

JONAH



BEYOND
the Tale of a Whale

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Preliminary Matters

Jonah: Beyond the Tale of a Whale— *An Introduction*



Prairie Creek Church. The thought of it produces fond memories of preaching, pot-luck dinners, and good-hearted people. Yes, these fine folks marked my life forever.

We had some characters in that small country congregation that seemed to jump off the pages of *Little House on the Prairie's* Walnut Grove Community Church. We had cast members like “brother” Marvin Evans, the church deacon. He was a plumber by trade, and just may have been one of the most faithful men I’ve ever known. But as a kid, I would run from him because he was a face-patter. He would accidentally crush you with his muscular plumber paws while giving you a hug on Sunday morning. And then we had “sister” Marie Rehorn, who always seemed a permanent fixture of the place. We all thought she came with the church building—like when it was built. Or maybe even when the church was established in AD 33! She knew *everything* about the Bible. Trust me, you wanted

her on your team when you played Bible Trivia. And then, of course, there was Pappy Horton. He lived across the street and was the local farmer and patriarch of the church. He had given the land on which the church building had been constructed. He wore overalls everywhere—for every circumstance—at all times. As a kid, I *wanted* to talk to him because he had false teeth. And on rare occasions he would take them out and show them to me—and even let me touch them! I’m sure this practice, reserved to awe and amaze children, broke all sorts of health and sanitation laws; but as a kid it was delightfully entertaining.

The warmth of those bygone days makes me smile.

It was there in that church that I first was exposed to the book of Jonah.

I know, I know. Even now, when most people hear the name Jonah, it conjures up a variety of interesting thoughts, ranging from mental pictures of Pinocchio, Geppetto, and a whale named Monstro, to three singing brothers whose name simply sounds similar to the prophet’s. But beyond thoughts about the story, asking people to “tell” it certainly evokes a variety of versions.

Many *outside* the church, or those who have very little interaction with the biblical text, would tell their account and present it as a fictional tale of a renegade man of God who supposedly survived the gulp of Moby Dick and lived to tell about it. They would talk about it as a moral myth that teaches that one ought not to run

from responsibility, to suck it up when things get tough, and that fulfilling life's challenges can become frightening. Or maybe they would reference it as a parabolic account that reminds one to appreciate and extend second chances. After all, everyone makes mistakes, and the prodigal prophet made his. But he eventually did the right thing. Correct?

Such are the frequently told versions from those outside the Christian faith.

But here is my problem: I think many people inside the church think the same thing.

I realize that some reading this may be wondering, *What's the problem? I thought Jonah was fiction that teaches us moral principles.* Or, *maybe* you believe the story to be *true*—but you still understand the message of the book to be primarily about repentance, second chances, and the need to display stick-to-itiveness in difficult circumstances.

I wonder where such understandings originate. My guess? First exposure.

My early encounter with the story happened in a Sunday school classroom at my little country church. Now, I am not throwing anyone under the bus here, but I have come to realize that we often perpetuate what was passed along to us—for good or bad—and that includes our theological understanding of biblical accounts, the meaning of favorite passages, and often our convictions about the faith. I also will concede that

my first exposure was at age five, and an age-level-appropriateness may have played a part in the presentation. Yet, it was there that my faithful Sunday school teacher told me her version of the story. All these years later, I have realized that she, like many today, may have been somewhat confused about the story's meaning.

Not only did she tell me about it, she showed me! You see, for us little guys at the ripe old age of five, she used a new technology in the classroom that was the envy of Sunday school children everywhere: flannel-graph. For those of you who are unacquainted with this marvel, it was what it sounds like: a flannel-covered board where the teacher placed flannel cut-out characters to bring the story to life. If you never experienced it, you missed out! For those of you who just had warm and fuzzy flashbacks to the '60s and '70s—*you* are my kind of people.

Well, it was in that classroom environment that she related to me the story of Jonah. Even then, we used different voices for the main characters. So, for dramatic effect, when I describe her version below, hear the voice of “God” sounding like James Earl Jones, “Jonah” in one of your favorite high-pitched-sounding Muppet characters, and the “Teacher” sounding like your favorite, sweet aunt. Trust me: when you do that, it spices up the story a bit.

