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Jonah Among the Prophetic Books



It is not immediately apparent that the story of **Jonah** should be grouped with the prophetic books of the TaNaKh. Since the **Jonah** material is a story about a prophet rather than a collection of prophetic sayings, it could have fit well in the books of **Kings**, where there are a number of stories about prophets. In fact, many phrases from **Jonah** find their closest biblical parallels in the stories about Elijah **(First Kings 17)** and Elisha **(Second Kings 9).** An account involving a sperm whale (and a small worm) would not have been out of place there, since these narratives in **Kings** already tell of encounters between prophets and lions **(First Kings 13:20-32** and **20:35-36)**, bears **(Second Kings 2:23-25),** ravens **(First Kings 17:4-6),** and a donkey **(First Kings 13:20-32).** The **Jonah** material could have been placed after the reference to **Jonah son of Amittai** in **Second Kings 14:25.** Or one could imagine the book of **Jonah** as part of the third section of the Hebrew canon, the Writings. As a short narrative about a memorable figure from Israel's history, **Jonah** would also have fit well here, next to the books of **Ruth** and **Esther**.[8]

The biblical canon, however, has firmly positioned **Jonah** among the Book of the Twelve, and not the histories. This collection has existed alongside the books of **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah**, and **Ezekiel** at least since the time of the writing of Sirach in the second century BC. "May the bones of the Twelve Prophets send forth new life from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope" (Sirach 49:10). A partially complete Hebrew text of **Yonah** was discovered at Wadi Murabba'at in the Dead Sea area in March of 1955 and was published in 1961 as *Les grottes de Murabba'at*, volume 2 of Discoveries in the Judean Desert. In both the Masoretic text and the Hebrew scroll of the twelve

prophets found at Wadi Murabba'at, **Jonah** is the fifth of the prophets in the collection: Hosea. Joel, Amos, Obadiah, **Jonah**, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. In the Greek codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus, **Yonah** is in sixth place. These Greek manuscripts begin the collection of the Twelve Prophets with Hosea, Amos, and Micah, linking these figures identified with the eighth century in their superscriptions, and then follow with Joel, Obadiah and **Jonah**; the last six books follow the Hebrew order. **Jonah's** location in the context of the prophetic books in general and the book of the Twelve "minor prophets" in particular suggests **four** directions for the interpretation of the book.[9]

First, Jonah is the only prophetic book that is primarily a story about a prophet. Prophetic books are normally made up of words from **God** to the people through the prophet, words from the prophet to **God** (prayer), and biographical or autobiographical material about the prophet. The book of **Jonah**, however, is not a book of prophecies such as you might find, for example, in Isaiah. There are no oracles, detailed judgments or hopes. Where there are the familiar impassioned pleas, in this book, they are most significantly said by **God** and directed to **Yonah**. By contrast, **Jonah's** prophecy of eight words is short indeed: **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (3:4).** But we should also note that although the book of **Jonah** is not really a book of prophecies, or a history book, it is most definitely a history of what it is like to be a prophet. Here, the relationship of **God** to the prophet and the prophet to **God** are intimately if ironically portrayed.[10]

Second, the linking of Jonah with Hosea, Amos and Micah in the Minor Prophets indicates that Jonah ought to be understood as a story about a person from the eighth century BC. Jonah's link with that time is also evident from his identification as **the son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1** and **Second Kings 14:23-27).** The context within the canon and the reference to **Second Kings** both suggest that we need to understand the book in the context of the ancient Near Eastern world of the eighth century BC when **Assyria** was the rising world power, although not at her zenith, and **Nineveh** was a great city.

Third, in reading Jonah in the context of the prophetic books, we discover that Jonah is the only one of these prophets sent to proclaim a message to a foreign land. Other prophets delivered oracles concerning foreign nations **(Amos 1-2; Obadiah; Nahum; Isaiah 13-23; Jeremiah 46-50; Ezekiel 25-32)**, but only **Jonah** is portrayed as walking down the streets of one of the major cities of the ancient world to deliver **his** message.

Finally, as we consider Jonah in the context of the biblical prophets we also discover that only Jonah needs to have his assignment from the LORD given to him a second time. The doubling of **ADONAI's** directive suggests to the interpreter that this commission to carry out a mission in **Nineveh** was important, very important indeed.[11]