



There is perhaps no book of the Old Testament canon more written about, illustrated and criticized than the book of the prophet Jonah. Let's be honest, any story involving a grown man who is swallowed whole by a large fish and lives to tell about it is difficult to take seriously. Everything in our college educated and Discovery-Channeled mind rebels against this idea on a mature, adult, scientific level. We'll get to that in a bit. However, the story of the prophet Jonah is actually much more focused on the person of Jonah and the character of God than it is about a fish, a group of sailors or even about the colorfully dark city and people of Nineveh. Seeing this intended focus gives us a different (and much clearer) lens through which we can not only study but be deeply challenged and encouraged.

The book has called a "masterpiece of Biblical literature" (Alexander), and rightly so. Its brevity and style adds to its force and luster. The deep ironic notes, parallelism, symbolism and illustration wrapped into this historical place it in a class of its own. Just because we can read it in a matter of minutes does not mean it can be fully grasped on our first take. It actually takes (spiritual) eyes to see the beauty and message of a complex story that has too often been reduced to a nursery wall collage.

The message, in reality, focuses on the heart of a godly man who does not well understand God. I think many of us, in reality, can relate and empathize. Perhaps even more so because Jonah, like us, assumed that he did understand God perfectly well. In our estimation, God never acts outside of the boundaries that we have conjured for Him. But how do we indeed "bind" a God of limitless rule, character, love, mercy, compassion and justice? As Jonah was forced to deal with this impertinent and impossible act, so shall we be challenged in our thinking about God and His people, our neighbors and community, our world and God's kingdom.

This tool kit is intended as such, a tool. The elements of it are listed below. Browse it if you need to. Skim the parts you don't care to read and skip to others. It is designed to meet a spectrum of needs for a spectrum of people as we all attempt to press into this magnificent section of God's inspired Word. The more we understand of context and background, the greater impact we will realize from our reading, meditation, discussion and small group and family interaction. I pray you find great joy in the tiny book of Jonah.

ELEMENTS OF TOOL KIT

- Background of Jonah
 - Jonah the Man
 - Assyria the Empire
 - Jonah the Prophecy
 - Swallowed and Survived
- Map
- Outline of Jonah
- Small Group Questions
- Application
- Follow-Up Nahum Study – By Ethan Collins



One of the many Kids illustrations of the Jonah story

BACKGROUND OF JONAH

Again, the purpose of this simple Tool Kit is to maximize both your enjoyment of the book of Jonah as well as God's transformation of your heart as you do so. That's it. In order to accomplish these goals, we will briefly discuss the essential elements of background, culture, geography and prophecy, without which Jonah simply remains a fanciful, if not implausible, children's story.

Jonah the Man

Wrapped up in the discussion of the person of Jonah is the authorship of the prophecy and its date. One would assume that Jonah wrote the book himself but actually nothing in the text of the book demands this conclusion. The man could have easily related the events, prayers and consequences to someone else who acted as a scribe or secretary, either during Jonah's lifetime or soon thereafter. Moreover, there is not much known of Jonah outside of this prophecy. He is only mentioned elsewhere in **2 Kings 14:25** and then only in passing. This is it in all of the Old Testament. Of course, Jesus mentions him in **Matthew 12**, **Matthew 16** and **Luke 11**, but we will come back to those later.

2 Kings 14:23-25

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. ²⁴ He did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin. ²⁵ [Jeroboam] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through **His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.**

Whereas in most of the writing prophets, if not all of them, the man of God acts as the noble mediator between God and His people, faithfully carrying out His will, delivering His messages. Sometimes those messages are delivered with images that can prove difficult if not plain odd. Think of Ezekiel cooking a barley cake over a fire of human refuse as an illustration of God's message and laying on his left side for

three hundred and ninety days (**Ezekiel 4**). Think of Isaiah going around naked for three years as an illustration of God’s warning (**Isaiah 20**). However, in the case of Jonah, he conducts no creative or illustrative act for his oracle. We are also not introduced to the prophet as a noble mediator. In fact, he is not a hero at all. He seems to be deliberately portrayed in a poor light.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that within the book of prophecy, Jonah, whose name means “dove,” is not referred to specifically as a “prophet.” However, this Jonah has the same father as the man in **2 Kings**, receives the standard “call” of a prophet (“the word of the LORD came to...”) and ultimately carries it out. There remain no substantial reasons to believe that the Jonah of **2 Kings** and the Jonah of the written prophecy are two different people. Indeed, they are one in the same.

Therefore, the reference in **2 Kings** helps us with timing. Since Jeroboam, King of Israel is mentioned here but the name of the Assyrian king in the book of Jonah is not given, we are limited in chronological references. Jeroboam ruled in Israel from about 790-750 B.C., a 41-year reign. It therefore follows that Jonah’s prophetic ministry overlaps or is subsumed in this time period. Aligning with what we know of Assyrian history, many scholars place Jonah’s trip to Nineveh in or around the year 780 B.C., at a time when the capital city was experiencing a relative calm. Despite claims otherwise, as many scholars suggest, “there is no reason why the book should not be [considered] eighth century in origin” (Baldwin).

