

Jonah The Prophet

Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign but no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet. Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up in the judgment with this generation and will condemn it for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, Someone greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:39 to 41; 16:4; Luke 11:29 to 32).

Jonah Chapter 1:1 to 17. The Word of God came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh that great city and preach against it for their wickedness has come up before Me." Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish (in the area now southern Spain) from the presence of God. He went down to Joppa (in the Mediterranean Sea) and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid his fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of God. The Lord sent a great wind and mighty storm on the sea so the ship was likely to break up. The mariners were afraid and cried every man to his (false) god. They threw cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the ship. He was lying down and was fast asleep. The shipmaster came to Jonah and said, "What do you mean by this, Sleeper? Arise, call on your God! Maybe your God will notice us so we will not perish." They all said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots so we may know for whose cause this evil is on us." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. They asked him, "Tell us please, for whose cause this evil is on us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? Of what people are you?" Jonah replied, "I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord the God of heaven, Who has created the sea and the dry land." Then were the men exceedingly afraid and asked him, "What have you done?" The men knew he was fleeing from the presence of God because he had told them. They said to him, "What will we do to you so the sea may be calm for us?" The sea grew more and more stormy. Jonah said to them, "Throw me into the sea then the sea will be calm for you for I know because of me this great storm is on you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to get themselves back to the land but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. They cried to the Lord, "We beg You Lord, we beg You, let us not perish for this man's life and do not lay on us innocent blood for You, Lord have done as it pleased You." The mariners threw Jonah into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. Then the men feared God exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to God and made vows. God prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah Chapter 2:1 to 10. Jonah prayed to the Lord out of the fish's stomach. He said, "I called because of my distress to God. He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried. You heard my voice. You threw me into the depths, into the heart of the seas. The flood was all around me. All Your waves and Your billows passed over me. I have been banished from Your sight yet I will look again toward Your holy temple. The waters surrounded me, even to the soul. The abyss surrounded me. The seaweed was wrapped around my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains. The earth barred me in forever yet have You brought up my life from the pit, Lord my God. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered God. My prayer came to You in Your holy temple. Those who regard false, lying, useless, worthless idols forsake their own mercy. I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation belongs to God." God spoke to the fish and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land.

Jonah Chapter 3:1 to 10. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and preach to it the message I gave you." Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the Word of God. Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey across. Jonah entered the city a day's journey and cried out, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown!" The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The news reached the king of Nineveh. He arose from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. He made a proclamation and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles saying, "Let neither man nor animal, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed nor drink water but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and animal and let them cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence in his hands. Who knows whether or not God will relent and turn away from His fierce anger so we might not perish." God saw their works as they turned from their evil way. God relented of the disaster He said He would do to them and He did not do it.

Jonah Chapter 4:1 to 11. It displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. He prayed to the Lord. "Please Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I hurried to flee to Tarshish for I know You are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abundant in loving kindness and You relent of doing harm. Therefore now Lord, I beg you, take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live." God said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah left the middle of Nineveh and sat on the east side of the city where he made himself a booth and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would become of the city. God prepared a vine and made it grow up over Jonah so it would be shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the vine but God prepared a worm at dawn the next day. It chewed on the vine so it withered. When the sun rose God prepared a sultry east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head so he fainted and requested for himself he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than

to live.” God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the vine?” He said, “I am right to be angry even to death.” God said, “You have been concerned for the vine for which you have not laboured, neither made it grow which came up in a night and perished in a night. Should I not be concerned for Nineveh that great city in which are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand and also much livestock?”