In a succinct and summarized account, my classroom version went like this:

Chapter 1

- God: “Jonah—go to Nineveh.”
- Jonah: “I’m not gonna go. That place is scary. I’m gonna run away instead.”
- Teacher: “Everyone knows you can’t run from God. Don’t run away.”
- God: “Jonah—you better not run away. If you do, I will get you good.”
- Jonah: “I don’t care. I’ll get on a boat and sail away!”
- God: “Okay, then . . . I will send a storm to frighten you.”
- Teacher: “Storms are God’s way of telling us we are in trouble. Storms are bad.”

Chapter 2

- Jonah: “Why am I running in a storm? I’ve done wrong. Throw me overboard.”
- God: “Jonah, you really deserve to die, but I am going to save you.”
- Jonah: “What? Are you kidding me? How are You going to save me, God?”
- God: “Look at what is coming—a big whale.”
- Jonah: “Oh no! Wow. I’m saved.”
- Teacher: “Gulp! The whale swallowed Jonah, and God saved him.”
- Jonah: “I’m sorry, God. I will tell others how I learned from my mistake.”

Chapter 3

- God: “Okay, whale. Let him out. Jonah has learned his lesson.”
- Teacher: “And the whale opened his mouth, and Jonah just walked out!”
- Jonah: “I am sorry, God. I will do what You say this time.”
- God: “Go preach what I tell you.”
- Teacher: “This time, Jonah obeyed and did what God said.”
- Jonah: “Okay, you Ninevites, God’s gonna get you. You’ve been bad!”
- Teacher: “The Ninevites started following God. We should all follow God, too.”

Chapter 4

- Teacher: “Jonah waited under a tree. We should always be ready to help others.”
- God: “Jonah, make sure you do what I say next time.”
- Jonah: “Sure thing, God.”

THE END

I think that version—with various twists and revisions—is *the* most commonly presented account that exists today. It’s preached that way. It’s taught in that format in small groups. We communicate it to our kids as a book of moral principles with pithy soliloquies.

And the statements from my teacher? They represent the frequent applications that many derive from the book. After all, there are some valid points:

1. No one should run away from God.
2. It is amazing that God saved Jonah with a big whale.
3. God should always be obeyed.
4. It's certainly good to help other people.

But may I employ a horrible pun?

Something is incredibly *fishy* here. It just doesn't add up.

That version begs many significant questions. Why the numerous details in the text? Why did the author go to considerable lengths to unfold the characters in this highly organized account? Why does it record how Jonah ran away, where he went, the interaction with the sailors, and the precision of his words inside the fish? Why does the king of Nineveh respond in such an unexpected manner? And what in the world is up with chapter 4? It's usually avoided like the plague because all we see is a prophet hanging out under a tree and something about scorching wind and a hungry worm. Then there is the conclusion. What book ends with an unanswered question?

To understand Jonah, we are going to need to slow down and unpack this rich, ancient narrative. We'll need to employ our Hebrew ears to listen accurately.

We'll need to view things through the Near Eastern lens to correctly observe. Only then will we understand the grandeur of Jonah's story and comprehend the purposeful design and powerful presentation of the drama.

So, let's go on this intriguing adventure together—an expedition, if you will. Let's allow the book of Jonah to be as practical as it is intended to be. Let's allow it to preach to our hearts; let's promise to listen to the words of the author and follow the breadcrumbs left for us to follow. We'll see it one unit of Scripture at a time as we unpack the narrative.¹ When we do, we will experience just how the author is *doing something* with what the author is *saying*.

One thing is for sure: we will conclude that the book is beyond the tale of a whale!

“I Grewed! I Grewed!”

Jonah: A Literary Overview



Anyone remember air travel before September 11, 2001? For those of you reading this who are too young to remember, I must explain that flying before that infamous date was *much* different. For those who do remember it, I'll bet you recall going directly to the gate and waiting to pick up your loved one, anticipating the moment that your special someone emerged from the ramp. The terminal gate was like the Hallmark Channel at Christmas: hugs, kisses, and high-fives.