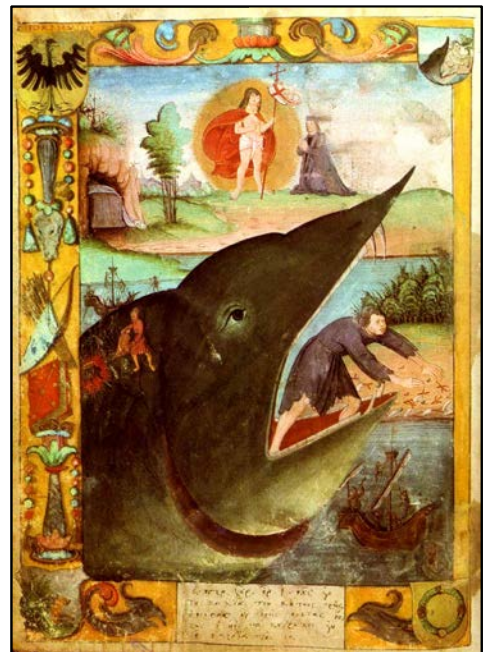
Assyria the Empire

The great Assyrian empire was a formidable neighbor. They were not one that you wanted to anger. Assyrians were well-known for their brutality. Nineveh was their capital city. In fact, the phrase “your reputation precedes you” probably found its most sincere usage in reference to the Assyrians and their war tactics.

Historical and governmental records and inscriptions from the Ancient Near East dating to the general time frame of Jonah have been discovered, some by pure accident. If you are willing to spend a few moments reading through them (just a couple are summarized below), it may become much easier to understand Jonah’s hesitation at God’s call. **WARNING: The following translated documents and inscriptions are graphic.**

For example, the remains of twenty-one lines of a tablet containing reference to the Judean (southern Israel) city of Azekah as well as the name of Hezekiah (a good kind of Judah, 2 Kings 18ff). It partially, and with various gaps bracketed in the text, describes battles of the Assyrian army (and Ashur, one of their pagan gods) that take place in southern Israel. These battles have been dated to between 712 and 720 B.C., some six or seven decades after Jonah’s adventure.

[by the might (?) of Ashur, my lord, the district [of Hezek]iah of Judah, like [] [] the city of Azekah, his stronghold, which is between my [] and the land of Judah [] [] located on a mountain peak, like



Ancient Bible illustration of Jonah

countless pointed iron daggers, reaching to high heaven [] were strong and rivaled the highest mountains; at its sight, as if from the sky [] [by packed-down ramps], and applying mighty (?) battering rams, infantry attacks by mines [] [the approach of my cavalry] they saw, and heard the sound of Ashur's mighty troops and they were afraid [] [I besieged (?)] I conquered. I carried off its spoil. I tore down, I destroyed [] [the city X] a royal [city] of the Philistines, which Hezekiah had taken and fortified for himself [].

Another similar find revealed more of the same, a war report of battle tactics, victory and spoils.

The kings of Amurru, all of them (listed)...brought me sumptuous presents as their abundant audience-gift, fourfold, and kissed my feet. ...Trusting in the god Ashur, my lord, I fought with them and inflicted a defeat upon them. The Egyptian charioteers and princes, together with the charioteers of the Ethiopians, I personally took alive in the midst of the battle. I besieged and conquered Eltekeh and Timnah and carried off their spoils. I advanced to Ekron and slew its official and nobles who had stirred up rebellion and hung their bodies on watchtowers all about the city.

Inscribed on a large stone stele (memorial inscription stone) discovered at Kurkh, one has access to ancient records of Shalmaneser III, a king of Assyria. The text ends abruptly with the battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.) and it is believed that the inscription dates just before this time. At the end of the inscription is the name of Ahab, one of the wicked kings in Israel who plagued Elijah's ministry in **1 Kings 16ff**. This places these records almost a century before the Jonah adventure.

In the month of Iyyar, the thirteenth day, I departed from Nineveh. I crossed the Tigris River (and) I traversed Mount Hasamu and Mount Dihnuu. ...I approached the city of Burmarina, which belonged to Ahuni, (the man) of Bit-A[dini]. Besieging the city, I captured it. I felled with the sword 300 of their fighting men. I made a pile of heads in front of his city. ...I approached the city of Paqarubuni, one of the cities belong to Ahuni (the man) of Bit-Adini, which is on the opposite bank of the Euphrates. I decisively defeated his land. I laid waste his cities. I filled the wide plain with the corpses (defeat) of his warriors. I felled with the sword 1,300 of their battle troops. ...I approached the city of Lutibu, the fortified city of Hayani.... I felled with the sword their fighting men. Like Adad, I rained down upon them a devastating flood. I piled them in ditches (and) filled the extensive plain with the corpses of their warriors. Like wool, I dyed the mountain with their blood. I took away from them numerous chariots and teams of horses. I made a pile of heads in front of his city. I razed, destroyed and burned his cities.