Non-believers have often used the narrative of Jonah in an effort to ‘prove’ the Bible cannot be true. Jonah was a Hebrew prophet whose name means ‘dove’. The Bible is true and there is a logical explanation for the large fish that swallowed Jonah. Recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed Jonah did really live in Israel. Jonah the son of Amittai was born in Gath Hepher in the province of Zebulun situated half way between Mount Carmel and the Sea of Galilee. He was an established prophet during the kingship of Jeroboam the son of Joash who delivered Israel from the oppression of the Syrian Empire. The Israelite King called for Israel to repent of their idolatry then Jonah prophesied the restoration of the boundary of Israel from Hamath to the Dead Sea. ‘He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke by His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher’ (2 Kings 14:25). Jesus always spoke the truth and He openly endorsed the narrative of Jonah. He referred to Jonah as a ‘sign’ of His own resurrection on the third day. If the story of Jonah were not factual, Jesus would not have used it as a comparison of Himself. Jesus put the huge fish, the repentance of the Gentile Ninevites, His resurrection and the reality of Judgement Day in the same category. Notice the two following events that happened hundreds of years apart – Jonah went deep down into the ship, remained asleep while the storm raged, the mariners feared for their lives and he had to be woken up. After he was tossed overboard the sea became calm. Hundreds of years later, Jesus was deep down in the boat, remained asleep during a storm, the disciples feared for their lives, Jesus had to be woken up but He spoke to the storm and the sea became calm. ‘As the disciples sailed Jesus fell asleep. A windstorm came down on the lake and they were taking on dangerous amounts of water. They went to Jesus and awoke Him saying, “Master, Master we are dying!” Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging of the water. They ceased and it was calm’ (Luke 8:23 & 24). If Jesus endorsed the Book of Jonah, that settles it and there can be no argument about the fact of Jonah and the whale. Jonah himself wrote the book. Jonah was a Biblical ‘type’ of Messiah (Matthew 12:39 to 41; Luke 11:29). Jonah and Jesus both grew up near Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. Joppa, where Jonah boarded the ship was the city where God sent Peter to preach 800 years later (Acts 10:5).

The Mediterranean Sea and Iraq are the settings for several stories in the Bible. Jonah is one of those stories. The city of Nineveh was situated inland in what is now in northern Iraq along the bank of the Tigris River. In the ancient Assyrian language Nineveh was called ‘Ninua’ or ‘Ninwa’. The modern city of Nineveh is called ‘Ninawa’ in their native language. Nineveh was built by Nimrod (Genesis 10:11) and it had become a vast city by the time of Jonah. It took three days to travel (on foot) from one side of the city to the other. It had many suburbs, three of which are mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 10:11 & 12). Nineveh was a rectangle and was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which was a World Empire for over three hundred years from 900 BC to 607 BC. Nineveh began to rise as the known world’s power during the end of Solomon’s reign. Assyria controlled most of Mesopotamia and it was a bloodthirsty kingdom, a menace to other smaller kingdoms in the area. Assyria overcame and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. There are extensive records carved into stone that graphically describe the terrible tortures invented by the Assyrians to force their neighbouring tribes and kingdoms into submission. The reason God wanted to destroy Nineveh was because of their violence (Jonah 3:8). After they had repented and ceased their violence, God relented.

Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser forced many Israelites to travel to Assyria (2 Kings chapters 15 & 16). King Shalmaneser attacked and cut Northern Israel from Judah (2 Kings chapters 17 & 18). King Adad-Nirari plundered Judah and what was left of Israel. King Sargon took almost all of the remainder of Israelites captive (Isaiah 20:1). King Sennacherib invaded Judah (Isaiah 36:1) but was stopped by the hand of God from doing any further damage to Israel. ‘Thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, “He will not come to this city (Jerusalem) nor shoot an arrow there, neither will he come before it with shield, nor cast up a mound (of defence) against it. The way (route) he came, by the same he will return. He will not come to this city (Jerusalem) for I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.” That night the angel of God went forth and struck in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand. When (the surviving) men arose early in the morning, behold these were all dead bodies. King Sennacherib of Assyria departed and went to live at Nineveh. As he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his (false) god, Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him with the sword and they escaped into the land of Ararat. Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place’ (2 Kings 19:32 to 37). King Esarhaddon was the most powerful of all the kings but repented after Jonah preached. Three more kings ruled Assyria but led the people back into brutality and sin until the Assyrian Empire collapsed in 607 BC and Nineveh was utterly destroyed as prophesied by Nahum.

The Assyrians had bitterly oppressed the Israelites. The 41-year reign of King Jeroboam was the time when Israel gained victory over the Assyrians just as Jonah had prophesied and Jonah helped recover some of Israel's lost territory (2 Kings 14:25). The people of Nineveh were so violent and cruel, Jonah was probably overwhelmed and afraid when God asked him to go there to preach. His life would have been in great danger. Jonah fled, possibly because he was feeling patriotic and did not think the people of Nineveh deserved to have the chance of repentance when they had already decimated the Israelite population. In those days, Assyria was an evil pagan and brutal nation that had attacked and killed many Hebrews living in Israel and had taken many more captive. Jonah would have known how evil the Assyrians were. They were already in the process of exterminating anyone who disagreed with the king. Jonah may have fled out of fear because he knew how the enemies of Esarhaddon were being treated and he was closing in on God's chosen people. Another reason Jonah may have fled was the Israelites were falling away from God and into sin, largely due to the sins of Solomon and successive kings, yet Jonah was being sent to preach to the worst enemies of Israel at that time. We cannot know the mind of Jonah but we do know he fled. Jonah went down, down and down again. He went down to Joppa, he went down into the deepest part of the ship, he went down into the sea, down into the stomach of the whale and down metres deep under the water as far as the base of the underwater mountains. The only place Jonah could go was up after he repented from trying to disobey God. Jonah quickly learned God is not confined to man-made regional borders.

