

# Lesson 8 - The Prophet Jonah

## The Book of Jonah

### Jonah Disobeys Yahweh

**1** And the word of Yahweh came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, **2** "Get up! Go to the great city Nineveh and cry out against her, because their evil has come up <sub>1</sub>before me<sub>1</sub>." **3** But Jonah set out to flee toward Tarshish from <sub>1</sub>the presence of<sub>1</sub> Yahweh. And he went down to Joppa and found a merchant ship going to Tarshish, and paid her fare, and went on board her to go with them toward Tarshish from <sub>1</sub>the presence of<sub>1</sub> Yahweh.

**4** And Yahweh hurled a great wind upon the sea, and it was a great storm on the sea, and the merchant ship <sub>1</sub>was in danger of breaking up<sub>1</sub>. **5** And the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they threw the <sub>1</sub>contents<sub>1</sub> that were in the merchant ship into the sea to lighten it for them. And *meanwhile* Jonah went down into the hold of the vessel and lay down and fell asleep.

**6** And the captain of the ship approached him and said to him, "Why are you <sub>1</sub>sound asleep<sub>1</sub>? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps *your* god will take notice of us and we won't perish!" **7** And they said <sub>1</sub>to one another<sub>1</sub>, "Come, let us cast lots so that we may know on whose account this disaster *has come* on us!" And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. **8** So they said to him, "Please tell us *whoever is responsible that* this disaster *has come* upon us! What *is* your occupation? And from where do you come? What *is* your country? And from which people *are* you?" **9** And he said to them, "I *am* a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

**10** Then the men <sub>1</sub>were greatly afraid<sub>1</sub>, and they said to him, "What *is* this you have done?" because they knew that he *was* fleeing <sub>1</sub>from the presence of<sub>1</sub> Yahweh (because he had told them). **11** So they said to him, "What shall we do to you so that the sea may quiet down for us?" because the sea <sub>1</sub>was growing more and more tempestuous<sub>1</sub>. **12** And he said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea so that the sea may quiet down for you, because I know that on account of me this great storm *has come* upon you all." **13** But the men rowed *hard* to bring *the ship* back to the dry land, and they could not *do* so because the sea <sub>1</sub>was growing more and more tempestuous<sub>1</sub> against them. **14** So they cried out to Yahweh, and they said, "O Yahweh! Please do not let us perish because of this man's life, and <sub>1</sub>do not make us guilty of innocent blood<sub>1</sub>, because you, O Yahweh, did what you wanted." **15** And they picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea,

and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> So the men feared Yahweh <sub>greatly</sub>, and they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and <sub>made</sub> vows.

### **Jonah Is Swallowed by a Fish and Prays to Yahweh**

<sup>17</sup> And Yahweh provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

<sup>2</sup> And Jonah prayed to Yahweh his God from the belly of the fish <sup>2</sup> and said,

"I called <sub>from my distress</sub> to Yahweh,  
and he answered me;  
from the belly of Sheol I cried for help—  
you heard my voice.

<sup>3</sup> And you threw me *into the* deep,  
into the heart of *the* seas,  
and *the* sea currents surrounded me;  
all your breakers and your surging waves  
passed over me.

<sup>4</sup> And I said, 'I am banished  
from your sight;  
how <sub>will I continue to look</sub>  
<sub>on your holy temple</sub>?'

<sup>5</sup> *The* waters encompassed me up to *my* neck;  
*the* deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

<sup>6</sup> I went down to the foundations of *the* mountains;  
the Underworld—its bars *were* around me forever.  
But you brought up my life from *the* pit,  
Yahweh my God.

<sup>7</sup> When my life was ebbing away from me,  
I remembered Yahweh,  
and my prayer came to you,  
<sub>to your holy temple</sub>.

<sup>8</sup> Those who worship vain idols  
forsake their loyal love.

<sup>9</sup> But I, with a voice of thanksgiving,  
will sacrifice to you;  
I will fulfill what I have vowed.

Deliverance *belongs* to Yahweh!"

<sup>10</sup> And Yahweh spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out on the dry land.

### **The People of Nineveh Repent at Jonah's Proclamation**

<sup>3</sup> And the word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second *time*, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Get up! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it the message that I *am* telling you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the word of Yahweh. Now Nineveh was <sub>1</sub>an extraordinarily great city<sub>1</sub>—a journey of three days *across*. <sup>4</sup> And Jonah began to go into the city a journey of one day, and he cried out and said, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be demolished!" <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed in God, and they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth—from the greatest of them <sub>1</sub>to the least important<sub>1</sub>.