The Kurkh stele of Shalmaneser III

...In the eponymy of Dayan-Assur, in the month of Iyyar, the fourteenth day, I departed from Nineveh. I crossed the Tigris. I approached the cities of Giammu on the River Balih. **They were afraid of my lordly fearfulness and the splendor of my fierce weapons;** and with their own weapons they killed Giammu, their master...

...I departed from the city of Argana. I approached the city of Qarqar. I razed, destroyed and burned the city of Qarqar, his royal city. 1200 chariots, 1200 cavalry, and 20,000 troops of Hadad-ezer of Damascus; 700 chariots, 700 cavalry, and 10,000 troops of Irhuleni, the Hamathite. **2000 chariots and 10,000 troops of Ahab the Israelite**... Like Adad, I rained down upon them a devastating flood. I spread out their corpses and I filled the plain. [I felled] with the sword their extensive troops. I made their blood flow in

the wadis(?) []. The field was too small for laying flat their bodies; the broad countryside had been consumed in burying them. I blocked the Orontes River with their corpses as with a causeway.

In addition to these accounts are those that detail the Assyrians “decorating” city walls with the skins of their defeated opponents, lighting streets with human candles (men and women and even children impaled on high posts, covered with pitch and lit), inserting large metal rings into the noses and jaws of captured prisoners in order to drag them, etc. It seems these tactics, many of them occurring after the heat of battle, were intended to add to the viral lore, legend and fear of the Assyrian empire. This growing reputation of demonic brutality would prove to be one of their greatest weapons.

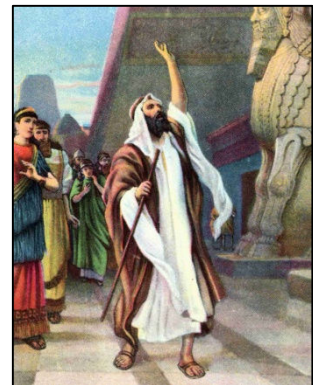
I know these are rather difficult to read, but they illustrate two vital things: the brutality and blood-lust of the Assyrian army and kings as well as their interaction with Israel and her kings. This is the historical situation in which Jonah heard the strange call of God to Nineveh. One can begin to understand his hesitation, not simply out of his dislike of the Assyrians but perhaps also a sense of self-preservation.

For more ancient inscriptions and texts, search for the *Black Obelisk* of Shalmaneser's reign (c. 828 B.C.) and the *Calah Annals* of Tiglath-Pileser III (ruled 745-727 B.C.), relief stone slabs decorating his palace, both of which reference Assyrian war tactics and the nation of Israel.

Jonah the Prophecy

Classification of the book of Jonah has been a subject of much debate over the past century or so. The problem, in no surprise to many, is the fish. If one can explain the genre of the book in such a way as to disregard the historicity and literal nature of the fish account, then it would seem much more palatable as a whole. The problem is Jonah doesn't fit in these proposed literary types.

Most often, the genre of parable has been raised as a meaningful, if not problem-solving, solution. As Baldwin points out, Jonah differs from other parables in the Bible in at least three significant ways. 1) Parables contain interpretation and application as an integral part of their makeup. Jonah has neither. 2) Parables are applied to a specific situation and usually, but not always, communicate one appropriate point of meaning. Jonah is complex and multi-themed. 3) Parables do not associate their characters with historical figures, such as Jonah, son of Amittai. The genre of parable does not seem to fit well.



Jonah crying out against Nineveh

In spite of a difficult fish-story (which we will see is not so difficult), it seems most reasonable to accept Jonah as a literal account of historical non-fiction. This conclusion does not negate the use of authorial style, literary features and the irony, satire and structure that were so valuable in the Ancient Near East. There remain many seasoned scholars who agree.

Use of the Jonah saga within the New Testament is also extremely significant to our study. The simple fact that references to Jonah appear on the lips of Jesus is very noteworthy. If Jesus treated Jonah, his mission to Nineveh, the three-day fish encounter and the prophecy in general as historical (and he

does), what are we to make of Jesus' divinity, truthfulness, authority, candor and knowledge if indeed the story was simply a parable, or worse yet myth or legend. In fact, the contrary is true. Jesus' belief and references add validity to our conclusion of historicity and accuracy.

Matthew 12:38-41

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." ³⁹ But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; ⁴⁰ for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Matthew 16:1-4

The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. ² But He replied to them, "When it is evening, you say, '*It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.*' ³ "And in the morning, '*There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.*' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot *discern* the signs of the times? ⁴ "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away.

Luke 11:29-32

As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. ³⁰ "For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. ³¹ "The Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. ³² "The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Moreover, apart from **2 Kings** these are the only references to Jonah in the remainder of the Bible. Do not be concerned about the "lack" of sufficient witness. Testimony from Christ is momentous considering this: Jesus consistently refers to Jonah as a validating illustration of His own resurrection. Thus if we believe in the historicity and truth of Christ's resurrection, it would follow that Jonah's saga would also be historical and true. The two are linked in the statements of Jesus.



