

Reading Through the Bible Week 19: Jonah

God's Boundless Mercy & Grace

CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

The Book of Jonah is historically set during the first half of the 8th century BC. While the book itself does not name a specific king, the ministry of Jonah aligns with the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel, who ruled from approximately 793 to 753 BC, during a period of Assyrian weakness. The geopolitical timeline of Assyria around Jonah likely takes place during the reign of Assyrian King Adad-nirari III (811–783 B.C.) or shortly after under Ashur-dan III (772–755 B.C.). These reigns were characterized by reduced power, internal instability, and, during Ashur-dan's time, significant plagues and unrest, creating a context where the city might repent.

Jonah covers a relatively short, dramatic timeframe, largely focusing on the period between Jonah's disobedience and Nineveh's repentance. While the events described in the text span about 40–45 days, the historical setting for the prophet's life is placed around 785–760 BC.

Jonah has all the marks of a prophetic narrative, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings, which set out to report actual historical events. The phrase that opens the book ("the word of the Lord came to") is also at the beginning of two accounts about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2, 8) as well as other prophetic narratives (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4). Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the book of Jonah, as when the fish "provides transportation" for the prophet. In fact, the account of Jonah is so much like the chronicles of Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the account of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom (2 Kings 14:25). The Book of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives. However, unlike other Minor Prophets that focus on the message of the prophet given to them by Yahweh, the Book of Jonah is a narrative about the prophet himself, acting as a subversion of the genre.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the book of Jonah, but the chronicle of Jonah should be viewed from a historiography perspective and not history for history's sake. The book is clearly didactic, that is, the book is provided to teach the reader key lessons. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of the 14 being addressed to Jonah. And the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to God. It is difficult to say that the book teaches God's sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact "appoint" the fish (Jonah 1:17), the plant (Jonah 4:6), the worm (Jonah 4:7), and the east wind (Jonah 4:8) to do his will. In fact, Jesus referenced the account of Jonah when he used elements from Jonah as analogies for other historical events (Matt. 12:40–41). This is especially clear when Jesus declared that "the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Matt. 12:41).

The repentance of Nineveh following Jonah's preaching (c. 760–788 B.C.) was sincere but temporary, lasting roughly one generation or up to 100 years before they returned to their evil ways and faced destruction. While the city was immediately spared in the 40-



day window, they had returned to severe violence by the time of the prophet Nahum, eventually falling to the Babylonians and Medes around 612 B.C. By the time of the prophet Nahum, the message had shifted from a conditional warning to a declaration of certain doom.

The Book of Jonah is a subversive theological narrative emphasizing God's universal sovereignty, boundless mercy, and compassion toward all nations, extending beyond Israel. It highlights divine pursuit of sinners and contrasts God's grace with human stubbornness and prejudice. The narrative challenges nationalism, showcasing that true repentance brings God's mercy, even upon enemies. The book strongly contradicts narrow ethnic pride, showing that God's grace is not restricted to a single nation but available to all humanity, including the pagan Ninevites and sailors. However, Jonah's rebellion stems from wanting God's mercy only for Israel and not for their enemies (Nineveh/Assyria), a point the book critiques.

PRIMARY THEME

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless with the desire to show mercy over judgment that is not limited just to "us" but also available for "them," and God's "steadfast love" (*hesed*). While often remembered for the "big fish," the book functions as a critique of religious nationalism and a mirror for readers to view their own heart in light of Jonah. This is clear from the flow of the account and the book's conclusion: Jonah is the object of God's compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion. The narrative ends with the question, "Should I not pity Nineveh . . . ?" (Jonah 4:11). And tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question - Do readers of the Book of Jonah have hearts that are like the heart of God?

While Jonah was concerned about a plant that "perished" (Jonah 4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (Jonah 1:14), their captain (Jonah 1:6), and the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not "perish."

The Book of Jonah demonstrates the limitless scope of God's mercy and compassion, particularly his willingness to forgive those outside his chosen people. The book highlights God's desire for global repentance, His sovereignty over nature, and His opposition to nationalistic pride. In addition, the narrative shows that God is in control of all nations and that his redemptive mission will be accomplished, regardless of human disobedience. It is a cautionary message about the futility of running from God's calling and the importance of submitting to His will.

Subthemes that define this message include:

THE UNIVERSALITY OF GRACE: The central conflict is between Jonah's narrow nationalism and God's global concern. Jonah flees because he knows God is "gracious and merciful" and fears He will spare his enemies, the Ninevites, if they repent.

REPENTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION: The book highlights that even the most "wicked" can change. Paradoxically, the pagan sailors and Ninevites show more humility and responsiveness to God than the prophet himself.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVER CREATION: The narrative demonstrates God's control over the natural world—the sea, the storm, the fish, a plant, and a worm—to accomplish His mission of mercy.



A "MIRROR" FOR THE READER: The book ends on an unresolved question from God to Jonah - "*Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?*". This shifts the focus to the reader, asking if they are okay with God loving their own "enemies."

