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JONAH, TOBIT,  
JUDITH

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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### Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles  
Amos—Amos  
Bar—Baruch  
1 Chr—1 Chronicles  
2 Chr—2 Chronicles  
Col—Colossians  
1 Cor—1 Corinthians  
2 Cor—2 Corinthians  
Dan—Daniel  
Deut—Deuteronomy  
Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes  
Eph—Ephesians  
Esth—Esther  
Exod—Exodus  
Ezek—Ezekiel  
Ezra—Ezra  
Gal—Galatians  
Gen—Genesis  
Hab—Habakkuk  
Hag—Haggai  
Heb—Hebrews  
Hos—Hosea  
Isa—Isaiah  
Jas—James  
Jdt—Judith  
Jer—Jeremiah  
Job—Job  
Joel—Joel  
John—John  
1 John—1 John  
2 John—2 John  
3 John—3 John  
Jonah—Jonah  
Josh—Joshua  
Jude—Jude  
Judg—Judges  
1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings  
Lam—Lamentations  
Lev—Leviticus  
Luke—Luke  
1 Macc—1 Maccabees  
2 Macc—2 Maccabees  
Mal—Malachi  
Mark—Mark  
Matt—Matthew  
Mic—Micah  
Nah—Nahum  
Neh—Nehemiah  
Num—Numbers  
Obad—Obadiah  
1 Pet—1 Peter  
2 Pet—2 Peter  
Phil—Philippians  
Phlm—Philemon  
Prov—Proverbs  
Ps(s)—Psalms  
Rev—Revelation  
Rom—Romans  
Ruth—Ruth  
1 Sam—1 Samuel  
2 Sam—2 Samuel  
Sir—Sirach  
Song—Song of Songs  
1 Thess—1 Thessalonians  
2 Thess—2 Thessalonians  
1 Tim—1 Timothy  
2 Tim—2 Timothy  
Titus—Titus  
Tob—Tobit  
Wis—Wisdom  
Zech—Zechariah  
Zeph—Zephaniah

## INTRODUCTION

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# Jonah

### Who is Jonah?

Jonah, son of Amittai, is introduced in the first verse of this book. His identity is mysterious. He is never named as a prophet, but his mission is clearly to deliver God's message to Nineveh (1:1-2). He has a much shorter historical introduction than many other prophets (see, e.g., Isa 1:1; Jer 1:1-3; Ezek 1:1-3; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1). He is identified only as "son of Amittai," and there is no indication of the period in which he lives.

So who is Jonah, son of Amittai? A prophet by that name appears in the time of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, who ruled for forty-one years (786–746 B.C.; 2 Kgs 14:23-29). His reign was the last period of stability and prosperity for the northern kingdom, although the narrator of 2 Kings condemns him for continuing the worship at Bethel and Dan. The prophet Jonah, named here, is credited with foretelling Jeroboam's acquisition of territory and restoring the earlier boundaries. Is the book of Jonah the story of this eighth-century prophet? The answer is not so simple. There is no historical record of Nineveh turning to worship of YHWH, and the style of the book is not like any other prophetic book. The solution must be sought elsewhere.

### Genre and date

The book of Jonah is not the report of the preaching of a prophet at a specific time. Rather it is a fictional tale. It has been called a parable or a satire or a parody, depending on how one reads it. It has qualities of each of those genres, but none seems to fit the whole work comfortably. Possibly it is woven together from previous pieces and original material. This construction also makes it virtually impossible to date. It must have been written after the period of Jeroboam II, the eighth century, and before the early second century, the time of Sirach, who mentions the Book of the Twelve of which Jonah is a part (Sir 49:10). The portrayal of YHWH as the sole God, sovereign over all nations, supports a postexilic date, possibly around the fifth century B.C.

## **How does Jonah fit in the Book of the Twelve?**

Recent interest in the Book of the Twelve, the collection of shorter Prophetic Books, has highlighted the position of Jonah in this collection. In the Hebrew version, the Masoretic Text, Jonah is the fourth prophet. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation, Jonah is fifth. In both arrangements Jonah is close to Nahum and precedes that prophet. Nahum is seventh in the Masoretic Text and sixth in the Septuagint. The primary message of Nahum is Judah's rejoicing over God's destruction of Nineveh. If the Book of the Twelve is considered as a whole, the message is that God had mercy on Nineveh when it repented (Jonah) but when Nineveh again turned to violence and decimated the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., God destroyed it (Nahum). The message for Judah seems to be that only through repentance will they be saved. The reader knows, however, that the warning will not be heeded. Judah will be attacked by Babylon and most of its people exiled in 587 B.C.

