

# JONAH

## GRACE WITHOUT BORDERS

LATE SPRING 2015

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### Forgive them?!

Is it hard for you to stomach the fact that God might completely forgive and save someone who committed the worst kind of sin...against you and your family? The thought of God saving people who were known for evils like murder, rape, and idolatry drove a guy named Jonah steaming mad...

## GOD'S PURSUING, RESCUING, FORGIVING, AND BORDERLESS GRACE

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*Getting into the "sandals" of the story...*

#### Author: Who Wrote it?

The book of Jonah does not explicitly identify an author. However, tradition holds that Jonah himself wrote this account. Several key pieces of evidence point toward this conclusion. First, this short story is clearly biographical in nature, with Jonah "the son of Amittai," (the central, dynamic character) being introduced in the opening clause (1:1). Second, much of the information given in this book could only come from first-hand knowledge and experience; it is inherently autobiographical (e.g. Jonah's private prayer from inside the "great fish," his later journey to Nineveh, the proclamation to the city's occupants, and his conversation with God after He relents His judgment on the people of Nineveh).

Little else is known of Jonah outside a brief mention in 2 Kings 14:25, which places him during the reign of Jeroboam II, who ruled over the northern kingdom of Israel (794-753 BC). Jonah, whose name means, "dove," hailed from Gath-Hepher ("wine press of the well").\* This village was approximately 3-5 miles north of Nazareth in Galilee. Interestingly, during Jesus' public ministry the Pharisees ridiculed Nicodemus' defense of Jesus by saying, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee" (John 7:52). Yet in their ethnocentric pride, they blindly forgot that Jonah and Nahum were both from Galilee.

#### Date: When Did He Write It?

Fitting within the timeline of Jeroboam II, Jonah most likely prophesied against the city of Nineveh during the reign of Ashur-dan III, when Assyria was in an era of national distress (763-759 BC).\*

#### Setting: What Was Going On?

God's call to Jonah arrived on the cusp of deep nationalistic pride in Israel. Although the religious climate was anything but pure under the rule of Jeroboam II, God prophesied favorably upon the land through Elisha (2 Kings 13:14-19) and Jonah (2 Kings 14:25). The Assyrians defeated Damascus to Israel's north. So Israel capitalized on their downfall by reclaiming significant territory and completely restoring its northern borders.

In this new relief from foreign oppression, Israel selfishly and complacently reveled in its favored position with God. Instead of being a light to "all the nations" (cf. Gen. 12:3; 49:10-12; Ex. 19:5-6; 1 Kings 8:41-43, 56-61; 10:1-9; Isa. 61:6-9), they became fixated on the coming judgment day of God when all other nations would be wiped out and they alone would rest in God's light (cf. Amos 5:18-20; 6:1).

### PURPOSE: WHY WAS IT WRITTEN?

**God's grace goes beyond all borders to call people everywhere to repentance and salvation in Him alone.**

God's lesson through the life of Jonah was given to show Israel that He is a God of immense grace and compassion who offers forgiveness and salvation to people from every nation – even the most wicked and cruel. Therefore, all God's people are to act with God's concern for all nations and celebrate His saving work.



## CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### Nineveh: "The Great City"

So just how nasty and evil were these Assyrians who lived in Nineveh? Why would Jonah be so mad about the possibility that God would relent His impending judgment on these people?

The Assyrians hold a reputation for being some of the most cruel, vindictive, and gruesome warriors in the history of mankind. They would often drag their captives out of conquered lands with what resembled large fishhooks – pierced through the prisoners' cheeks.