So, the year was 2000, and I was returning home from speaking at a conference on the East Coast. Jennifer brought our daughter, Kayla—age four at the time—to greet me at the gate. As I headed down the ramp from the plane, Kayla slipped out of Jennifer's reach and began to weave and bob through the line of disembarking air-patrons, screaming at the top of her lungs, “I grewed! I grewed! Daddy, I grewed! Where's my Daddy?” Hearing the commotion, I was startled at the chaos until she slammed into my leg halfway down

the jet-ramp. With all eyes on me, I quickly asked, “Whose child is this?” That was met with many laughs.

To me, the moment was funny because I had been gone less than forty-eight hours—and we had measured her height right before I left! But like a good daddy, when we arrived home, I retrieved the measuring stick and she stood at attention. On this particular occasion, I asked the Lord to overlook my purposeful drawing of the new line ever so slightly above the old line. (To ease my conscience, I told myself that she *had* to have grown to *some* degree.) Then I said, “Look at that, baby girl. You’ve grown while I’ve been gone!” We looked at her progress together. She seemed satisfied and then matter-of-factly exclaimed, “I knew it. I knew I had grown.”

At bedtime that evening I was reading her a book when I noticed she had a puzzled look on her face. She said, “Daddy, I have a question. Why do big people stop growin’?” Obviously, she meant in height, not girth. I briefly thought about referencing molecular biology, entropy, or other laws of thermodynamics. Instead I simply said, “Honey, I stopped growing a long time ago. We grow to a certain point and then we stop. That’s the way God made us.” For her four-year-old mind, that was sufficient. She was satisfied. After I tucked her into bed and we said our prayers, I sat down and began to catch up on a book I had been reading before my trip. It was then that it hit me. Her question can be applied

far beyond a discussion of the physical realm, right? Let me phrase it this way:

Why do people stop growin' spiritually?

That's a whole 'nother question, isn't it?

Without a doubt, that question is at the heart of the book of Jonah. If you read the book carefully, you'll see the writer is purposefully asking his audience to evaluate his or her heart against the heart of God. Jonah was written to challenge the people of God to *gauge* their *growth*—to see if they are progressing or retreating in their spiritual development.

Why do I think this is true?

It's because of the purposeful way the story is told. Assuming you have stuck with me thus far, I'd like to show you how the author directs the reader's attention toward the particular issue of growth.

Before we plow into the text, however, we must first remember how the book of Jonah is recorded, and the type of literature in which the story resides. C. S. Lewis asserts, "Since [the Bible] is after all literature, [it] cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are."¹ Lewis is right. As it applies to Jonah, it means we must understand the art of biblical narrative.

Biblical narrative, by definition, is an organized, artistic presentation of a historical event that describes God's working in His creation and through His people. This means that Jonah is neither fiction nor distorted

history. It is a *real*, true account of a *real* person who had *real* experiences with *real* people at a *real* point in time—but is recorded for theological purposes. Historically, the events occurred when the heart of the nation of Israel was drifting far away from God.

To help us understand Jonah's artistically designed account, we must do four basic things:²

1. *Know* the setting, scene, and structure.
2. *Identify* the characters—both major and minor.
3. *Understand* the purpose and pace of the plot.
4. *Share* in the experience of the story.

So, let's take these one at a time to lay the groundwork before we unpack the biblical text. However, before proceeding, please do yourself a favor. Stop right now and read the book of Jonah. Yes, put this book down and read the Bible. It won't take long. In fact, read Jonah twice.

Now that you have read Jonah, let's orient ourselves to one of the Bible's most famous books.

Know the setting, scene, and structure.

The divine call of Jonah to embark on an evangelistic journey occurs in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (782–753 BC). Outside of the book of Jonah, 2 Kings 14:23–27 is the only other

Old Testament passage that mentions the prophet's name, and it identifies Jonah's ministry during that period of time. According to this passage, things were decaying in Israel, spiritually speaking. Jeroboam II "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (v. 24). He was an unfaithful king who did not follow the Mosaic covenant. It was during such dark days that God sent Jonah to Nineveh—the heart of the Assyrian Empire—to call the nation to repentance.