NARRATIVE ARC

The book of Jonah follows a chiastic pattern of rebellion, repentance, and revelation, focusing more on the prophet's heart than the city's fate, which comes from the prophet's anger over God's mercy toward his enemies. Jonah flees his mission to Nineveh (1:1–16), is saved from drowning by a great fish (1:17–2:10), preaches in Nineveh causing massive repentance (3:1–10), and ultimately rebels again when God spares the city, ending in a lesson on divine compassion (4:1–11).

Summary Outline for Study

- 1) **Send (Jonah 1):** The call and the flight.
- 2) **Save (Jonah 2):** The prayer and the fish.
- 3) **Spare (Jonah 3):** The second chance and repentance.
- 4) **School (Jonah 4):** The lesson of the vine and mercy.

The Book of Jonah can be divided into a two-part chiastic parallel structure, each beginning with a divine commission from God:

Division 1: Jonah's First Commission (Chapters 1–2)

- **Call and Rebellion:** God calls Jonah to Nineveh; Jonah flees in the opposite direction toward Tarshish.
- **Consequence:** A "great storm" threatens the ship, leading to Jonah being cast into the sea and swallowed by a "great fish".
- **Resolution:** Jonah prays from the fish's belly and is vomited onto dry land.

Division 2: Jonah's Second Commission (Chapters 3–4)

- **Call and Obedience:** God calls Jonah again; this time Jonah travels to Nineveh.
- **Mission:** Jonah delivers a brief message of judgment, and Nineveh repents.
- **Consequence:** Jonah becomes angry at God's mercy and retreats to the desert, where God uses a plant and a worm as object lessons.

The two-part parallel chiasmus can also be modeled into ring chiasmus structure:

A: God's first call and Jonah's flight (1:1–3)

B: Storm at sea and the sailors' repentance (1:4–16)

C: The great fish and Jonah's prayer (1:17–2:9)

X: Jonah's deliverance and second call (2:10–3:3)

C': Nineveh's mission and their repentance (3:4–10)

B': The object lesson of the plant and Jonah's anger (4:1–9)

A': God's final question and the lesson of universal mercy (4:10–11)



IDENTITIES OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah uses three primary Hebrew names or titles for God: **Yahweh**, **Elohim**, and a unique compound form, **Yahweh-Elohim**. Collectively, these terms occur at least 42 times throughout the narrative.

Yahweh (YHWH / The LORD): This is God's personal, sacred covenant name, appearing frequently throughout both books. It is often rendered as "LORD" in English translations to indicate the Tetragrammaton. References: Jonah 1:1; 1:3; 1:14; 2:1-2, 2:7, 2:9; 4:2.

Elohim (God): The general plural noun for "God," often used to denote His power as Creator and Judge. In Kings, *Elohim* is used to distinguish the God of Israel from false deities. A key example is 1 Kings 18:21, where Elijah asks, "If *Yahweh* [the LORD] be *Elohim* [God], follow Him: but if Baal, then follow him." In Jonah, there is an observable switch from "Yahweh" to "Elohim" when positioning the narrative perspective on Ninevites and other non-Jews. This highlights the biases of Jonah's and his reluctance of obedience to God. References: Jonah 1:6; 3:5; 3:8-10; 4:7-9.

Yahweh-Elohim (The LORD God): Appearing notably in Genesis 2:4, this compound unites the personal, relational name of God (Yahweh) with his title as Creator/Supreme Being (Elohim). The use of Yahweh-Elohim makes it clear that the universal Creator (Elohim) is the exact same being as the personal God of Israel (Yahweh).

This compound name is rare and appears only once in the Book of Jonah. The combined name often emphasizes the covenantal, personal nature of God, distinct from the more generic or majestic usage of Elohim alone in Genesis 1. It emphasizes God's dual role as both the personal covenant Lord and the sovereign Creator.

El Chanun w'Rachum (God of Mercy and Grace): A description used by Jonah (Jonah 4:2) to describe God's nature as "too good," prioritizing mercy over immediate destruction; hence, Jonah's explanation about why he fled to Tarshish rather than warn Nineveh. *El Chanun w'Rachum*, meaning Gracious and Merciful God, is a Hebrew phrase representing God's nature, appearing prominently in the Bible, which includes the terms, *Rachum* (derived from *rechem* (womb)), indicating a deep, protective nurturing, and *Chanun* denoting a showing of favor. It appears in contexts such as Jonah 4:2, Nehemiah 9:31, and Joel 2:13.

Elohei Hashamayim (God of Heaven): A title used by Jonah to emphasize God's superiority over the elements of the sea and land. In the Book of Jonah, specifically in Jonah 1:9, the Jonah identifies himself to the sailors by saying, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear *Elohei HaShamayim*, which hath made the *yam* [sea] and the *yabashah* [dry land]."

This name of Yahweh used by Jonah serves to contrast God's sovereignty over pagan nations and the pagan idols worshipped by the sailors, highlighting that Jonah serves the Creator of the very elements that are threatening them. The irony of this confession is that Jonah claims to worship the universal God of Heaven, yet he is actively trying to flee from His presence (running to Tarshish instead of going to Nineveh as *Elohei Hashamayim* instructed). The irony of this confession is that Jonah claims to worship the universal God of Heaven, yet he is actively trying to flee from His presence (running to Tarshish instead of Nineveh).