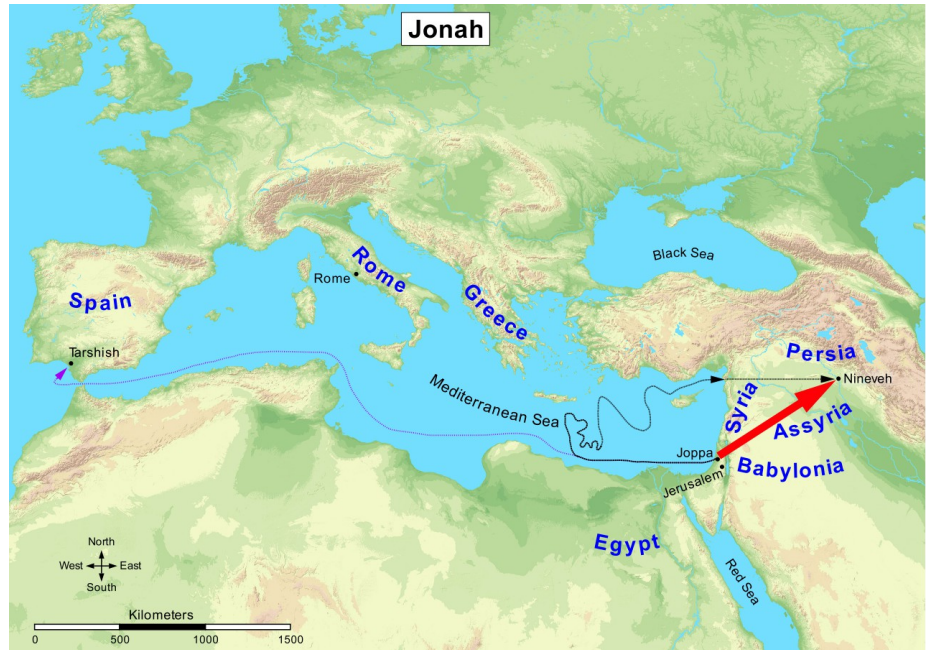
Here's a translation of an ancient Assyrian chronicle:

"I slew one of every two. I built a wall before the great gates of the city; I flayed the chief men of the rebels, and I covered the wall with their skins. Some of them were enclosed alive within the bricks of the wall, some of them were crucified with stakes along the wall; I caused a great multitude of them to be flayed in my presence...." (D.C. Truman and J.H. Truman, *The Pageant of the Past*, 99.

"Ashurbanipal's wars were numerous and characterized by ruthlessness and cruelty. He boasted of his violence and shameful atrocities, which included among other things the tearing off of the limbs of victims, putting out their eyes, impaling them, boiling them in tar, skinning them alive..." (Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 228.)

### PROBING APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

- ✓ What category of people in our culture incite your emotions, perhaps similarly to how Jonah felt about the Ninevites? Muslim extremists? Hindu militants? Atheist leaders? Violent gang members? LGBTQ propagandists? Anti-Christian political activists?
- ✓ What immediately comes to mind when you see a person of Arab descent, who, perhaps, may be Islamic?
- ✓ What is your general attitude toward people who differ from your strongly held political views?
- ✓ How should we treat people who are living outside of a relationship with Christ...and clearly act like it?



MAP OF JONAH'S TRAVELS AS HE RUNS FROM GOD, RUNS TO GOD, AND RUNS FOR GOD...

### NOTES FOR TODAY

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### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

- I. **God's Pursuing Grace (1:1-17)**
  - A. God Calls and Jonah Runs (v. 1-3)
  - B. God's Great Storm (v. 4-6)
  - C. Jonah Overboard! (v. 7-16)
  - D. God's Great Fish (v. 17)
- II. **God's Rescuing Grace (2:1-10)**
  - A. Jonah's Repentant Prayer (v. 1-9)
  - B. Jonah Back on Dry Land (v. 10)
- III. **God's Forgiving Grace (3:1-10)**
  - A. God Calls and Jonah Proclaims (v. 1-4)
  - B. Nineveh's Great Repentance (v. 5-9)
  - C. God's Relents His Judgment (v. 10)
- IV. **God's Borderless Grace (4:1-11)**
  - A. Jonah's Anger (v. 1-4)
  - B. Jonah's Pity Party (v. 5-8)
  - C. God's Great Question for Jonah (Central Lesson) (v. 9-11)

### FOR FURTHER STUDY...

**Christ's View of Jonah:** Bearing on the historicity of the book of Jonah is Jesus Christ's unmistakable reference to Jonah as a real person of history and His belief in the veracity of Jonah's story, including the three days he spent in the belly of the great fish. (see Matthew 12:40-41; Luke 11:29-32)

**A Whale of a Tale?** Notwithstanding God's miraculous power to do as He so chooses in the natural world, historical and scientific evidence also indicates the possibility of a person staying alive inside a sperm whale or whale shark.

(See A.J. Wilson, "Sign of the Prophet Jonah and Its Modern Confirmations," *Princeton Theological Review* 25 (October 1927): 630-42; George F. Howe, "Jonah and the Great Fish," *Biblical Research Monthly* (January 1973): 6-8; Eugenie Clark, "Whale Sharks," *National Geographic* 182:6 (December 1992): 120-139.

#### \*Selected Bibliography

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