The prophecy of Jonah, containing a single prophetic oracle (in only five words of Hebrew; **3:4b**) as opposed to the compilation of oracles that we find in the other writing prophets, is peculiar in other ways. For instance, the concern of most prophetic narratives is the process by which the divine oracle was fulfilled. "This book, on the contrary, break the pattern surprisingly by showing how and why a divine oracle, concerning the destruction of Nineveh, was not fulfilled." (Allen) Moreover, whereas prophetic oracles against pagan nations are common (see **Joel, Amos, Obadiah**, etc.), most are given in the prophets homeland for the benefit of his countrymen. In

the case of Jonah, he goes to a foreign land and delivers a message for the sake of pagan brutes. Despite all of these breaks from the norm, it is in the delicate balance of these artistic, historical and scientific peculiarities that we notice its stunning beauty and relevance, remembering that the focus of the letter seems to be on Jonah and God.

“The great merit of the book is that it comments objectively on the human scene, especially the religious side of it, from the divine viewpoint. Here lies the secret of the book’s continuing fascination, for readers see an aspect of self in its compelling story. What one makes of it will depend partly on self-understanding and partly on one’s grasp of the all-embracing love of the God we serve.” (Baldwin)

Swallowed and Survived

There has been no small amount of ink spilled on the fact that the book of Jonah claims that an adult man without mental illness was swallowed whole and alive by a fish, remained in the belly of said first for three days and nights, and then was vomited out on or near dry land unharmed (apart from the assumed stench and prune hands). This is clearly a farce...or is it?

A quick internet search will undoubtedly lead you to the infamous story of one James Bartley, whaler or not whaler depending on which account you read, who was lost at sea and swallowed by a whale in 1891. His mates killed a whale shortly after James was lost and upon bringing the internal organs aboard the ship, James was found alive but unconscious inside the stomach, his skin bleached white from gastric juices. This story has made almost infinite loops through Christian circles and scientific and journalistic and historical filters. At the final bell, it seems that something happened to James Bartley back in 1891 and the details of the story have been smattered through the conversations of time. However you feel about the story, be careful using this account as hard “proof” of anything at all.



Let’s break down some of the most obvious questions and tackle them one by one. First of all, **Jonah 1:17** has the curious statement, “And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah.”

What does the phrase “the LORD appointed” mean and does it have bearing on the science of the event? This is the point of entry for many Bible students who see God’s miraculous or guiding hand in this process, as they should. The omnipotent God of the Bible is not limited by anything but His own magnificent and benevolent character. He can hand-pick a perfectly created species of sea creature to swallow Jonah unharmed. The LORD’s appointment of this creature should not be overlooked.

What exactly is “a great fish”? First of all, the fact that “fish” is used in **Jonah 1-2** and “whale” or “sea monster” is used in **Matthew 12** is not a contradiction. The terms used represent translations from more ambiguous Hebrew and Greek terms used for large sea creatures. Because classifications between sea mammals such as whales and gilled fish were unfounded in the Ancient Near East, this apparent discrepancy is no matter at all. A “great fish” is then simply a large sea creature of nonspecific species.

Jonah 1:17 continues, “and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.”

There seem to be at least three explanations for Jonah’s sojourn “in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights”: 1) A completely natural explanation; 2) A miraculous explanation of God’s unnatural intervention; and as a slight change on the second, 3) Jonah’s literal death and resurrection occur inside the belly of the great fish. Each of these explanations has been taken up by their own champions for as long as this discussion has existed.

Natural Explanation. There is much to say about natural explanations for a man surviving this extended encounter within a sea creature. Although there is little physical evidence of such things happening, the anatomy and data necessary seem to exist. Certain whales, if indeed this sea creature was a whale, can get extremely large. Blue Whales are the largest creature on earth and have a heart the size of a cow. An average sized adult could swim through some of its veins. In the 1930’s a Sulfur-bottom whale was caught off the coast of Massachusetts. It was 100 feet long and had a mouth over 10 feet wide. It carried multiple stomach chambers and large cranial cavities (extensions of the nasal sinuses) which measure 7 feet high, 7 feet wide and 14 feet long. At least the anatomy of sea creatures of this size do not preclude swallowing an adult man whole. Air to breathe for three days and nights is yet another matter that is more difficult to prove, although as mammals, whales need to gulp and hold air to breathe. However, they do not normally store this air in their stomach.

Miraculous Explanation. The words for “miracle” or “miraculous” are only used seven times in the Old Testament, and none of them in Jonah. Nor are there words for “wonder” or “sign” in this book. It seems that if the underwater sojourn of Jonah was indeed miraculous, the written prophecy either has no intention of calling it such or it is not at all interested in the question we are asking. Again, this explanation is difficult, if not impossible, to prove. The fact that “the LORD appointed” the fish may give some all the nudge they need to understand this as a miracle. They may be correct.

Death and Resurrection. This is a clear subset of the Miraculous Explanation above. The interesting facet of this explanation is of course Jesus’ corollary in His reference in Matthew and Luke. In **Matthew 12**, Jesus clearly mentions Jonah in reference to the “sign” of His own imminent resurrection (and death?). This correlation may put a twist on our traditional understanding of Jonah’s stint in the fish. This produces one more question: When did Jonah say and pray the words recorded in **2:2-9**? It seems reasonable to allow time for Jonah to pray this immediately upon his entrance into the creature. It may also be that he prayed them after his resuscitation.