COLOROLOGY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah does not explicitly list many colors, focusing instead on themes of disobedience, repentance, and mercy. However, the narrative The Book of Jonah does not explicitly name any colors in its four chapters. However, the narrative contains deep symbolic imagery and specific Hebrew words that carry inherent color associations through its descriptions of nature and Jonah's experiences.

Based on the text and traditional interpretations, here are the symbolic colors associated with the Book of Jonah:

- **Green (Leafy Plant/Vine):** Albeit implicit, symbolic resemblance to "green" in the Book of Jonah is primarily centered on the gourd (or vine) that God provides to shade Jonah (Jonah 4:6). The description of the plant as a provider of shade, its rapid growth, and its quick withering implies a lush, leafy plant (likely *Ricinus communis* or castor-oil plant), which in biblical context carries the following symbolic meanings:
 - Temporary Comfort and Human Frailty:** The green, thriving plant represents fleeting, earthly comfort that Jonah immediately loves, but which quickly fades.
 - God's Provision and Mercy:** The "shady" green gourd is described as a gift from God to relieve Jonah of his discomfort (Jonah 4:6), demonstrating God's compassion even for a disobedient prophet.
 - The Contrast of Life and Death:** God provides a gourd/vine to provide shade for Jonah, representing life and growth. But then the worm attacks it, resulting in the rapid withering illustrating "flesh cannot inherit the kingdom of God" as all earthly things will perish.
- **Scarlet (Crimson Worm):** "But God prepared a worm [Hebrew: *tôlā*] when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. The Hebrew word *tôlā* or *towla* refers to a "crimson worm" or scarlet color that destroyed Jonah's plant as a tool of God. This specific worm (*Coccus ilicis*) was crushed to produce the crimson or scarlet dye used for the Tabernacle's curtains and the High Priest's garments.
- **White (Repentance):** In general, white in the Bible often symbolizes purity, sanctification, and righteousness (e.g., Psalm 51:7, Revelation 19:8). In the context of Jonah, there is a strong symbolic connection to "white" through their act of repentance as Nineveh was draped in dark sackcloth, the mark of their repentance, resulting in the forgiveness and purification by God.
- **Orange (East Wind/Sun):** The dust and sand carried high into the air by this "scorching east wind" (sirocco) in Jonah 4:8 often creates a haze described as a "reddish-organge" tint. And the hot sun, which carries the connotation of a red or orange heat. These are associated symbolically and literally with colors representing judgment and destruction.
- **Black (Darkness/Belly of the Fish):** Jonah describes his time inside the fish as being in the "lowest parts" of the sea, often depicted as deep blue, black, or total darkness. The darkness inside the belly of the fish is not merely a physical setting. The blackness and dark environment are symbolically linked to the profound spiritual symbol representing death, judgment, separation from God, and ultimate repentance. Some historical commentaries refer to the storm in Jonah 1:4 as a "black north wind," a common term for violent Mediterranean gales. And the "sackcloth" worn by the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5) was typically made of dark goat hair, symbolizing the "blackness" of mourning and repentance.



- **Sere (Withering Plant):** When the worm strikes the plant, it turns into a withering, dead color, often brown. Sere primarily describes a dry, withered, or brownish-yellow color, similar to dead vegetation, dried grass, or barren landscapes. As a word, it signifies dried-out plant life.
- **Blue (Sea):** The sea is the dominant backdrop when Jonah is thrown into the water. The Mediterranean Sea is often described as a shiny silvery blue. The biblical symbolic color resembling a silvery-blue sea is *tekhelet* (Hebrew), often translated as blue, violet, or azure, which represents God's majesty, heaven, and his holy throne. *Tekhelet* is a specific dye derived from the Mediterranean sea snail (*Murex trunculus*).

NUMEROLOGY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

Biblical numerology in the Book of Jonah, interpreted by many scholars to be symbolic rather than strictly literal, uses numbers to emphasize themes of judgment, divine intervention, and the limits of human endurance.

The key numbers employed in the text are:

- 1 =** In biblical numerology it represents unity, supremacy, and the oneness of God, highlighting His role as the exclusive Creator and Sovereign. It signifies the beginning, indivisibility, and the first in order (primacy), often referring to God the Father or the unique, undivided nature of the Godhead.
In Jonah 3:4, the prophet begins his message on the "first day" (often interpreted as the beginning of his proclamation) to Nineveh, which represents the start of God's urgent offer of repentance. This highlights the contrast between Jonah's singular rebellion and God's singular desire to show mercy to all.
- 3 =** In biblical numerology, the number 3 in the Book of Jonah signifies completeness, divine perfection, a period of restoration or spiritual death and resurrection, and divine involvement in the world. Jonah spending three days and three nights in the fish represents a full, God-ordained period of punishment, reflection, and the "third day" marking the moment of salvation (Jonah 1:17). The city of Nineveh is described as a "three-day journey" across, indicating its massive scale and that God's message needed to be delivered thoroughly to the entire city, reinforcing the theme of completeness.
- 40 =** Biblical numerology generally associates the number 40 with a period of testing, limit of divine patience, preparation for transformation, and completeness of judgment. Specifically, in Jonah 3:4, Jonah proclaims, *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* Unlike other instances where 40 years represent a generation's failure (e.g., the wilderness wandering), the 40 days in Jonah is a rare example where a group successfully passed their "trial" and averted judgment.
- 120,000 =** The biblical numerology connection to 120,000 specifically isn't as commonly cited as the number 120, which often signifies a "divine waiting period" or a time of probation or repentance, often linked to the 120 years before the flood (Gen 6:3). The number 12 or 120 is sometimes seen used as a large, hyperbolic, or symbolic multiplier (e.g., 12 [**representing divine government, perfect order, and completeness**] * 10,000; 120 * 1,000 [**representing divine completeness, vastness, and absolute perfection**]). So, in the context of Jonah it represents the vast population of Nineveh. Some scholars interpret this number to represent a massive population of children or a high-level estimation of people to show God's overwhelming grace. But it also shows Jonah depicted as caring more for a plant that gives him shade than ~120,000 people, highlighting the contrast between human selfishness and Elohim's mercy.



Study Points & Outline Commentary

The Book of Jonah is less of a biography of a prophet and more of an event biography. Reading Jonah requires navigating a unique structure as a tightly crafted, ironic, four-chapter narrative, often described as a novella that uses parallelism to mirror its two main subdivisions. Unlike other prophetic books that focus on God's words, the Book of Jonah focuses on the prophet's actions.

Like the Book of Samuel, framed by a literary symmetry with two major poetic "bookends" as a biblical literary device known as *inclusio*, the Book of Jonah also uses the *inclusio* literary stratagem by opening and closing it with God taking action or asking questions, framing Jonah within the context of divine mercy. Thus, the book is meant to move the reader from a moment of crisis to a hope for ultimate restoration.

The book's structure hinges on a "staircase" or chiasmic pattern (A/A'), where Jonah's disobedience in chapters 1-2 (running from God) is echoed by his reluctant obedience in chapters 3-4 (reproaching God), highlighting themes of divine mercy and prophetic hypocrisy. The narrative shifts between Jonah's interactions with God and with Gentiles (sailors/Ninevites), creating a "closing in" or entrapment feel that forces the prophet to confront his prejudice. The overall structure serves to deride the prophet's narrow-mindedness and magnify the universal, and sometimes inconvenient, mercy of God.

It is notable that the Hebrew word *gadol*, meaning great, appears 15 times throughout the text, used to describe the city, and other elements, emphasizing the magnitude of God's work. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, known for extreme, or great, brutality and a constant threat to Israel. Understanding who the Ninevites were adds weight to Jonah's reluctance, so Jonah's flight to Tarshish was a move away from a "hated enemy." Jonah's journey from Israel toward Tarshish (modern-day Spain) was an attempt to reach the farthest known point away from Nineveh.

Jonah is often read as a caricature of a rebellious prophet who does everything opposite of what is expected. He flees from God, resents God's mercy, and expresses anger when his mission is successful, and frequently portrays "outsiders," the pagan sailors and the wicked Ninevites, as more responsive to God than the prophet himself. Hence, the book acts as a mirror, exposing the reader's own potential for religious smugness or lack of compassion.

As the first book written categorized as OT prophecy, it requires noting that the primary Hebrew word translated as "prophet" in the Bible is *nāvî*, meaning representative or mouthpiece for God. Appearing over 300 times in the Bible, it designates a "called one" by God to proclaim messages. A "prophet" as rendered in the English Bible is often understood as "a person gifted with profound moral insight." However, *nāvî*, derived from the root related to "calling" or "announcing," is one who primarily delivers divine messages to the people, rather than predicting the future. The root origins are linked to the Akkadian root *nabû*, meaning "to call," "to summon," or "to proclaim." While *nāvî* is the most common term, other words used in the Bible to describe the calling, emphasizes the different aspects of how they received their messages and includes: **Seer** (Hebrew: *Ro'eh*) meaning "to see" highlighting spiritual perception appearing seven times in the Bible; **Visionary** (Hebrew: *Hozeh*), meaning "to see a vision" appearing 21 times (e.g., 2 Sam. 24:11 and Amos 7:12); and **Man of God** (Hebrew: *Ish ha-Elohim*)



appears 75 times and used as a broad title for one who speaks for God most notably Elisha (27 times), Elijah, and Moses marking them as authorized messengers who speak on behalf of God.

The Book of Jonah is listed as the fifth of the twelve Minor Prophets in the Old Testament, grouped together because of their shorter length compared to the Major Prophets. While titled a "minor" prophet, this refers to the book's brevity (4 chapters) rather than its importance. In Christian Bibles, it falls between Obadiah and Micah, often immediately following Amos. In the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*), the Twelve are counted as a single book called "The Twelve" or *Trei Asar*, with Jonah positioned as the fifth component. Jonah will be the first book of 19 books of prophecy.

