

JONAH and the whale

Jonah came from Galilee, where Jesus later grew up. He was a prophet to the Ten Tribe kingdom. Like **Amos** and **Hosea**, he lived during the long reign of King Jeroboam the Second (we learn this from 2 Kings 14:24, 25). The date would be around 780 BC.

We know very little of the prophecies he delivered in Israel. The whole book of Jonah is devoted to a single episode. Jonah received an extraordinary request from God – that he should go to **Nineveh**, the capital of Assyria, and call on the people there to repent. It is hard for us to imagine the impact on him. As a Jew, Jonah had always kept himself at arm's length from all Gentiles (non-Jews). They worshipped idols, and were unclean. How, he asked himself, could Israel's God have anything to do with such people? Besides, the Assyrians had powerful kings, and could easily bring trouble for Israel (thirty years later they would indeed invade Israel and take captives). Nineveh was 700 miles away to the north east. Jonah decided God was making a big mistake. He went to the shipping company office at Joppa, bought a ticket, and sailed off in the opposite direction.

But you cannot run away from God. After a while a great storm blew up, and the ship was in danger of sinking. The superstitious mariners cast lots to decide whose fault it was, and the lot fell on Jonah. He admitted he was running away from God. But, to his credit, he volunteered to sacrifice himself to save them from drowning. *"Hurl me into the sea", he said, "then there will be a calm"*. So they picked him up and threw him overboard. The irony is, the sailors were Gentiles. Jonah had been forced to realise that Gentiles have feelings, just like Jews. They did not want to die. And he had been prepared to give his life to save them! Perhaps he was beginning to see that God was right after all.

Mercifully, God did not let him die. A great fish saw him fall through the water and gobbled him up. It was probably a whale – they have been known to swallow men alive when chased by harpoon boats, and they breathe air like men. The second chapter of Jonah records his amazing prayer to God from the darkness and terror of his underwater prison. It winged its way up through the waves and into heaven. God had pity on him. Three days later the whale threw him up on a Mediterranean beach.

Again God commanded the prophet to go to Nineveh. And this time, grumpily, he went. It was a huge metropolis – three days to cross on foot. He cried to the people that if they did not repent from their violence and their wicked ways Nineveh would be overthrown. Remarkably, the king set an example, clothed himself in sackcloth as a sign of mourning, and started praying to the God of Israel.

Jonah sat down to wait for the outcome. He was really peeved when God told him the capital had been saved. But God reproved him. *"Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city,"* He said, *"in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left (presumably He meant little children), and also much cattle?"* As Peter the Apostle writes in the New Testament, God does not wish that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Whatever our race, we can be sure that if we truly humble ourselves before God, He will have mercy on us.

Jesus remarks on the repentance of the Ninevites, and contrasts them with the hard-hearted Jews of Galilee who refused to listen to his call to repentance. He also says that as Jonah was three days in the belly of the whale, he would be three days in the tomb, and then rise again.

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