How do the actual words and images of Jonah’s prayer inform our question? Look specifically at 2:5-6.

How do you understand Jonah’s sojourn in the belly of the fish? Discuss your thoughts in your group.

MAP

Placing the geography of the story may seem a bit ancillary, but it is not. Central to the development and drama of the account are issues of east and west, water and land. The simple map that follows will help orient you to the place names and routes in a memorable and illustrative way.



OUTLINE OF JONAH

This short four-chapter book is broken down into even easier-to-manage chunks that play off each other. There seem to be common and mirrored themes within the progression of the story that add to its drama and style. Perhaps the following outline will help you access these features.

1:1-16 – *Jonah rejects God’s compassion and calling to Nineveh*

1:17-2:10 – *Jonah accepts God’s deliverance*

3:1-9 – *Nineveh accepts God’s deliverance*

3:10-4:11 – *Jonah rejects God’s compassion to Nineveh*

Notice the repeating and contrasting themes of acceptance and rejection, deliverance and judgment, Jonah’s reluctance and God’s persistence. Also appearing at stylistic and important places within this outline are passages referring to God’s character. Pay special attention to these and other features as you read in order to grasp the full affect of the book’s beauty.



SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This four-chapter book will be broken up into six sermons. The passages for each sermon are listed below with some specific questions for each of the passages.

Each study session, whether in a small group of peers or in a family discussion, can begin with the same kind of opening or starter questions. These questions assume a prior (even if immediately prior) reading of the section, if not the entire book. The starter questions can be followed up by the specific questions in each passage below.

Starter Questions

- What emotional response did you have to the text?
- What about the text struck you as very important?
- Identify two questions you have about the text.
- Identify two things in the text that were unexpected.
- What has changed about your thoughts on the book of Jonah?

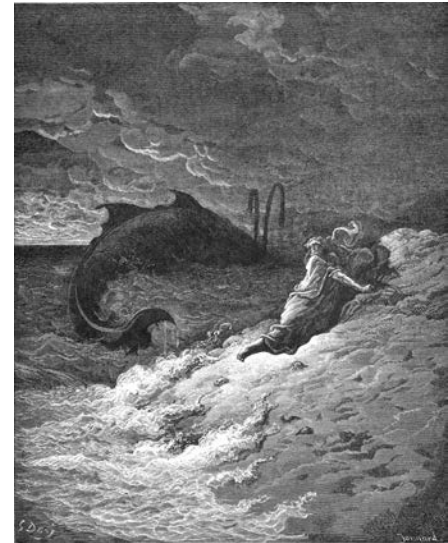
Sermon Passages and Discussion Questions

Jonah 1:1-2

- What else do we know about Jonah? (**2 Kings 14:23-25**)
- Where does Jonah live and minister as a prophet?
- What is the role of a prophet in Old Testament times?
- What about Nineveh and the kingdom of Assyria made them greatly feared? See *Assyria the Empire* above.
- What do the words in **Jonah 1:2** say about God?

Jonah 1:3-16

- How did Jonah react to God's calling in **1:2**? Why?
- Locate Joppa, Nineveh and Tarshish on the map.
- Track the word "down" through **1:3-6**. What is the author trying to illustrate?
- What do you find particularly noteworthy about the storm on the sea?
- Describe the religion of the sailors. Where does their religion appear? How does it change?



Gustav Dore etching of Jonah's expulsion

Jonah 1:17-2:10

- Why did the LORD "appoint a great fish to swallow Jonah"?
- What do you think is significant about Jonah's prayer?
- How does Jonah change in this encounter?
- What image is Jonah using in **2:5-7** to describe his situation?
- Who is clearly in total control of the situation? Why is this important?

Jonah 3:1-9

- What is significant about God's "second time" call to Jonah?
- Describe the flavor and force of Jonah's oracle against Nineveh...all eight words of it!
- What is significant about the reactions and actions of the people of Nineveh? Their king?
- How long did these people reform their deeds in **3:10**? What does this say of God's mercy?

Jonah 3:10-4:4

- Read **Jeremiah 18:7-11** and discuss its possible relevance to this text.
- How do you understand God "relenting" and/or changing His mind about Nineveh's judgment?
- What did Jonah know about God's character? How do you suppose he knew this?
- Read **1 Kings 19:1-8** and discuss its possible relevance to this text.
- What other biblical character comes to mind here? (See **Job 6:8ff**; **Job 7:15ff**)

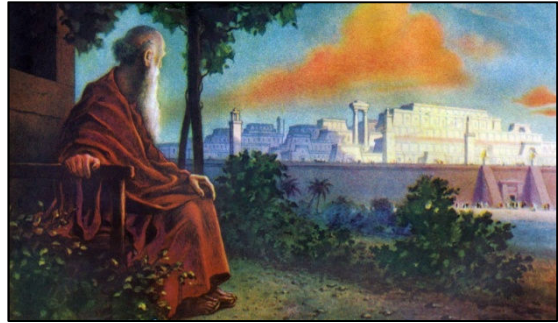
Jonah 4:5-11

- What do you imagine Jonah was waiting for outside of the city? How long did he wait? (**3:4**)
- What point did God have in compassionately giving Jonah the shade of a plant?
- What point did God have in His judgment to take the plant away by killing it?
- What do Jonah and God finally have in common? What is Jonah still lacking?