THEOLOGICAL OUTLINE

A systematic theological study of Jonah (Hebrew: *Yōnāh*), meaning dove, moves us beyond the narrative plot to examine core biblical doctrinal theologies as they appear in the text. Jonah is the "prodigal prophet," as a representation of what appears in the N.T. older brother of the "prodigal son" parable who obeys outwardly but lacks the compassion of God, running from the mission believing God is too gracious. Jonah is known for his reluctance to preach repentance to the Assyrian city of Nineveh and his subsequent experience inside a "great fish." While the dove often represents peace and gentleness, the prophet Jonah's account ironically highlights his reluctance and stubbornness.

A hermeneutical study often follows the flow of the four chapters of the book, while a chronological study would likely follow the prophet's journey from rebellion to submission. However, a systematic theological study of Jonah moves beyond the narrative plot to examine core biblical doctrines as they appear in the text and organizes the book by theological categories. A systematic theological study of the book of Jonah moves beyond the narrative of the fish to focus on major themes regarding God's character, human responsibility, and divine mission. The book is structured and analyzed through the lens of theology in the following framework.

1. Theology of Protology

The protology of the Book of Jonah (its opening, setting, and foundational premises) presents a unique, abrupt narrative style compared to other prophetic book. We are told that Jonah was from Gath-hepher (or Gat Hefer), a border town in the territory of Zebulun in the northern kingdom of Israel. Gath-hepher is typically identified with modern-day city of Khirbet ez-Zurra', about 4 km (2.5 mi) north-northeast of Nazareth in Galilee. The book centers on God's mercy and as sovereign creator who holds authority over the sea, storms, and sea creatures as well as setting the stage for addressing the theology of the nature of sin (Hamartiology), the necessity for redemption (Soteriology), and the nature of humanity (Anthropology). It highlights the swift, cosmic consequence of disobedience against the Creator, contrasting Jonah's human rebellion with the natural world's compliance with divine commands. Historically, the writing of the Book of Jonah has been attributed to the prophet Jonah because of the reference to "Jonah, son of Amittai" in the book's opening verse, and the first-person prayer in the second chapter. However, many modern scholars believe it was written by an unknown writer at a later date pointing to the third-person didactic or "parable of mercy" narrative style as well as the unique blend of Standard Biblical Hebrew and notable Aramaic influences presenting words, grammatical forms, and motifs characteristic of post-exilic (Persian period) literature



suggesting the book could have been written long after the events took place leading to a later, post-exilic date of composition.

It is notable that Jonah worked during the days of Jeroboam II (782-753 BC), just after Elisha and just before Amos and Hosea. The protology of Jonah is characterized by a "call and response" that subverts typical prophetic patterns. However, there is a distrust when Jonah refuses to act as a true "man of God" to the pagans, contrasted with the sailors who act with more faithfulness and fear of God than he does. Sending a Hebrew prophet to a Gentile enemy nation, it is the beginning of the book challenging the idea that God's favor is exclusive to Israel. It begins not with a prophecy, but as a historical narrative, implying it is a piece of a larger, known history.

Key aspects of protology in Jonah include:

- a) **The Sovereign Over Nature & People:** The overarching theme is that Yahweh is the Lord of all nations, not just Israel, making him "a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment" (4:2), a concept that Jonah initially rejects. God commands the wind (1:4), the sea (1:15), the great fish (1:17), a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7), and a scorching wind (4:8) to fulfill His purpose.
- b) **The Divine Commission:** The book begins with a standard prophetic opening: *"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai"*. God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to preach against its wickedness.
- c) **The Subversive Response:** Unlike other prophets who might argue with God (like Jeremiah or Moses), Jonah responds with silence and immediate flight. He attempts to flee to Tarshish, the opposite direction of Nineveh, to "escape from the presence of the LORD."
- d) **Literary Context:** Jonah's beginning is noted for making the reader "suspicious" of Jonah because he was a historical prophet who had previously given favorable prophecies for a wicked king. Jonah is known as a patriot who likes to see Israel succeed and wicked enemies fail. Therefore, when God sends him to Nineveh, the reader is immediately suspicious. Will he really preach for their repentance, or will he try to sabotage the message? It is notable that Jonah's prophecy for Jeroboam was fulfilled; however, the prophet Amos, a contemporary of Jonah, who later confronted Jeroboam II and predicted that the prosperity that Jonah celebrated would lead to national collapse and exile.
- e) **Typology:** Protology is a necessary precursor to the context of the "Sign of Jonah," where his three days in the fish (resulting from his flight) prefigures the resurrection of Christ. Also, the fish's belly is often viewed as a "new creation" or rebirth experience, a "*Sheol*" (Jonah 2:2) from which Jonah is resurrected. *Sheol*, while often translated as "hell" in older versions, theologically refers to an "abode of the dead" in a state of helplessness, rather than the theological concept of a place of eternal torment.
- f) **Comparison with Eschatology:** Protology deals with "first things" and is often paired with Eschatology "last things." In Jonah, the "first thing" is God's initial call to repentance, while the "last thing" (the end of the book) is the unanswered question of whether Jonah, and by extension the reader, can accept God's mercy for their enemies.