## **Who is God in this book?**

The identity of God in the book of Jonah is complex. God is clearly in charge of creation, bringing a great storm on the sea, commanding a fish to swallow the reluctant prophet and then vomit him up on the shore, bringing up a plant to shade Jonah and then killing it with a worm and strong east wind. God also cares for people other than Abraham's descendants. The Ninevites are worth God's mercy, shown by the warning of a prophet and the lifting of their punishment. God also seems to overreact in threatening disaster for innocent sailors in order to corral one recalcitrant prophet.

The strongest statement about God, however, is found in chapter 4: "gracious and merciful . . . , slow to anger, abounding in kindness, repenting of punishment" (Jonah 4:2; see Joel 2:13). This version of the Old Testament creedal statement is the crux of the book: Jonah is angry because God is forgiving the Ninevites. He declares, "I knew this would happen!" What this book omits from other versions of this description of God is the added phrase, "not declaring the guilty guiltless, but bringing punishment for their parents' wickedness on children and children's children to the third and fourth generation" (Exod 34:7). The Ninevites are forgiven immediately simply because they repented. The message of this book is not punishment and retribution but rather mercy.



## Jonah

- 1 <sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah, son of Amittai: <sup>2</sup>Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it; for their wickedness has come before me. <sup>3</sup>But Jonah made ready to flee to Tarshish, away from the LORD. He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down in it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD.
- 4 <sup>4</sup>The LORD, however, hurled a great wind upon the sea, and the storm was so great that the ship was about to break up. <sup>5</sup>Then the sailors were afraid and each one cried to his god. To lighten the ship for themselves, they threw its cargo

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### JONAH'S DISOBEDIENCE AND FLIGHT

#### *Jonah I*

The book begins with what seems to be a typical call narrative. “The word of the LORD” comes to Jonah and God gives him a commission to preach. But this is no ordinary call narrative. Ordinarily the person called objects. Moses objects five times when God calls him (Exod 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). But Jonah outdoes even Moses. He says nothing, but he attempts to flee as far as he can, “away from the LORD” (1:3). He even tells the sailors that this is his intention (1:10). He must know that this flight is futile, since he declares that the God he fears made both “the sea and the dry land” (1:9). His situation is both ludicrous and tragic.

Further exaggeration is found in the vocabulary of this chapter. Everything is oversized. God commissions Jonah to “[s]et out for the *great* city” (1:2, Hebrew *gadol*). When Jonah attempts to flee, God sends a “*great* wind” that stirs up a “*great* storm” (1:4). After Jonah explains his motive, the sailors are “seized with *great* fear” (1:10). Jonah knows that this “*great* storm” is his fault (1:12), so he urges the sailors to hurl him into the sea. Finally, after every other attempt to save themselves, the sailors follow his instructions and the sea grows calm. Then they are “[s]eized with great

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► This symbol indicates a cross reference number in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See page 103 for number citations.

into the sea. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship, and lay there fast asleep. <sup>6</sup>The captain approached him and said, "What are you doing asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps this god will be mindful of us so that we will not perish."

<sup>7</sup>Then they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots to discover on whose account this evil has come to us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup>They said to him, "Tell us why this evil has come to us! What is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country, and to what people do you belong?" <sup>9</sup>"I am a Hebrew," he replied; "I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

<sup>10</sup>Now the men were seized with great fear and said to him, "How could you do such a thing!"—They knew that he was fleeing from the LORD, because he had told them. <sup>11</sup>They asked, "What shall we do with you, that the sea may calm down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more stormy. <sup>12</sup>Jonah responded, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea and then the sea will calm down for you. For I know that this great storm has come upon you because of me."

<sup>13</sup>Still the men rowed hard to return to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy. <sup>14</sup>Then they cried to the LORD: "Please, O LORD, do not let us perish for taking this man's life; do not charge us with shedding

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fear of the LORD" (1:16). The Hebrew word *gadol*, "great," appears fourteen times in this book of forty-eight verses (see also 2:1; 3:2, 3, 5; 4:1, 6, 11). Everything is supersized!

Another literary device in this chapter helps the reader understand what Jonah is doing. In order to get away from God he goes *down* to Joppa and goes *down* into the ship (1:3). Where is he when the storm comes up? He has "gone *down* into the hold of the ship" (1:5, Hebrew *yard*). Later, in his prayer, he will tell God he "went *down* to the roots of the mountains" (2:7). Meanwhile God is trying to encourage Jonah to get up. God tells him to *get up* and go to Nineveh (1:2, *qwm*), but instead he *gets up* to flee to Tarshish (1:3). During the storm the captain scolds him for sleeping and says, "*Get up*, call on your god!" (1:6). Later God will again tell Jonah to *get up* and go to Nineveh and this second time he does *get up* and go (3:2-3).

