

The Book of Jonah: Scratching beneath the surface of the text:
How (and why) is Jonah different from the other Prophets?
Temple Beth Sholom Yom Kippur Breakout Session.
Led by Mike Rubin on October 12, 2016

- 1) How is Jonah different from other Prophets we have encountered in our scriptures?
 - a) Jonah is a narrative, whereas other prophets have at best short narrative sections.
 - b) Jonah's prophecy is incredibly short, the focus is on his story, not his prophecy.
 - c) Jonah's success or lack of success in his prophecy may be different from other prophets.
 - d) Jonah does his prophecy to another people, not the Hebrews/Jews/Israelis.
- 2) Who was Jonah? What was Nineveh?
 - a) Jonah Reference in II Kings 14:23-25: "In the fifteenth year of King Amaziah son of Joash of Judah, King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel became king in Samaria—for forty-one years. ... It was he who restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the promise that the LORD, the God of Israel, had made through His servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amittai from Gath-hepher."
- 3) When was Jonah written?
 - a) Historians tell us Jonah was most likely during the period of post-exilic Persian rule.
 - b) What else was happening at the time Jonah was written?
 - i) Ezra and Nehemiah. What were their themes?
 - ii) Xenophobia
 - iii) The Book of Ruth. What was its theme?
- 4) Was Jonah a true prophet?
 - a) The text never calls Jonah a prophet.
 - b) Jonah is the only prophet mentioned in the Koran.
- 5) How do we know that a person is a true prophet?
 - a) Deuteronomy 18:21-22: "Now if you say to yourself, "How will we know the word that the Lord did not speak? If the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, and the thing does not occur and does not come about, that is the thing the Lord did not speak. The prophet has spoken it wantonly; you shall not be afraid of him."
 - b) What were the words that Jonah used in his "prophecy"?
 - i) "Forty more days and Nineveh shall be overturned."
 - ii) Did this come true?
 - c) Does the context of the times help us understand what the author(s) message was?
 - d) What else was written during this time?
- 6) What is/are the message(s) of Jonah?
- 7) What did the people of Nineveh do in response to Jonah's preaching?
 - a) Ch3, line 10: "God saw what they did – how they were turning back from their evil ways;"
- 8) If Jonah had not caused the people of Nineveh to repent, what would have happened?
 - a) If Jonah had not caused the people of Nineveh to repent, how would the history of Israel been affected?
- 9) What are your views about the sailors on the boat that Jonah attempted to escape on? What are your views of Jonah?
- 10) The story of the gourd.

- a) What is it telling us?
- b) Did Jonah pity (have compassion for) the gourd?
- c) God says you pitied the gourd, ...should I then not have compassion for the great city of Nineveh [Chapter 4, lines 10-11.] Is Jonah's thoughts about the gourd really a meaningful comparison to God's thoughts about Nineveh?

Jonah Reference in II Kings 14:25

In the fifteenth year of King Amaziah son of Joash of Judah, King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel became king in Samaria—for forty-one years.

24 כד

He did what was displeasing to the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had caused Israel to commit.

II Kings
Chapter 14:25

It was he who restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the promise that the LORD, the God of Israel, had made through His servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amittai from Gath-hepher.

26 כו

For the LORD saw the very bitter plight of Israel, with neither bond nor free left, and with none to help Israel.

27 כז

And the LORD resolved not to blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; and he delivered them through Jeroboam son of Joash.

28 כח

The other events of Jeroboam's reign, and all his actions and exploits, how he fought and recovered Damascus and Hamath for Judah in Israel, are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Israel.

29 כט

Jeroboam slept with his fathers, the kings of Israel, and his son Zechariah succeeded him as king.