### **The King's Proclamation**

<sup>6</sup> And the news reached the king of Nineveh, and he rose from his throne and removed his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in the ashes. <sup>7</sup> And he had a proclamation made, and said,

"In Nineveh, by a decree of the king and his nobles:

"No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything! They must not eat, and they must not drink water! <sup>8</sup> And *the* human beings and *the* animals must be covered *with* sackcloth! And they must call forcefully to God, and each must turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may relent and change his mind and turn <sub>1</sub>from his blazing anger<sub>1</sub> <sub>1</sub>so that<sub>1</sub> we will not perish."

<sup>10</sup> And God saw their deeds—that they turned from their evil ways—and God changed his mind about the evil that he had said *he would* bring upon them, and he did not do *it*.

### **Jonah Is Angry at Yahweh's Compassion**

<sup>4</sup> And this <sub>1</sub>was greatly displeasing<sub>1</sub> to Jonah, and <sub>1</sub>he became furious<sub>1</sub>. <sup>2</sup> And he prayed to Yahweh and said, "O Yahweh, was this not <sub>1</sub>what I said<sub>1</sub> while I was in my homeland? Therefore <sub>1</sub>I originally fled<sub>1</sub> to Tarshish, because I knew that you *are* a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger <sub>1</sub>and having great steadfast love<sub>1</sub>, and one who relents concerning calamity. <sup>3</sup> And so then, Yahweh, please take my life from me, because *for* me death *is* better than life!" <sup>4</sup> And Yahweh said, "<sub>1</sub>Is it right for you to be angry<sub>1</sub>?"

<sup>5</sup> And Jonah went out from the city and sat *down* east of the city, and he made for himself a shelter there. And he sat under it in the shade, <sub>1</sub>waiting to see<sub>1</sub> what would happen with the city. <sup>6</sup> And Yahweh God appointed a plant, and he made it grow up over Jonah to be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. And Jonah <sub>1</sub>was very glad<sub>1</sub> about the plant. <sup>7</sup> So God appointed a

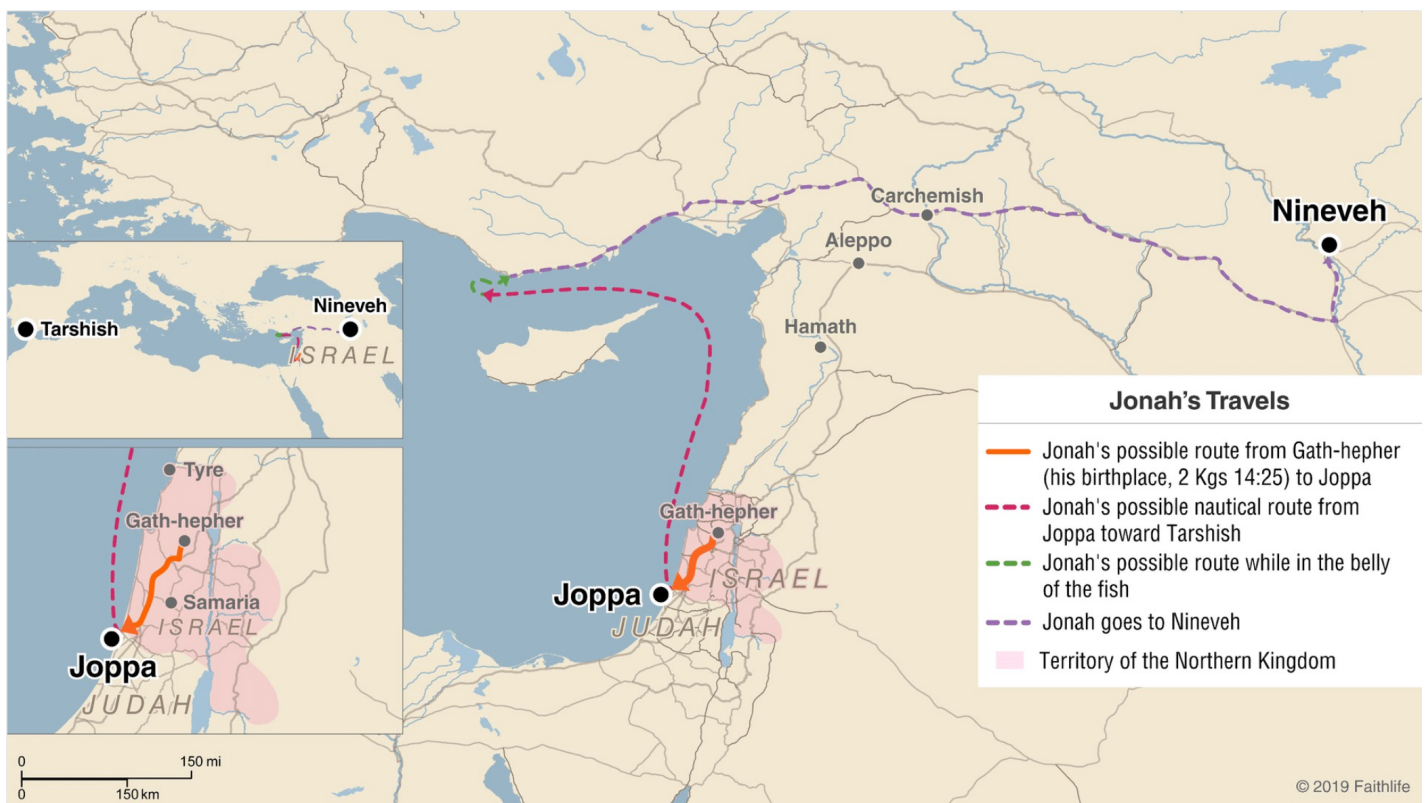
worm [at daybreak] the next day, and it attacked the plant, and it withered. <sup>8</sup> [And when the sun rose], God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head and he grew faint. [And he asked that he could die] and said, "My death is better than my life!" <sup>9</sup> So God said to Jonah, "[Is it right for you to be angry] about the plant?" And he said, "[It is right for me to be angry enough to die]!"