APPLICATION

No study of God's Word is complete until we practically apply the truths learned. Any study of Scripture without a concerted emphasis on application is ultimately futile and potentially dangerous as pride, arrogance, legalism and puffy-head syndrome set in (**1 Corinthians 8:1**).

While many applications are referenced in the discussion questions above, I want to highlight more specific applications here for added emphasis and ease of reference.



Jonah awaiting the destruction of Nineveh

It seems clear from the lengthy discussion and study above that the prophecy of the book of Jonah is much more than what it seems. God's love for and mercy towards the people of Nineveh is magnificent but in the story it fades into the background. The sailors and the great fish are also important characters, but only for a moment, for a specific reason. Throughout each and every word of the saga, from "the word of the LORD came," all the way to God's words to the prophet at the close, "should I not have compassion on Nineveh the great city," the spotlight is on Jonah. More specifically, the spotlight is on Jonah's heart. We are watching and waiting and hoping for the transformation of a heart.

This begs the question: what about my heart? What about your heart? As you read this, wherever you sit and whatever is happening around you, write these simple questions on your mind and prayerfully meditate in communion with God until He reveals a truthful answer.

Does my heart reflect the compassion and grace of God's heart?

How can I practically imitate and display God's furious and bewildering love to those around me?

How am I in danger of making the same mistakes as Jonah?

How well do I represent God?

What people do I consistently disregard and look over because I am me-focused?

Father God,

I long to see your heart as it truly is. Come and clarify my sight of you. Move in and illuminate my thoughts of you. Enlarge my heart for others and help me see them the way you do. Forgive me for the times I have failed to represent you well. For the countless times I have selfishly chosen myself over others. Please give me the grace to change my thinking and my doing. I long to realize the joy you have waiting for me as I join you in your mission. Increase my faith. Help my abandon. I will follow you.

In the name of your Son Jesus, the servant who considered all others as more important than himself. Amen.

JONAH PART 2 – NAHUM – A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

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Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark, The Lord of The Rings, The Bourne Identity, Harry Potter, even the “Twilight” series all have this in common with Nahum and Jonah...they are great sequels! Just like those movie series make you watch all three or more of the movies to get to the final point, Jonah and Nahum should be put into a “boxed set” for us to get to God’s final point regarding the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. “Nahum’s book is a sequel to, and a dramatic contrast with, the book of Jonah.”¹ Jonah went to preach a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, “And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.” (Jonah 3:4-5). In contrast to Jonah, Nahum has a message of judgment and destruction! Nahum blasts the city of Nineveh with harsh words like this, “Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make the nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle.” (Nahum 3:5-6).

So when we put these two prophetic books together we can see God’s ultimate plan for Assyria. Assyria is an instrument that God used to discipline the northern kingdom of Israel because of their rebellion and disobedience to Him as His covenant people. Ultimately, however, because of the Assyrians’ wickedness and pride God brings destruction upon their kingdom and specifically the city of Nineveh, which had become the capital of that once world super-power.

The city of Nineveh wasn’t always the capital of the Assyrian kingdom, but it was always a prominent city. “Nineveh, the last capital of Assyria, was one of the oldest cities of Mesopotamia, but attained its zenith only under Sennacherib and his successors”² Interesting to me in researching this paper is what the word “Nineveh” may mean.

The name Nineveh may be traced to a Cappadocian cuneiform tablet from the twenty-first century BC and found in Asia Minor at modern Kultepe. The name Nine is found on this tablet as an ideogram with the picture of a fish within an enclosure. The name is linked to the Ninevite goddess Ishtar, whose symbol was the fish. Hammurabi (eighteenth century BC), in the prologue of his law code, describes himself as “the king who in Nineveh glorified the name of the goddess Ishtar.”³

When thinking about how God sent the prophet Jonah to Nineveh, the city of the fish-god, VIA THE GREAT FISH-to go preach to that city to tell them to stop worshipping the fish-god, I can only smile. So how did the Assyrians come to be a world super-power, and how does God ultimately overthrow them? Let’s look at the rise of Assyria. Then specifically let’s look at Nahum’s prophecy against Nineveh, comparing that to the fall of Nineveh, which took place in 612 B.C.

This was the first empire in history, in the sense that it had the first imperial administration...Basically the empire consisted of the home kingdom of Assyria with a number of subject territories, the obedience of which was marked pre-eminently by their payment of tribute to avoid Assyrian raids...The heart of the

¹ Lane T. Dennis, Exec. Ed. “Introduction to Nahum.” *ESV Study Bible*. (Crossway Bibles: Wheaton, Illinois) p. 1709.

