

Who Was Jonah?

Jonah 1:1-3

1 Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.” 3 But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah the son of Amittai

We know a little about Jonah even before this book. Jonah was mentioned once before in Scripture in 2 Kings 14:25-27:

“He (Jeroboam2) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gathhepher.

The Jews of Jesus day were following the **Torah**, the five books of the law, but along with that there were accompanying expansion and explanation of the laws in the **Talmud**. Beyond the Talmud which contained theological teaching came the **Mishnah**, which contained the oral traditions of rabbis through the ages, and finally came the **Midrash**, which were sermons and commentaries of scores of rabbinical scholars.

Even though he is mentioned very clearly here in **2 Kings 14** many Rabbis taught that he is mentioned in two other places in the Old Testament. They believed and taught...

1) He was the son of the Shunammite widow that Elisha raised to life in **2 Kings 4:8-37**.

2) He was a disciple of Elisha among the school of the prophets, and he was the one Elisha sent to anoint Jehu to be the king in **2 Kings 9:1-10**.

3) Some rabbis taught that Jonah had given another prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem that did not come true, because they repented, and so he was considered by many to be a false prophet. *“One of the greatest prophets during the time of Jeroboam II was Jonah the son of Amittai, who was a disciple of Elisha. He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, which did not occur because the people repented, and Jonah thereafter was known as “the false prophet.” This experience offended his pride and caused him to flee the Nineveh mission.”* (www.Chabad.org)

This explains why in **John 7:52** the Jews of Jesus’ day claimed no prophet came out of Galilee. Jonah was from Galilee, north of Nazareth, from Gath-Hepher, which was in Zebulun. They could say that because of the teaching of the rabbis that Jonah was not a real prophet because 1) his prophesy concerning Jerusalem did not come true, 2) he went to the Gentiles as a prophet, not to the people of Israel. Although the Book of Jonah was in the Hebrew canon of Scripture they by their traditions rejected Jonah.

The rabbis also taught that Jonah’s voice was so loud he could be heard throughout the city. Rabbinic traditions relate that Jonah returned to Israel after his mission to Nineveh and lived there to a ripe old age of 120 with his wife who was well known and highly regarded as a woman of God. They also taught that the sailors (70 representing all the then-known nations) all made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, made vows, offered sacrifices, and were circumcised.

Where Was Nineveh?

Almost every reference to Nineveh in this book refers to it “a great city.” In fact it was the largest city in the world at that time. There were approximately 120,000 innocent children under the age of accountability. (Jonah 4:11) By the calculation of many scholars the city would be around 600,000 people or more. It was a huge city state which included the surrounding cities with a 60 mile circumference. It measured 18 miles by 14 miles. The mounds around Mosul are being explored and they are finding astounding buildings and walls. The walls around the city proper were 100 feet high and wide enough for three chariots to ride side by side. There were a series of aqueducts bringing water into various parts of the city as well as the Tigris river that flowed through it. The king’s palace that rivaled anything yet discovered. They have found 30,000 cuneiform tablets that tell the ancient story of the city and its history. Its wealth surpassed that of Babylon. Some believe the hanging gardens of Babylon were in fact here in Nineveh, some 60 miles from Babylon. The Jews hated the Assyrians who ruled from Nineveh. They were always a threat to northern Israel and were well known for their atrocities of war.

“their wickedness is come up before me.”

We do not know of the sins of the people of Nineveh other than their violence was world-renowned. But there are only three times when God used this phrase against a group of people: **1)** The people of Noah’s day, **2)** at the Tower of Babel and **3)** Sodom and Gomorrah. We know the judgment of God against all three of those wicked populations. Nineveh was just as bad. Is it any wonder that Jonah did not want to parade through the streets of Nineveh preaching judgment? Would you want to go to New York City and parade through the streets with placards declaring God’s wrath against homosexuality and abortion? (see Word Study “Assyrians”)

Where Was Joppa and Tarshish?

“Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa;”

Joppa was a sea coast town along the Israeli edge of the Mediterranean Sea. It would have been the closest and most logical escape route for anyone wanting to flee from Israel. If you remember your New Testament, Peter had a friend who loaned him his seaside cottage for a prayer retreat. The port of Joppa was the largest seaport and served as a point of departure for distant lands.

The city of Tarshish has never been found. Recent underwater researchers have found a large city under the waters off the Rock of Gibraltar, which is where it is believed that Tarshish was located. It was known as Tartessos by the end of the 4th Century BC. Tarshish has been referred to in ancient literature as a city where tin, iron, gold, silver, ivory and peacocks were traded and delivered around the world. Solomon sent ships to Tarshish for gold and silver. (1 Kings 10:22 and 2 Chronicles 9:21) *“The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons.”* The Phoenicians were great seafaring adventurers and traders all along the Atlantic Sea coast from Britain to South Africa. (see Word Study: Tarshish)

Tarshish was as far away from Israel as a man could travel in those days. Jonah was trying to get as far away from God and his temple as humanly possible.