<sup>10</sup> But Yahweh said, "You are troubled about the plant, for which you did not labor nor cause it to grow. [It grew up in a night and it perished in a night]! <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, the great city, [in which there are] more [than one hundred and twenty thousand] people who do not know right from left, plus many animals?"

W. Hall Harris III et al., eds., [\*The Lexham English Bible\*](#) (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Jon 1:1–4:11.

## Jonah is commanded to go to Nineveh and he goes to Tarshish????????

The modern day equivalent would be if you lived in Mt. Airy, MD, were commanded to go to Bar Harbor, Maine, but you went to Los Angeles, California instead.



# The Test of a True Prophet

There are several dimensions to this question. One in particular is touched on in Parashat Shofetim, namely, the prophet's ability to foretell the future. This is how Moses puts it:

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him. (Deut. 18:21–22)

The test seems simple: if what the prophet predicts comes to pass, he is a true prophet; if not, not. In actuality, it turned out to be not that simple. The classic case is the book of Jonah. Jonah is commanded by God to warn the people of Nineveh that their wickedness is about to bring disaster on them. Jonah attempts to flee, but fails – the famous story of the sea, the storm, and the "great fish." Eventually he goes to Nineveh and utters the words God has commanded him to say: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed" (Jonah 3:4). The people listen and repent and the city is spared. Jonah, however, is deeply dissatisfied, (Jonah 4:1–3).

Jonah's complaint can be understood in two ways.

First, he was distressed that God had forgiven the people. They were, after all, wicked. They deserved to be punished. Why then did a mere change of heart release them from the punishment that was their due?

Second, he had been made to look a fool. He had told them that in forty days the city would be destroyed. It was not. God's mercy made nonsense of his prediction.

Jonah was wrong to be displeased; that much is clear. God says, in the rhetorical question with which the book concludes: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:11). Should I not be merciful? Should I not forgive? What then becomes of the criterion Moses lays down for distinguishing between a true and false prophet: "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken"? Jonah had proclaimed that the city would be destroyed in forty days. It was not, yet the proclamation was true. He really did speak the word of God. How can this be so?

A possible answer is given in the book of Jeremiah. (Jer. 28:6–9)

Jeremiah makes a fundamental distinction between good news and bad. It is easy to prophesy disaster. If the prophecy comes true, then you have spoken the truth. If it does not, then you can say: God relented and forgave. **A negative prophecy cannot be refuted, but a positive one can.** If the good foreseen comes to pass, then the prophecy is true. If it does not, then you cannot say, "God changed His mind," because **God does not retract from a promise He has made of good, or peace, or return.** It is therefore only when the prophet offers a positive vision that he can be tested. That is why Jonah was wrong to believe he had failed when his negative prophecy – the destruction of Nineveh – failed to come true.