2. Theology Proper

In the Book of Jonah, theology proper (the study of God's nature and attributes) focuses on the tension between God's absolute sovereignty and His expansive, often "shocking" mercy. The narrative functions as a revelation of God's character, often contrasting the real God with Jonah's limited, nationalistic counterfeit.

- a) **The Sovereignty of God:** God controls all elements—the wind/storm (1:4), the lot (1:7), the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the sun/wind (4:8).
- b) **The Universality of Mercy:** God's grace is not limited to Israel but extends to all nations, even those considered enemies (Nineveh).
- c) **The Character of God:** The key text is Jonah 4:2, defining God as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.
- d) **Theological Tension - Justice vs. Mercy:** The book presents a God who is both just (threatening judgment) and merciful (relenting when people turn).
- e) **Sovereignty:** God displays absolute authority over nature—appointing the storm, the lot, the great fish, the plant, the worm, and the east wind.
- f) **The Attributes of Mercy and Grace:** This is the book's central theme. God is described as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2), a confession Jonah uses as his reason for fleeing.
- g) **Omnipresence:** The narrative refutes the idea that one can "flee from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3), showing God's active presence even in the depths of the sea.
- h) **Immutability and Responsiveness:** While God's character remains unchanging, the book explores His "relenting" from judgment in response to human repentance.

3. Theology of Anthropology

The theology of anthropology in the Book of Jonah uses anthropomorphism (attributing human form/traits) and anthropopathism (attributing human emotions) to portray God as a relatable, active agent, which presents a complex view of humanity in relation to God. It highlights human stubbornness, ethnic prejudice, and moral blindness, while contrasting these with the universal, merciful nature of God. The narrative functions as a mirror, challenging the reader to recognize their own "Jonah-like" tendencies. However, the theology of anthropology in Jonah suggests that humanity is often flawed, prejudiced, and reluctant, yet remains the subject of an all-encompassing, relentless divine love that desires repentance rather than destruction.

a) The Reluctant and Disobedient Human

- **The Prophet as Barometer:** Jonah is portrayed as a caricature of the "people of God": reluctant, disobedient, and parochial. Jonah's desire to evade God's command reveals a fundamental human tendency to restrict God's grace to a "chosen" few.
- **Hardness of Heart:** Despite having a correct theological understanding of God (as gracious and compassionate), Jonah's heart is hardened against applying that knowledge.
- **Self-Centeredness:** Jonah's concern consistently involves his own comfort (the plant) rather than for the lives of thousands of others.



b) **The Teachable Gentiles (The Sailors and Ninevites)**

- **Pagan Response vs. Prophetic Failure:** The book flips the expected narrative: foreign mariners and Ninevites show more spiritual sensitivity than the Israelite prophet.
- **Genuine Repentance:** The Ninevites' response demonstrates that repentance is determined by a genuine transformation of character and action, not just theological knowledge.
- **Universal Mercy vs Ethnocentrism:** The text suggests that God's grace is not restricted by ethnicity or nationality, challenging the idea that salvation is exclusively for one group and critiques the belief that God's favor is exclusive to one nation or people group.

c) **Human Vulnerability**

- **Fear and Limitation:** The narrative portrays humanity as caught in a "web of limitations" (symbolized by being in the ship, the fish, and a booth), highlighting human fear, vulnerability, and the need for divine intervention.
- **"Right Hand from Left":** God's final description of the Ninevites (4:11) suggests a human condition of spiritual ignorance or helplessness, deserving of pity rather than anger.

d) **Human Responsibility & Moral Agency**

- **Accountability:** Despite their limitations, humans are accountable for their actions.
- **The Power of Choice:** The book emphasizes that repentance can avert judgment, affirming the capacity for humans to turn from evil, regardless of their background.
- **The Struggle of the Will:** The contrast between Jonah's reluctance and the immediate response of the pagan sailors and Ninevites highlights human resistance to divine authority.

e) **Anthropomorphic and Anthropopathic Attributions to Yahweh**

- **Divine "Relenting/Repenting":** The most prominent example occurs when God sees the Ninevites' repentance and "relented" (*nacham*), meaning "withholding judgement", from the judgement of destruction He had threatened (Jonah 3:10). While traditional theology often views this as a delay in God's *treatment* of people rather than a conflict with His unchanging character, the text uses the human language of "changing one's mind" to describe the shift.
- **Divine Compassion and Pity:** In the final chapter, God describes His "pity" for the vast population of Nineveh and even their livestock (Jonah 4:11). This attributes the human capacity for mercy and emotional concern to the Divine to explain His decision to spare the city.
- **Dialogue and Argument:** The text portrays God in an intimate, almost peer-like dialogue with Jonah asking rhetorical questions. The book ends with a question, emphasizing the "infinite preciousness of all living things in the sight of God." God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4), mimicking human reasoning and pedagogical techniques to challenge Jonah's perspective.