The Assyrians were infamous for their brutality, exploitation, and violence. Ancient records bear witness to their fearsome conquests of other societies. They boasted of committing detestable acts, such as cutting off their enemies' ears and other body parts, skinning people alive, and impaling them outside the gates of their own cities as a sign of Assyrian might and power. They were also known for their witchcraft and sorcery. The prophet Nahum speaks of the grotesqueness and wickedness of the sins of Nineveh (Nah 3:1–7). Assyria became known for alcoholism, a sure predictor of the demise of any culture. In addition, they celebrated brazen prostitution and illicit sexuality. There were no rules or regulations on promiscuity, and immorality was openly expressed in any form and fashion of one's depraved desire.

In the Old Testament era, Assyrian society was detested as an immoral culture. Today, we would call them "sick," but Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who

need a doctor, but the sick. . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt 9:12–13).

As we trace the scenes, we begin with Jonah 1, which opens with the call of Jonah and his subsequent flight to Joppa. It then transitions to a boat bound for Tarshish that becomes caught up in a sovereignly appointed monster storm. The chapter ends with a final scene: the prophet’s swan dive into the ocean and the great fish that swallowed him. Jonah 2 opens with Jonah’s prayer *inside* the belly of the fish, and then describes how the prophet is upchucked onto dry land for a do-over opportunity. Chapter 3 finds Jonah in Nineveh, warning the people of impending destruction. To his immense dismay, however, the king and his citizens repent, and the Lord delays judgment. In the final chapter, the scene shifts to a location outside the city where Jonah sulks, angry and bitter that the Lord did not destroy Israel’s enemy. The Lord and the prophet then engage in a Q & A session that leaves the reader in a quandary.

The book is organized into four chapters.³ Each chapter is distinct and succinct, and it is ideal for reenacting and memorizing. As a summary, view the setting, scenes, and structure as follows:

(Chap. 1) *In Israel*

(Chap. 2) *Inside the Fish*

(Chap. 3) *In Nineveh*

(Chap. 4) *Outside of Nineveh*

Identify the characters— both major and minor.

Four primary characters exist in the story:

1. *The Lord*. The opening words of the book begin, "The word of the LORD . . ." (v. 1). "The LORD" is the God of Israel, and the opening words spoken by a character in the story are from Him (v. 2).
2. *The prophet Jonah*. As the opening verse of the book states, "The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai." Jonah is the primary character in the book, and the story is about his response to the command he receives from the Lord. The reader follows every move of the prophet from beginning to end.
3. *The Gentile sailors*. These intriguing seamen are onstage only in chapter 1. Israelites were not typically a seafaring people, so it is unlikely these men are Hebrews. At the onset, they do not believe in the Lord God of Israel. However, by the end of chapter 1, they offer Him sacrifices and make vows to Him (v. 16).
4. *The king of Nineveh*. The king appears in chapter 3 and is specifically referenced as the "king of Nineveh" as opposed to the usual Old Testament and Assyrian title, "the king of Assyria."⁴ After hearing the prophet's message,

he responds unexpectedly in actions associated with repentance. He makes a decree for the people, leading the community in repentance before the God of Israel.

Understand the purpose and pace of the plot.

Any good story describes people we care about doing things that fascinate us. It means that characters are described and developed, then presented as playing roles within the events themselves. When these characters have conflict or development, they are involved in a plot. Every great story has a plot, and as we all know, it thickens with masterful storytelling!

