

## The Book of Jonah

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." <sup>3</sup> But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup> The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

<sup>7</sup> The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" <sup>9</sup> "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." <sup>10</sup> Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

<sup>11</sup> Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. <sup>12</sup> He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." <sup>13</sup> Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. <sup>14</sup> Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." <sup>15</sup> So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

<sup>17</sup> But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

**2** Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying,

"I called to the LORD out of my distress,  
and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.  
<sup>3</sup> You cast me into the deep,  
into the heart of the seas,  
and the flood surrounded me;  
all your waves and your billows  
passed over me.  
<sup>4</sup> Then I said, 'I am driven away  
from your sight;  
how<sup>sq</sup> shall I look again  
upon your holy temple?'  
<sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped around my head  
<sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land  
whose bars closed upon me forever;  
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,  
O LORD my God.  
<sup>7</sup> As my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered the LORD;  
and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.  
<sup>8</sup> Those who worship vain idols  
forsake their true loyalty.  
<sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

<sup>10</sup> Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

**3** The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup> When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink

water. <sup>8</sup> Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

**4** But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. <sup>3</sup> And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." <sup>4</sup> And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" <sup>5</sup> Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

<sup>6</sup> The LORD God appointed a bush,<sup>[a]</sup> and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

<sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." <sup>10</sup> Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"



## Jonah and Genre

So, what genre is Jonah? What kind of literature is it?

First, Jonah is a *narrative*—a story, comparable to other narrative sections of the Bible such as those found in *Genesis* or *Judges*. Second, it is a *short story*, comparable to other short stories also found in the Bible (e.g., *Ruth*, *Esther*, or the *Joseph* story in *Genesis 37–50*). Third, it is a *prophetic* short story, which is to say it is a story involving a prophet as the main character. One might compare the stories about *Elijah* and *Elisha*, perhaps, in *1 Kings 17–2 Kings 5* which are further examples of "prophetic literature" (see Petersen 2002). None of this, however, speaks to Jonah's overall force or tenor or purpose—that is, is the book of Jonah fiction or nonfiction? And what is its point?

Here is where reading "according to genre" is tricky (see McKenzie 2005; Strawn 2005). As mentioned earlier, genre is so routinely learned and practiced by members of a culture that recognizing and interpreting genres is almost automatic if not subconscious. That is why we often read ancient genres as if they are modern ones—we are simply intuiting what they must be in light of our own cultural "genre-genes." But this is also what makes reading ancient genres difficult—not only did the ancients have different genres that we don't have, even those genres we share with the ancients often differed in antiquity (see above). Moreover, literature typically doesn't broadcast its genre. It just is the genre it is, and competent readers know as much. When we don't know a genre type or if we are unsure whether it is coterminous with our own examples—both of which are situations we regularly encounter when reading ancient literature—we must rely on clues to help us determine the genre.

So what further "genre clues" do we get from Jonah? One is the highly artificial nature of the book, by which I mean the evidence that shows the book has been carefully constructed, especially around closely similar and repeating structures (see Tribble 1994 for an extensive discussion; more briefly Strawn 2010). Jonah is no quickly jotted down eyewitness account of some event in the *Iron Age*; it is a carefully crafted work of literature—a literary artifice.

McKenzie has argued that a number of clues in Jonah point to its *genre* and overall purpose as being one of satire. He highlights elements of humour, exaggeration, *irony*, even ridicule. For example, Jonah is more an "anti-prophet" than a prophet: he does anything and everything he can do to escape delivering God's word to Nineveh. To cite different humorous elements: In *1:4*, the ship is personified—it thinks about breaking up (NRSV: "threatened to break up"). Meanwhile, in the midst of this "perfect storm," Jonah is napping! The sailors come off looking far more righteous than Jonah, as do the Ninevites later in the book (see Strawn 2010). Another odd, if not humorous, element concerns the big fish: in *1:17* and *2:10* the fish that swallows Jonah is a masculine noun (Hebrew *dāg*), but in *2:1* it is a feminine noun (*dāgāh*)! It is highly unlikely that Jonah's "whale" was some sort of reef fish, like the clownfish or parrotfish, that can change gender, nor would ancient Israelites have known of hermaphroditic fish. The switch could be some sort of scribal error in the textual tradition, but according to McKenzie, it may be a genre clue as well.

More could be said in support of McKenzie's interpretation of Jonah as satire. Regardless, there are other good reasons not to read Jonah as a straightforward historical narrative. Key historical details are left out of the story, there are chronological problems in fixing the prophet and the city of Nineveh as described in the story into the history of *Assyria* as we now know it, and there are even geographical problems with several of the details (e.g., Jonah going to *Joppa* rather than *Tyre*, the vast size of Nineveh, and so on).

The end result of these considerations, according to McKenzie, is that Jonah is not " history but satire or parody, a ridiculous story that makes a serious point" (p. 13). To read Jonah as history is to *mis*-read according to genre—to mistake its real genre and therefore to "misconstrue its primary message" (p. 2), which for McKenzie has to do with the stupidity of prejudice, hatred, arrogance, and bigotry toward others (in this case, the Assyrians). That is a serious message indeed, far more significant and relevant than debating whether or not it is possible to survive under sea for three days prior to the invention of submarines. Whether or not the latter could happen is quite another question—perhaps a live question for some people—but it is not a question that the book of Jonah is primarily interested in answering. To reduce the book of Jonah to that kind of scientific (or historical) question is to make a serious category error: an error of genre, a mistake of misreading. It is to be "literal-minded" in the worst way, taking "literally what is spoken figuratively or with humorous exaggeration or irony" or adopting "a matter-of-fact or unimaginative view of things" (OED). It may also be an attempt to evade or escape (like Jonah!) from what may be the primary point of the book since bigotry, prejudice, and hatred are very real, very live problems in our time, no less than in antiquity.

Finally, Jonah's "lessons" on these topics are as real via satire as they are via science—more real, in fact. As the Roman poet Horace said about satires long ago: "What are you laughing at? Change the name and you are the subject of the story" (*Satires* 1.1.69–70).

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