence,
but I keep on looking to your holy Temple.

⁶The waters engulfed me up to my throat;
all around me was the abyss;
wrapped about my head were seaweeds.

⁷I went down to the roots of the mountains,
the bars of the netherworld closed upon me,
but you brought my life up from the pit,
Yahweh, my God.

⁸When my soul was fainting within me,
I remembered Yahweh,
and before you rose my prayer
up to your holy Temple.

⁹Those who worship worthless idols
lose your grace

¹⁰but I, with songs of praise,
will offer to you sacrifices.

What I have vowed, I will make good—
deliverance comes from Yahweh, my God.

¹¹Then Yahweh gave his command to the fish, and it belched out Jonah onto dry land.

3 ¹The word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time:

²—Go to Nineveh, the great city, and announce to them the message I give you.

³In obedience to the word of Yahweh, Jonah went to Nineveh. It was a very large city, and it took three days just to cross it. ⁴So Jonah walked a single day's journey and began proclaiming:

—Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed.

⁵The people of the city believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶Upon hearing the news, the king of Nineveh got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes. ⁷He issued a proclamation throughout Nineveh:

—By the decree of the king and his nobles, no people or beasts, herd or flock, will taste anything; neither will they eat nor drink. ⁸But let people and beasts be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call aloud to God, turn from his evil ways and violence. ⁹Who knows? God may yet relent, turn from his fierce anger and spare us.

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened upon them.

4 ¹But Jonah was greatly displeased at this, and he was indignant. ²He prayed to Yahweh and said:

—O Yahweh, is this not what I said when I was yet in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and full of love, and you relent from imposing terrible punishment. ³I beseech you now, Yahweh, to take my life, for now it is better for me to die than to live.

⁴But Yahweh replied:

—What right have you to be angry?

⁵Jonah then left the city. He went to a place east of it, built himself a shelter and sat under its shade to wait and see what would happen to Nineveh. ⁶Then Yahweh God provided a castor—oil plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade over his head and to ease his discomfort. Jonah was very happy about the plant.

⁷But the next day, at dawn, God sent a worm which attacked the plant and made it wither. ⁸When the sun rose, God sent a scorching east wind; the sun blazed down upon Jonah's head, and he grew faint. His death wish returned and he said:

—It is better for me to die than to live.

⁹Then God asked Jonah:

—Do you have a right to be angry about the castor oil plant?

Jonah answered:

—I am right to be angry enough to wish to die.

¹⁰Yahweh said:

—You are concerned about a plant which cost you no labor to make it grow. Overnight it sprang up, and overnight it perished. ¹¹But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish right from left and they have many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned for such a great city?