The contrast between Jonah and the sailors is also revealing. Jonah is fleeing from God, whereas the sailors turn immediately to their gods during the storm. The sailors cast lots, a typical Jewish action, to discover the reason for the storm. Jonah knows the reason, but hasn't bothered to tell them. When Jonah tells them to fling him into the sea (another flight from God?), they make every effort to avoid harming him, although he has brought great harm upon them. When the sea stops raging, these pagan sailors sacrifice to YHWH. Although Jonah has protested that he fears

innocent blood, for you, LORD, have accomplished what you desired.” <sup>15</sup>Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea stopped raging. <sup>16</sup>Seized with great fear of the LORD, the men offered sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

### Jonah's Prayer

◀ **2** <sup>1</sup>But the LORD sent a great fish to swallow Jonah, and he remained in the belly of the fish three days and three

nights. <sup>2</sup>Jonah prayed to the LORD, his God, from the belly of the fish:

<sup>3</sup>Out of my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me;  
From the womb of Sheol I cried for help,  
and you heard my voice.  
<sup>4</sup>You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the sea,  
and the flood enveloped me;  
All your breakers and your billows  
passed over me.

YHWH (1:9), in the end it is the sailors who are “[s]eized with great fear of the LORD” (1:16).

## JONAH'S PRAYER

### Jonah 2

Jonah seems to have hoped to die when the sailors tossed him into the sea. That would be the final escape from this commission of God that he fervently desires to avoid. But God does not give up so easily. God sends “a great fish to swallow” the reluctant prophet (2:1). In popular imagination this great fish is thought to be a whale. In the Hebrew text of Jonah, however, this amazing animal is designated only as a fish (Hebrew *dag*). The Septuagint describes it as a sea monster, *ketos*, a word that then appears in the Gospel of Matthew (12:40). In later Greek this word connotes a whale. Jonah is “in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” “Three days” is a common phrase for a long time and sometimes indicates the time span before God will take action (see Gen 40:13; Hos 6:2; Jdt 12:7; Esth 4:16).

Finally, in the belly of the fish, Jonah decides to pray. It would be appropriate for Jonah in this situation to pray a lament. Instead, as if anticipating God, he prays a psalm of thanksgiving. In the Psalter the psalm of thanksgiving usually follows a specific pattern (see, e.g., Pss 116; 118): The person who had been rescued from trouble turns to God and sometimes describes both the distress and the agonized lament. Then the grateful person gathers a crowd in order to tell the story of how terrible the situation was. Finally, the whole crowd goes to offer thanks to God and to celebrate the deliverance.

Jonah begins in typical fashion. He remembers his lament and the relief that God answered him (2:3). Then he describes his frightening situation and his fear that he will never again be able to praise God (2:4-7). He



<sup>5</sup>Then I said, "I am banished from  
your sight!  
How will I again look upon  
your holy temple?"  
<sup>6</sup>The waters surged around me up  
to my neck;  
the deep enveloped me;  
seaweed wrapped around my  
head.  
<sup>7</sup>I went down to the roots of the  
mountains;  
to the land whose bars closed  
behind me forever,  
But you brought my life up from  
the pit,  
O LORD, my God.  
<sup>8</sup>When I became faint,  
I remembered the LORD;

My prayer came to you  
in your holy temple.  
<sup>9</sup>Those who worship worthless  
idols  
abandon their hope for mercy.  
<sup>10</sup>But I, with thankful voice,  
will sacrifice to you;  
What I have vowed I will pay:  
deliverance is from the LORD.  
<sup>11</sup>Then the LORD commanded the  
fish to vomit Jonah upon dry land.

### **Jonah's Obedience and the Ninevites' Repentance**

**3** <sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to  
Jonah a second time: <sup>2</sup>Set out for the  
great city of Nineveh, and announce to

has not forgotten, however, that God was the cause of this distress (compare Ps 88). But the description of all his suffering is a way to praise God for having heard him and brought him up from the pit (2:3, 7). He intends to go to God's temple (presumably in Jerusalem) and offer the sacrifice he promised when he was in distress (2:8-10).

The fish, which was masculine in 2:1 (*dag*), becomes feminine in 2:2 (*dagah*), so Jonah seems to be carried in her womb (2:1). Is his rescue a new birth? Jonah doesn't see it that way. He finds himself in the "womb of Sheol" (2:3). Sheol was understood as the place to which everyone goes at death. It is described as a place of darkness and stillness, not a place of suffering (see Job 3:17-19). Whether God is there or not is debated (compare Ps 88:10-13 with Ps 139:8). Jonah at least believes that God heard him from there and delivered him. This prophet who was always going down is now brought "up from the pit" (2:7).

The chapter ends with the announcement that God commanded the fish (again masculine) to vomit Jonah up on dry land. The next chapter will indicate that Jonah has been returned to his starting point.

## **JONAH'S OBEDIENCE AND THE NINEVITES' REPENTANCE**

### **Jonah 3**

Once again God summons Jonah. The similarity in wording lulls the reader into thinking that this is a simple repetition of chapter 1. But there