

**Notes & Outlines**

# **JONAH**

J. Vernon McGee

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Is the Book of Jonah the Achilles' heel of the Bible? It is, if we are to accept the ridiculous explanations of the critics. The translators of the Septuagint were the first to question its reasonableness. They set the pattern for the avalanche of criticism which was to follow. The ancient method of modernism is to allegorize the book and to classify it with *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

Some of the extravagant theories of the critics are more far-fetched and fantastic than they even concede the Book of Jonah to be. For example:

1. It is held (without a scrap of evidence) that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath.
2. There is a theory that Jonah fell asleep during the storm, had a dream, and that the Book of Jonah is the account of that dream.
3. There are those who relate the Book of Jonah to the Phoenician myth of Hercules and the sea monster.
4. It is claimed that Jonah was picked up after the storm and shipwreck by a boat that had a fish for a figurehead — which gave support for the record in the Book of Jonah.
5. Others resort to the wild claim that a dead fish was floating around and that Jonah took refuge in it during the storm.

The producers of these speculations claim that the Book of Jonah is unreasonable, and they bring forth these theories to give credence to the story! We must dismiss them all as having no basis of fact, no vestige of proof from an historical standpoint, and are only in existence in the imagination of the critics.

### **WRITER: Jonah**

Jonah was a historical character. The historical record of the kings of Israel and Judah is accepted as reliable. No one denies that David, Josiah, and Hezekiah were real kings, and it is among the records of these kings that we find the mention of Jonah. Speaking of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the historian writes:

***He restored the border of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which he spoke by the hand of his servant, Jonah, the son of Amitai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.*** (2 Kings 14:25)

Jeroboam was a real person; Israel was a real nation; Hamath was a real place. It is unlikely that Jonah, the son of Amitai, was a figment of the imagination.

It is begging the point to say that this is another Jonah. It is not reasonable to believe that there were two Jonahs whose fathers were named Amitai and whose offices were prophets. This is especially evident when it is observed that the name is not a common one (it occurs only in this reference in 2 Kings, in the Book of Jonah, and in two references in the New Testament).

Obviously the Lord Jesus Christ considered Jonah a real person, and He accepted the record of the Book of Jonah as true. Listen to Him:

***For as Jonah was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation.*** (Luke 11:30)

And again,

***But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet, Jonah; for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.*** (Matthew 12:39-41)

If you reject the Book of Jonah, you are not merely saying that you cannot accept the record as reasonable, but that you do not believe that Jesus was acquainted with the facts of the case. You break with Jesus when you deny the Book of Jonah.

The fact that the question has been raised concerning the authen-

ticity of Jonah's record is all the more startling when a contrast is made with one of the other minor prophets. For instance, there is no reference to Habakkuk in any historical book, and he is never mentioned by name in the New Testament. In spite of this, there is no concerted effort to classify him as a mythological character. Of course, the real reason for getting rid of Jonah is to get rid of the miraculous experience which he records concerning himself.

### **DATE:**

Conservative scholars place the writing of this book before 745 B.C. The incidents took place about that time. Some even place it as early as 860 B.C. It seems best to place it between 800 and 750 B.C. Students of history will recognize this as the period when Nineveh was in its heyday. The nation of Assyria was at its zenith at this time, also. It was destroyed by 606 B.C. By the time of Herodotus, Nineveh, the city of Nimrod, had ceased to exist. When Xenophon passed the city, it was deserted, but he testified that the walls still stood and they were 150 feet high. Historians now estimate they were at least 100 feet high and 40 feet thick.

### **COMMENTS:**

(See author's booklet, "Jonah, Dead or Alive?"")

#### **The Book of Jonah is Experience, Not Prophecy**

In examining the Book of Jonah, we find that it contains the personal record of an experience which Jonah had, and he evidently was the writer. Properly speaking, the brief brochure is not a prophecy and seems to be out of step among the Minor Prophets. It contains no prophecy, although Jonah was a prophet. It is the personal account of a major event in the life of Jonah. As the narrator, he told of his experience which was a sign of the greatest event in the history of the world — *the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

The Book of Jonah is not a fish story that disturbs a gainsaying world, but it is a throne in the midst of which "stood a Lamb as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6). This Lamb is a resurrected Lamb, and a Christ-rejecting world will someday cry out, "Hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 6:16).