Through the years, literary critics have identified various ways to assess a plot. As I describe this, you may have flashbacks to a high school or college literature class, so you can either forgive or thank me if these descriptions bring back painful or delightful memories! Frequently, teachers reference essential plot points, without which a story falls flat. These plot points occur in all types of well-crafted accounts and may be presented as such:

1. Exposition (background)
2. Inciting moment (a crisis or dramatic change in the status quo)

3. Rising action (exacerbation of the problem or development in the main character)
4. Turning point (the moment when the reader sees how the plot will be resolved)
5. Further complication (an additional crisis or moment of anxiety)
6. Climax (the critical moment that resolves the crisis)
7. Denouement (tying up the loose ends)⁵

Note how these steps generally unfold in the book of Jonah:

1. Exposition—*The Lord gives Jonah an assignment to go to Nineveh and preach.*
2. Inciting moment—*Jonah flees from the Lord and attempts to escape to Tarshish.*
3. Rising action—*The Lord sends a storm, and Jonah is thrown overboard.*
4. Turning point—*The Lord miraculously preserves Jonah, and he goes to Nineveh.*
5. Further complication—*Jonah preaches while hoping for Nineveh's destruction.*
6. Climax—*The king of Nineveh and the people repent and seek the mercy of the Lord.*
7. Denouement—*The Lord and Jonah have a discussion with no apparent resolution for him.*

Share in the experience of the story.

Biblical narratives are structured to draw the reader into the action and to *experience* the progression of the plot. To effectively immerse ourselves in the narrative of Jonah, we'll need to engage the story s-l-o-w-l-y and with intentionality. While this won't be a technical commentary, we *will* look at the narrative verse by verse, and section by section. This is where it gets fun, because the story comes to life. And we'll use our sanctified imaginations to step right onto Jonah's ancient set as the curtain rises.

We are going to need to do something important. We will need to listen to the text as it would sound to Hebrew ears and see it through the lens of the ancient Near East. When the author of the biblical text chooses to draw our attention to the message through highly crafted literary techniques, we'll stop and assess the message in detail.

Two critical tools the author employs throughout the book are the use of irony and satire. Irony is perhaps the most common literary device in narrative literature in the Bible, but it is used especially in Jonah when the prophet presents a life opposite of what the reader expects. That is why irony usually involves a surprising reversal. Even today, when something is the opposite of what we anticipated, we say, "Isn't that ironic?" This

tool is used *extensively* in Jonah in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Akin to irony is satire. Satire uses biting ridicule to highlight a particular truth. Satire pokes the reader in the eye to then reveal the obvious flaw of one's thinking. In Jonah, it specifically challenges the reader of Jonah's day. As Wendy Widder states, "As a satire, the story of Jonah could be intended to highlight the ridiculousness of Israel's continued stubborn refusal to repent despite repeated prophetic pleadings and pronouncements of doom."⁶ We will see this more clearly as the story progresses.

One thing's a must: when we unpack the text, we must let the Holy Spirit wrestle with our hearts. After all, this story was meant to teach, so we must allow Him to get personal.

Yes, we must allow my little Kayla to ask us a hard question: "Are we still growin'" . . . spiritually?

As the story unfolds, I am going to make this very practical. For each chapter to follow, I'm going to organize it into three distinct areas:

1. *Opening Thoughts*—This will help us think about the major theme framed by the author in a particular portion of the narrative.
2. *Textual Understanding*—In each section we will walk through the text in detail, looking at how the author describes and emphasizes a specific sequence of events. (FYI, I will be

using the 1978 edition of the NIV translation of Jonah as our primary reference.)

3. *Growth Indicator*—This practical point will allow us to see the thrust of the text and will challenge us to “not merely listen to the word. . . . Do what it says” (Jas 1:22).

To be specific, I am going to pose twelve “Growth Indicators,” roughly three for each chapter in Jonah’s book, with which to assess our spiritual growth. These diagnostic tools are, I believe, straight from the text. The author of this powerful narrative, the Holy Spirit—through literary design—has provided these for us.

So, put on your seatbelt and get out your passport. Let’s head back to ancient Israel. Let’s engage the story of Jonah. But don’t forget: from time to time, when the story asks us to, we’ll need to stand at attention at our personal measurement board to see if we’re growing. We’ll need to see how we’re doing against God’s standards.

And when we make it to the end of the book, I’m pretty sure we will all agree that this is no normal fish story. It will be *beyond the tale of a whale*.