² Alfred J. Hoerth. *Peoples of the Old Testament World*. (Baker Books: Grand Rapids) p. 79.

³ R.K. Harrison. *Major Cities of the Biblical World*. (Thomas Nelson: Nashville) p. 181-182.

system was the Assyrian king, “the great king, the legitimate king, the king of the world, king of Assyria, king of all the four rims of the earth, king of kings, prince without rival, who rules from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea”⁴ Most of the rulers were forceful men who spent the campaigning season in the field; weaklings had little chance to keep their throne against ambitious relatives or outsiders.⁵

It appears that the Assyrians were related to (from the same people-group as) the Babylonians. We learn this from Genesis 10:11-13 which tells us of the exploits of Nimrod, “The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went into Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.” (Gen. 10:10-12, ESV).

This inference is in harmony with the conclusions of archaeologists and Assyriologists, who agree in affirming that the Assyrians were of purely Semitic race. In physiognomy they resembled the modern Armenians; while in language and customs and even in physical characteristics, they bore a striking resemblance to the Babylonians. The settlement of Assyria was admittedly subsequent to that of Babylonia. Professor Goodspeed says that the Assyrians were probably originally a Babylonian colony but of purer Semitic blood than the Babylonians.⁶

Although there is evidence of life and activity in this area of the fertile crescent for thousands and thousands of years, arguably since the beginning of creation, for this paper’s purpose we will focus on Assyria’s growth into a world super-power, their subsequent decline, and then resurgence from approximately 1100 B.C. to around 700 B.C. This paper will focus on this time period because this is the Assyrian empire of Jonah and Nahum’s day. The first great figure to lead Assyria to dominance was Tiglath-pileser I. This king led Assyria to greatness and territorial growth mostly through warfare and conquest. “Beginning with Ashur-resh-ishi I and his son Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076) the Middle Assyrian era attained its full flower. Once again Assyria’s borders were established after northern frontier battles. Tiglath-pileser ventured beyond Assyria’s traditional northern boundaries into more distant regions all the way to the “Great Sea” (Mediterranean).”⁷

Under Tiglath-pileser I Assyria was destined to realize her ambition of Asiatic supremacy. In the very first year of his reign Tiglath-pileser I conquered Armenia...Next, he conquered the great Hittite nation to the west, extending his conquests into Asia Minor as far as Cappadocia. To the east he conquered Elam; and later extended his conquests to the south over the whole of Babylonia, becoming ruler of all the lands from the Persian Gulf to the Caucasus Mountains, and from the mountains of Elam to the Mediterranean. Once conquered, the peoples were organized under Assyrian rule.⁸

Tiglath-pileser I provided impressive growth and dominance in a very short amount of time. What is almost as fascinating as this growth is how quickly the Assyrian empire seems to have fallen apart as soon as this king moves off the scene. There is one very interesting reason that certainly accounts for this rapid decent: the crowning of the monarchs in the Kingdom of Israel! As Israel grew in strength and prospered through the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, Assyria seems to have faded into the background of history. It isn’t until after the split of the kingdom of Israel into two kingdoms-the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom that Assyria seems to come back onto the scene. It is interesting to notice the link between Israel’s faithfulness to God and God’s protection of them, and then their disobedience and God’s discipline of them via outside nations-specifically Assyria for the Northern Kingdom, which was headquartered in Samaria.

⁴ Tr. A. Leo Oppenheim, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 297 (Ashurbanipal)
⁵ Chester G. Starr. *A History of the Ancient World* (Oxford University Press; New York), pp. 131-132.
⁶ Dorothy Ruth Miller. *A Handbook of Ancient History in Bible Light*. (Fleming H Revell Co.: New York) p. 86
⁷ Hoerth, *Peoples of the Old Testament World*. (Baker Books: Grand Rapids) p. 86.
⁸ Miller, p. 88.

The second Assyrian empire rises with Tiglath-pileser III or IV depending on which account you acknowledge (745-727 B.C.). Between these two kingdom periods is when Jonah went to Nineveh. The Assyrian king most likely to have been in Nineveh when Jonah went there was Shalmaneser II, although this king is not named specifically by Jonah. We know from II Kings 14:23-28 that Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (782-753 B.C.). The repentance that the Ninevites displayed is certainly documented by the New Testament writers (Luke 11:29-32) but history seems to give us some hint of religious change in Assyria because of Jonah's mission as well.

The suddenness of the Ninevites' repentance has proven difficult for certain scholars to accept. The miraculous power of God, however, which must have accompanied Jonah's preaching, should not be minimized. In addition, the Ninevites may have been somewhat preconditioned and open to Jonah's message due to the religious reforms of Adad-nirari III (810-783 B.C.). This Assyrian king had established a trend toward monotheism by focusing the cult-worship upon the god Nebo.⁹

Miller's book sheds some light on this shift from polytheism to monotheism in Assyria as well.