## **The Fish Is Not the Hero of the Story**

There is another salient point to keep before us as we study this book: The fish is not the hero of the story, neither is it the villain. The book is not even about a fish. The chief difficulty is in keeping a correct perspective. The fish is among the props and does not occupy the star's dressing room. Let us distinguish between the essentials and the incidentals. The incidentals are the fish, the gourd, the east wind, the boat, and Nineveh. The essentials are Jehovah and Jonah — God and man.

### **SIGNIFICANT SUBJECTS:**

**1. This is the one book of the Old Testament which sets forth the Resurrection.** Those who assert that the resurrection is not found in the Old Testament surely are not versed in the magnificent message of Jonah. When a wicked and adulterous generation was seeking after a sign, Jesus referred them to the Book of Jonah for the message: “As Jonah...so Jesus” is the fine comparison made by our Lord.

**2. Salvation is not by works.** Salvation is by faith, which leads to repentance. The Book of Jonah is read by the Orthodox Jews on the Great Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). One great self-evident truth from the ritual of this day is that the way to God was not by “works of righteousness which we have done” (Titus 3:5), but by the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice provided by God. The most significant statement in the Book of Jonah is in 2:9 — “Salvation is of the LORD.”

**3. God’s purpose of grace cannot be frustrated.** If Jonah had refused to go to Nineveh the second time, would God have destroyed the city? God would not have been limited by Jonah’s refusal. He would have raised up another instrument, or, more likely, He would have had another fish ready to give Jonah the green light toward Nineveh. The book shows God’s determination to get His message of salvation to a people who will hear and accept it.

**4. God will not cast us aside for faithlessness.** When Jonah failed the first time, God did not give him up. The most encouraging words that a faltering and failing child of God can hear are, “And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time” (Jonah 3:1).

**5. God is good and gracious.** The most penetrating picture of God in the entire Bible is in Jonah 4:2. It is wrong to say that the Old Testament reveals a God of wrath and the New Testament reveals a God of love. He is no vengeful deity in the Book of Jonah.

**6. God is the God of the Gentiles.** It has been suggested that Romans 3:29 be written over this book: "Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also." The Book of Jonah is the answer to those critics who claim that the Old Testament presents a local and limited deity, a tribal deity. The Book of Jonah is a great book on missions and has a world vision.

### APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF JONAH:

**1. Striking resemblance between Jonah and Paul.** Both were missionaries to the Gentiles; both were shipwrecked; both were witnesses to the sailors on board the ship, and both were used to deliver these sailors from death. There are other striking comparisons which a careful study will reveal. Paul made three missionary journeys, and with his trip to Rome, there were four. The four chapters of the Book of Jonah may be divided into four missionary journeys of Jonah: (1) into the fish, (2) out onto dry land, (3) to Nineveh, and (4) to the heart of God.

**2. Timetable approach.** When you consult a timetable in a railroad station or airport, there are three important factors you note: (1) destination, (2) departure time, and (3) arrival time. It is possible to construct the four brief chapters of Jonah into the form of a timetable.

**Timetable of the Book of Jonah**

DEPARTURE	DESTINATION	ARRIVAL	CHAPTER
Israel (Samaria or Gath-hepher)	Nineveh	Fish	1
Fish	Nineveh	Dry Land	2
Dry Land	Nineveh	Nineveh	3
Nineveh	Gourd Vine	Heart of God	4

## **RECOMMENDED BOOKS:**

- Feinberg, Charles L. *The Minor Prophets*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1976.
- Gaebelein, Arno C. *The Annotated Bible*. 1917. Reprint. Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1971.
- Ironside, H. A. *The Minor Prophets*. Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, n.d.
- McGee, J. Vernon. *Jonah & Micah*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991.
- Tatford, Frederick A. *The Minor Prophets*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Klock & Klock, n.d.
- Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1982.

*These notes, prepared by J. Vernon McGee, are for the purpose of giving assistance to the listeners of the THRU THE BIBLE RADIO program. They are to be used with the Bible and will be more meaningful as you look up all the Scripture references. Due to the necessary brevity of both notes and broadcasts, a list of recommended books is included for those wanting a more detailed study. These books may be obtained from a Christian library or bookstore or ordered from the publishers.*



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