When the mariners who were with Jonah were told to throw him overboard, they hesitated. What is surprising, is the politeness and righteousness of the mariners on Jonah's ship. They did not want to toss him overboard. They desperately tried to row back to shore. They prayed to God first and after tossing Jonah overboard they prayed for him, offered a sacrifice and took vows. Yet before this incident, they did not know God. They obviously knew about Him but they had no relationship with Him like the Hebrews did. God 'prepared' a great fish to swallow Jonah. What was the great fish? In ancient times, nearly all sea creatures were called fish (in Hebrew, dag gadol) so to argue that whales are mammals and not fish is rather silly. The word 'mammal' was not invented in Jonah's day. Sceptics challenge the fact there was a sea creature large enough to swallow a man whole and be large enough to provide fresh air for three days so the man could breathe. In reality, there are two species of whale that could have been large enough to swallow Jonah. The Mysticete opens its mouth and takes in hundreds of litres of water and food then slowly forces the water out of its mouth and swallows the food. The Balaenoptera Musculus is about 30 to 40 metres long. Its stomach has a very large air chamber measuring 686 cubic feet and is large enough to hold several men. When some of these whales were caught and killed, some of them contained live animals and several times, whole skeletons of humans were found within their stomachs. One man named Harry Rimmer was found alive inside a whale. He was an English sailor who had fallen overboard and disappeared. The ship chased the whale and killed it two days later. The whale was towed ashore so their shipmate could have a Christian burial but when they opened up the belly of the whale, Rimmer was found unconscious but alive. He was rushed to hospital and was found to be suffering from shock and terror. His entire body was devoid of all hair, burnt off by the stomach acids. His skin had light brown patches where the skin had been burnt but he made a full recovery. If this could happen in modern times, it is very likely it happened to Jonah but under the watchful eye of Almighty God. Very recently, in March 2019, a diver was almost swallowed whole by a whale while it was feasting on sardines. The footage can be seen on the internet.

After three days, the fish or whale vomited Jonah out onto dry land then he would have needed to travel inland to Nineveh. In those days it was a very long distance. Jonah must have been in a sorry physical state. The digestive acids would have burned his eyes and skin. He was forced to breathe stale stomach air like a massive belch. He would have smelled like bile. His hair and beard would have been matted with stomach debris and seaweed. We can only imagine the sight and smell of him. People who have accidentally inhaled the blast of a whale's blowhole describe the stench as being overpoweringly rancid and the fluid acidic. It burns the eyes and nostrils. It must have been three days of hell for Jonah. The sight of Jonah in that terrible state must have startled the Assyrians.

The repentance of Gentile Nineveh halted the cruel attacks on Israel. The Book of Jonah highlights the futility of trying to disobey God or trying to run away from Him. When God asked Jonah to warn Nineveh of its impending doom because of its wickedness, the subsequent relenting from God after total repentance reveals to us the grace and mercy of God shown to any Gentile or Jewish person who repents. God has mercy on whomever He chooses to show mercy (Exodus 33:19). He calls all people to repentance and reconciliation with Him no matter what our background (Acts 17:30). Some people have lived extremely wicked, evil, violent or perverse lives, yet when those people genuinely repent, God accepts them into His fold as though they have never sinned. That is the message of the Book of Jonah. It does not matter what your individual background is, if you genuinely repent God will receive you. There is no sin that can never be forgiven and blotted out except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31). Everything else can be forgiven and pardoned by the Lord God of Mercy through the blood and cross of Jesus. Jonah's story could have finished at the end of chapter three but after it was all over, Jonah's suffering and stress seems to have

caused him to have an emotional episode. He became angry at the entire situation and argued with God over it, acknowledging the heart of God. Jonah said, "I knew You are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abundant in loving kindness and You relent of doing harm." When the Lord said to Jonah, 20,000 people were not able to discern between their left and right hand means there were 20,000 young children in Nineveh at that time. If we do our maths, that meant there would have been hundreds of thousands of people living there then, who all received the mercy of God.