4. Theology of Hamartiology

The theology of hamartiology in Jonah highlights sin as willful disobedience, national rebellion, and hard-heartedness against God's mercy. Jonah's flight represents a personal rebellion against divine command, while Nineveh represents gross, systemic wickedness. The book highlights that all (prophets and pagans) need grace, and it corrects the misconception that sin only harms the individual, showing it impacts the entire community as presented through three distinct lenses: the rebellion of a prophet, the "evil" of a pagan nation, and the underlying spiritual pride that resists divine grace.

a) Sin as Personal Disobedience (The Prophet)

- **Fleeing Presence:** Jonah's sin is not merely a mistake but a direct contradiction of God's will, fleeing "from the presence of the Lord" (1:3), illustrating that sin attempts to evade divine sovereignty. Jonah's actions illustrate sin as a deliberate "missing of the mark" (*hamartia*) through rebellion/treason against a clear command from God.
- **Functional Inconsistency:** Despite having "fine theology" and claiming to fear God, Jonah's actions show a "functional inconsistency." Jonah knows the truth but refuses to live it, which is presented as a spiritual sickness.
- **The Contagion of Sin:** Jonah's personal rebellion puts the sailors in danger, showing that sin impacts innocent parties (Jonah 1:4).
- **Problem of Prejudice & Self-Righteousness:** Jonah's primary sin is loving his nation more than he loves mercy, leading him to fear God's compassion on others. He displays a "spiritual sickness" where his theology is orthodox, but his heart is hardened.

b) Sin as Societal Wickedness (The Ninevites)

- **Universal Accountability:** The call to Nineveh proves that even those outside of Israel's covenant are accountable to God's standards of righteousness.
- **Evil and Violence:** The book defines the sin of the Ninevites as "wickedness" (*ra'ah* – appearing ~10 times) that has "come up before" God (Jonah 1:2). The King of Nineveh specifically identifies their sin as "evil ways" and "violence" (*chamas*). In Jonah, *ra'ah* is used to describe general evil (sin); whereas *chamas* implies physical violence, and injustice showing that biblical hamartiology includes both spiritual rebellion and social injustice (Jonah 3:8).

c) Sin as Spiritual Pride and Lack of Pity

- **Self-Righteousness:** The final chapter of Jonah reveals a more subtle form of sin: the resentment of God's mercy toward others. Jonah is angry because God is "gracious and compassionate" (Jonah 4:2). His sin is not just his initial flight, but his lack of pity for a "city full of people."
- **Misplaced Values:** God uses an object lesson with a plant to show Jonah that he pities a meaningless gourd while being indifferent to the eternal destruction of thousands.



5. Theology of Missiology

Jonah is a foundational text for the theology of missions. Missiology in the Book of Jonah highlights God as the sovereign initiator of mission, whose compassion extends beyond his chosen people to all of creation, including enemies. It challenges narrow nationalism, showing that God's grace is universal and that mission requires obedience to his will, even when it demands going to "Nineveh."

- a) **Universal Sovereignty:** Jonah shows that God is not just a localized deity of Israel but the Lord of all nations, controlling nature, foreign kings, and individuals to fulfill his salvation plan - **God as the Sending One**. The mission originates with God's concern for the "lost" city.
- b) **The Heart of the Missionary God:** God pursues the sinner (Jonah) and warns the wicked (Nineveh). Jonah reveals God as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2), demonstrating that compassion is the driving force behind the missionary initiative.
- c) **The Mission of God - *Missio Dei*:** God rarely brings judgment without first warning of his wrath, reflecting his desire for repentance. God is determined to get his message of repentance to the nations (Jonah 1:2; 3:1). Jonah's failed flight proves that God's redemptive purposes for the nations cannot be thwarted by a reluctant messenger.
- d) **Cross-Cultural Mission and Reconciliation:** Jonah is sent to Nineveh, the capital of Israel's enemy (Assyria). This demonstrates that God's mission can require crossing deep racial, religious, and political barriers to offer mercy. The final question in Jonah 4:11 emphasizes God's pity for those who "do not know their right hand from their left."
- e) **Reluctant Messenger:** Jonah tries to evade the missionary call, representing a "Pharisaical" mindset that dislikes God's mercy toward outsiders. God initiates the mission, while Jonah acts as a "prodigal prophet" who attempts to run from his responsibilities. The mission succeeds despite the prophet's disobedience, emphasizing that God does not need a perfect messenger.

6. Theology of Soteriology

The book's theological climax is found in Jonah's confession, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9), highlighting that grace is God's free gift, extended through mercy rather than human merit. It presents a universal message where salvation is available to all, including pagan sailors and enemies, and based solely on God's sovereign mercy.

- a) **Universal Scope & Repentance (*shuv*):** Salvation is not limited by blood relationship to Abraham but is extended to all who repent and believe and linked to a "broken and contrite heart" rather than ceremonial works. In addition, the book defines repentance as a "turning" from evil ways (Jonah 3:10) and demonstrates that repentance can avert divine judgment. The Ninevites' salvation is linked to their immediate, humble repentance (fasting, sackcloth, turning from evil) upon hearing the word of God, which serves as a paradigm for receiving divine mercy.
- b) **"Salvation is of the Lord":** In Jonah 2:9, Jonah acknowledges that salvation cannot be achieved by human effort, ritual, or works, it is a free gift of God. Salvation is shown to be entirely a work of God (i.e., Monergism) just as Jonah contributes nothing to his own rescue from the fish.