Winckler tells us that there was in the reign of Shalmaneser II a religious movement which resulted in a change from the worship of many gods to that of one God whom they called Nebo. Nebo was the son in the Babylonian trinity. His name means "the proclaimer," "the prophet."...It would seem that in earlier days he had been worshipped as the supreme and only God. To the worship of this God the nation now returned. According to Winckler, the reformation which resulted in the establishment of monotheism in the form of the worship of Nebo was "as decided as that under Luther."¹⁰

So we see the impact of Jonah's message of repentance, now let's move to Nahum's message of destruction.

The repentance we see in the book of Jonah (and historically through the shift to monotheistic worship) didn't last for very long as Tiglath-pileser III comes to the scene in 745B.C. He leads the Assyrians back into their old ways of cruelty and viciousness.

He was, according to his own inscriptions, a ruthless conqueror, who greatly extended the boundaries of his realm. Conquered lands, he tells us, were plundered; the inhabitants carried away captive; and cities 'desolated like an overwhelming flood.' He boasts of impaling a king on the gateway of his city. By a systematized policy of conquest, deportation, and colonization, he built the most extensive and best organized empire the world had ever seen.¹¹

Tiglath-pileser is followed on the scene by the likes of Shalmaneser IV, Sargon II, and Sennacherib. Sennacherib was murdered by his sons (Is. 37:37-38) after his unbelievable and divinely orchestrated defeat at Jerusalem and is succeeded by Esarhaddon. Ashurbanipal came next and he is probably the king of Assyria when Nahum prophesies of Nineveh's coming destruction.

Nahum gives us both the *why* for Nineveh's destruction and the *how*. Nahum predicts that Nineveh's destruction will come because of the Assyrians' plundering of Judah: "For the Lord is restoring the majesty of Jacob as the majesty of Israel, for plunderers have plundered them and ruined their branches." (2:2). The other reasons given for Nineveh's destruction come in 3:1-violence, lying, and greed-"Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder-no end to the prey!"

⁹ Harrison, p. 186.

¹⁰ Miller, p. 92.

¹¹ Miller, p. 102.

The *how* comes in 2:6-8. "The river gates are opened; the palace melts away; its mistress is stripped; she is carried off, her slave girls lamenting, moaning like doves and beating their breasts. Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. 'Halt! Halt!' They cry, but none turns back."

Nahum paints a description of the gates being opened and the palace melting away. This is probably a hard picture to see coming to fruition to the reader of Nahum's day because of the strength and seemingly insurmountableness of Nineveh. Listen to this description of how impregnable the city seemed, "It was at this time that Nineveh, across the Tigris from the modern Mosul, became the capital city. Some 10,000 captives must have worked 12 years to raise a platform for its great buildings; double walls and moats encircled the city over a course of 8 miles; and a special canal provided fresh water."¹² A raised platform, double walls, an 8-mile long moat! This city was a defensive masterpiece.

Approaching armies must have had a difficult time even getting up to the wall of the city, much less being able to break it down. But the plans of man are nothing when they come against the God of the Universe! God used those very moats that the Assyrians thought would defend them to be their downfall. "In August 612 B.C., Nineveh fell. The armies of the Babylonians, the Medes, and Scythians laid siege to the Assyrian capital. Nabopolassar was greatly aided by his brilliant son Nebuchadnezzar *and by the flooding of the rivers about the city.*"¹³ "Nineveh was taken and destroyed by the combined forces of Babylon and Media. It is believed that the allied armies were unable to force an entrance until, in the third year of the siege, the Khoser River, *swollen by very heavy rains, and very rapid in its current, broke through the city walls and made a way for the besiegers to enter.*"¹⁴

So there it is, Nahum's seemingly impossible prophecy of the gates opening and the palace melting away are fulfilled by the flooding river and moats around Nineveh. God raises up the water to "melt away" the wall to the city and the Babylonians and Medes do the rest to end the Assyrian civilization. So complete and total was the destruction of Nineveh that only 200 years later, when "the Greek Zenophon came upon the crumbling ruins as he led the 'Retreat of the Ten Thousand,' he could not even learn the name of the city whose site they marked. In more modern times (19th century), Henry Layard gives this testimony of Nineveh: "And what was left of mighty Nineveh? Layard looked, and saw desolation. 'Fragments of pottery,' he wrote, 'and the stupendous mass of brickwork occasionally laid bare by the winter rains.' The ruins of palaces, buried by shifting sand. The shattered glory of a lost civilization."¹⁵ Thus ends the powerful and cruel kingdom of Assyria. They have never been heard from since. But this is not the ultimate end of the story for Assyria. There will come a happy day for the bloody city. Isaiah 19 gives us a beautiful picture of a future Assyria in the Millennial Kingdom who is worshipping God and serving God along with Egypt and Israel. The former bitter rivals will be brothers (Isaiah 19:23-25). God indeed raises nations and brings them down as He wishes and as He is accomplishing His plan for this world. Assyria (and the city of Nineveh) is just one example of His sovereignty. May we remember Who is *really* in control as we help lead this country forward.

¹² Starr, p. 131.

¹³ Harrison, p. 189 (italics mine).

¹⁴ Miller, p. 106 (italics mine).

¹⁵ Robert Silverberg. *The Man Who Found Nineveh: The story of Austen Henry Layard.* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston: New York), p. 31.