It is believed Jonah was buried in Nineveh, in a vast palace called Nevi Yunus. The word 'Yunus' means Jonah in the native language spoken by Assyrians. In that area is a mound called 'Jonah's Mound' that is 100 feet high (about 35 metres) and covers 40 square acres. This tomb is so sacred nobody is allowed to excavate it. The palace called Nevi Yunus was once used as a temple before it was named after Jonah but it is unclear what the original name was. After Jesus and Christianity came it was used as a church. When Muslims overran Iraq they turned Nevi Yunus into a mosque. When Isis blew up the mosque, they accidentally revealed a vast history that had been buried beneath it. Archaeology around Nevi Yunus has proven Jonah existed and he visited the palace. Cuneiform writing on the walls of previously hidden tunnels and caves revealed a lot about Jonah's visit and King Esarhaddon was the king to whom Jonah spoke. It is very possible Jonah preached within the walls of the palace. The messages in the tunnels reveal the fact, Nineveh was a real city; Nevi Yunus was a real palace; Esarhaddon was a real king and Jonah really did visit Nineveh, the palace and he spoke with the king. These are all historical realities. King Esarhaddon originally built the palace as a shrine to the violent, promiscuous and evil goddess of fertility Ishtar whom the Assyrians worshipped. From that goddess Ishtar the word Easter is derived. That is why the symbols of fertility, bunnies, chicks and eggs are so popular during Easter. That proves Easter is pagan and was adopted into the ancient church to replace God's holy feast of Passover. Outside the gates of Nevi Yunus Palace, Esarhaddon had two enormous carved statues of Lamassa, an idol that was a half man/half bull. The remains of the two statues are still there although they are damaged. Two massive limestone reliefs reveal the story of Jonah and the repentance of every person in the city except King Esarhaddon's mother Naqia. The idols around the palace and city were not removed. The discovery of Nevi Yunus confirms Jonah's story. Jonah was a famous statesman as well as chosen prophet.

Eventually, ancient Nineveh was destroyed because of sin and witchcraft. The ancient Ninevites returned to their sin of idolatry and became more evil, cruel and violent than they originally had been so God judged them accordingly. He did not ask for repentance the second time, He utterly destroyed the entire city and there was no second chance of escape. 'Nineveh is empty, void and waste' (Nahum 2:10). The Lord God of heavenly armies says, "Behold, I am against you" (Nahum 2:13). "Woe to the bloody city! It is full of lies and robbery. The noise of the whip, the noise of the rattling of wheels, galloping horses and bounding chariots, the horseman mounting (for war) and the flashing sword, the glittering spear, a multitude of slain and a great heap of corpses. There is no end of the bodies. They stumble on their bodies because of the multitude of the idolatry and witchcraft, who sells nations through her idolatry and families through her witchcraft' (Nahum 3:1 to 4). "All those who look at you will flee from you and say, 'Nineveh is laid waste! Who will mourn for her?' Where will I seek comforters for you? ... There the fire will devour you. The sword will cut you off. It will devour you like you are a grasshopper" (Nahum 3:7 & 15). 'Your shepherds slumber king of Assyria. Your nobles lie down. Your people are scattered on the mountains and there is no one to gather them. There is no healing your wound for your injury is fatal. All who hear the report of you clap their hands over you for who has not felt your endless cruelty?' (Nahum 3:18 & 19). 'God will stretch out His hand against the north, destroy Assyria and will make Nineveh a desolation, dry like the wilderness. Herds will lie down in the midst of her, all the animals of the nations. The pelican and the porcupine will lodge in its capitals. Their calls will echo through the windows (of the vacant houses). Desolation will be in the thresholds for God has laid bare the cedar beams. This was the joyous city that lived carelessly, that said in her heart, "I am, and there is none besides me." How she has become a desolation, a place for animals to lie down in! Everyone who passes by her will hiss and shake their fists' (Zephaniah 2:13 to 15).

This warning is there for all of us to see. If we turn to God and repent of our sin then return back to our evil ways, we may not be given a second chance. 'If we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and a fierceness of fire which will devour the enemies of God ... How much worse punishment do you think will they be judged worthy of, who has trodden underfoot the Son of God and has counted the blood of the covenant with which He was sanctified an unholy thing and has insulted the Spirit of Grace? God said, "Vengeance belongs to Me. I will repay." "The Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:26 to 31).

Amen and God bless you.

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