7. Theology of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics in Jonah centers on interpreting God's radical mercy, which transcends nationalistic boundaries and challenges established prophetic expectations. Trama hermeneutics is addressing themes of justice, mercy, and the struggle to understand God in the face of enemies.

- a) **Universalism vs. Nationalistic Exclusivity:** The core theological struggle is God's compassion for Nineveh (Israel's enemy) versus Jonah's parochial desire for judgment. The text challenges "toxic nationalism". It breaks the pattern of "come and see" (where nations come to Israel) by deploying a "go and tell" mission, signaling that salvation belongs to the Lord and is not exclusive.
- b) **Canonical Context:** Hermeneutically, Jonah is often read alongside the Book of Nahum. While Jonah emphasizes God's mercy toward Nineveh, Nahum emphasizes God's judgment upon it. A theological reading suggests that God's ultimate will is to save, but this grace is harmonized with His justice.
- c) **Trauma Hermeneutics:** Recent hermeneutical tools, such as trauma hermeneutics, reimagine Jonah as a "symbolic trauma narrative" of a wounded prophet and his community, asking ethical questions about forgiveness and justice for oppressed peoples. From a biblical theology perspective, Yahweh is not distant from human trauma but is a "refuge and strength, a present help in trouble," actively present in the midst of suffering rather than simply removing it. Scripture validates the reality of trauma.
- d) **"Reluctant" Prophet:** Jonah serves as a type for Israel's own disobedience, turning the prophet into a "prodigal son" figure who resists grace. Jonah acts as a "prodigal prophet" who mirrors Israel's own disobedience and narrow nationalism, resisting God's grace towards enemies. He flees from his calling (chap. 1), experiences grace in the fish (Jonah 2) but angrily rejects God's mercy towards Nineveh (Jonah 4), embodying the "elder brother" who resents mercy shown to sinners. Does God delay his destructive judgment on Nineveh as a result of repentance as an example to the Kingdom of Israel to repent in the face of their own forthcoming judgement? **Divine mercy overriding judgment** in Jonah's own words in Chapter 4 reveal his resentment that God is a "gracious God and merciful," making this the central theological point.

8. Theology of Christology

In systematic theology, Jonah is often studied as a "type" of Christ. The theology of Christology in Jonah presents Jesus as the "true and better Jonah," using the prophet's experience as a type (foreshadowing) of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and mission to the Gentiles. Jesus directly identifies the "sign of Jonah"—three days in the fish—as a prefiguration of his own three days in the tomb before His resurrection.

- a) **The Sign of Jonah:** Jesus identifies Jonah's three days in the fish as a type of his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40), linking the Old Testament narrative directly to the New Testament gospel.
- b) **The Greater Prophet:** Jesus is presented as the antitype, the willing and perfectly obedient messenger who brings a message of salvation far greater than Jonah's.
- c) **Salvation for the Gentiles:** Jonah's reluctantly successful preaching to pagan Nineveh foreshadows Christ's mission extending beyond Israel to all nations.



- d) **Substitutionary Action:** Jonah offers his life to calm the storm to save the pagan sailors, a shadow of Jesus sacrificing himself to save humanity.
- e) **Heart of God:** Jonah highlights God's mercy, grace, and compassion (Jonah 4:2), which are fully embodied in Jesus' ministry, whereas Jonah highlights human resistance to that mercy.

9. Theology of Bibliology

The theology of bibliology in Jonah centers on the authority and reliability of Scripture through God's sovereign word, which initiates mission, pierces human rebellion, and extends mercy universally, even to enemies. The text highlights "the Word of the LORD" as dynamic, effective, and unhindered by human disobedience.

- a) **Authority and Sovereignty of the Word:** The book begins and ends with the authority of God's word. Jonah 1:1 and 3:1 establish that the "word of the LORD" is direct, imperative, and brings absolute accountability.
- b) **The Inerrancy of God's Purpose:** The narrative demonstrates that God's plans are not thwarted by a prophet's disobedience. The text portrays the "unabridged account" of God's interaction with a rebellious prophet, showing it is not a humanly edited story but a truthful account of divine grace.
- c) **"Sign of Jonah" and Typology:** Jesus validates the historical and prophetic nature of the book by citing it in Matthew 12:40, linking Jonah's three days in the fish to his own resurrection. This affirms the book as a foreshadowing (type) of New Testament theology.
- d) **Universality of Message:** The text shows that God's word and salvation are not confined to Israel, as the pagan sailors (1:16) and Ninevites (3:5-10) respond to the Word of God more readily than the prophet himself.
- e) **Function of Scripture:** The book serves as a mirror, challenging the reader's own biases against divine mercy, acting as a corrective to narrow, nationalistic theology (Jonah 4:11).

Event Timeline – Book of Jonah (written c. 780-750 BC)

c. 760 BC	Jonah Sent to Nineveh	Jonah 1 - 4
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Sunday Morning Bible Class: 10 May 2026

Teacher: Dr. David Utzke

<https://atbethel.church/sunday-adult-bible-study>