CHRONOLOGICAL CHART OF JEWISH HISTORY

EGYPT	EREZ ISRAEL		MESOPATAMIA	CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS
c. 1991 B.C.E. xii Dynasty				
c. 1786 B.C.E. c. 1720/10 B.C.E. Hyksos			c. 1728-1686 Hammurapi	
c. 1570 xviii Dynasty	The Patriarchs Hebrews in Egypt			
c. 1550 B.C.E. c. 1400-c. 1350 Tell el-Amarna Period c. 1370-c. 53 Akhenaton c. 1340-c. 10 Haremhab				
c. 1310 xix Dynasty				
c. 1200	c. 1280 Exodus c. 1250 Conquest of Canaan under Joshua c. 1200 Philistines settle in Erez Israel			
	The Judges c. 1125 Deborah c. 1100 Gideon c. 1050 Fall of Shiloh Samuel			
	c. 1020-1004 Saul 1004-965 David 965-928 Solomon		ARAM DAMASCUS Rezan	
c. 935-c. 914 Shishak 918/17 Shishak invades Erez Israel xxii Dynasty	Judah	Israel		
	928-911 Rehoboam 911-908 Abijah 908-867 Asa	907-907 Jeroboam I 906-906 Nadab 883-883 Baasha 882-882 Elah 882 Zimri 882-71 Omri	Ben-Hadad I	
	867-46 Jehoshaphat	871-852 Ahab 852-51 Ahaziah 842-14 Jehu	853 Battle of Karkar Ben-Hadad II	Elijah
	846-43 Jehoram 843-42 Ahaziah 842-36 Athaliah 836-798 Jehoash 798-69 Amaziah 769-33 Uzziah 758-43 Jotham (regent)	814-800 Jehoahaz 800-784 Jehoash 784-48 Jeroboam II 748 Zechariah 748 Shallum 747-37 Menahem 737-35 Pekahiah 735-33 Pekah	Hazael Ben-Hadad III	
	743-33 Ahaz 758-43 (regent)	733-27 Ahaz 727-698 Hezekiah	Rezin	Amos Hosea c. 740-c. 700 Prophecies of Isaiah
			MESOPATAMIA	
		722 Samaria captured by Shalmaneser V 720 Sargon makes Samaria an Assyrian province Mass deportation of Israelites		
663 Sack of Thebes	701 Expedition of Sennacherib against Hezekiah 698-42 Manasseh 641-40 Amon 639-09 Josiah 609 Battle of Megiddo 609 Jehoathaz		612 Fall of Nineveh	627-c. 585 Prophecies of Jeremiah

EGYPT	EREZ ISRAEL	BABYLONIA	CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS
	608-598 Jehoiakim 597 Jehoiachin 597 Expedition of Nebuchadnezzar against Judah; Jehoiachin deported to Babylonia 595-86 Zedekiah 586 Destruction of Jerusalem; mass deportation to Babylonia 585 ? Murder of Gedaliah	605 Battle of Carchemish Exile of Judeans in Babylonia	593-571 Prophecies of Ezekiel
525 Egypt conquered by Cambyses	538 First return under Sheshbazzar c. 522 Zerubbabel governor 520-15 Temple rebuilt	PERSIA 539 Cyrus takes Babylonia 538 Cyrus' edict	6th cent. Canonization of the Pentateuch (in Babylonian Exile)
460-54 Rebellion of Inaros	458? Second return under Ezra 445 Walls of Jerusalem reconstructed under Nehemiah; Ezra reads the Torah 428 ? Second return under Ezra	465-24 Artaxerxes I 423-04 Darius II	
411 Destruction of the temple of the Jewish colony at Elephantine	c. 408 Bagohi governor	404-358 Artaxerxes II	
404 Egypt regains freedom	398? Second return under Ezra		
343 Egypt reconquered by Persia	348 Artaxerxes III deports a number of Jews to Hyrcania	333 Battle of Issus	4th cent. Canonization of the Prophets Section of the Bible
332 Alexander the Great conquers Egypt	332 Alexander the Great conquers Erez Israel	323 d. of Alexander the Great	
323-285 Ptolemy I	301 Ptolemy I conquers Erez Israel	SYRIA 312-280 Seleucus I 223-187 Antiochus III	Mid-3rd cent. Pentateuch translated into Greek in Egypt (Septuagint)
385-46 Ptolemy II Philadelphus			
246-21 Ptolemy III Euergetes	219-17 Antiochus III conquers most of Erez Israel 217 Ptolemy IV defeats Antiochus III in the battle of Rafah and recovers Erez Israel		
221-03 Ptolemy IV Philopator			
203-181 Ptolemy V Epiphanes	198 Battle of Panias (Banias); Erez Israel passes to the Seleucids	187-75 Seleucus IV 175-64 Antiochus IV Epiphanes	
181-46 Ptolemy VI Philometor	175 Onias III deposed by Antiochus IV 175-71 Jason High priest c. 172 Jerusalem becomes a polis (Antiochia) 171-167 Menelaus high priest		c. 170 Book of Ben Sira written
168 Antiochus I invades Egypt	169 Antiochus IV plunders the Temple treasures 168 Antiochus IV storms Jerusalem; gentiles settled on the Acra 167 Antiochus IV outlaws the practice of Judaism; profanation of the Temple; the rebellion of the Hasmoneans begins 166-60 Judah Maccabee, leader of the rebellion, victorious over several Syrian armies 164 Judah Maccabee captures Jerusalem and rededicates the Temple 162-59 Alcimus high priest	164-63 Antiochus V 162-50 Demetrius I	

5

E Z R A

10 While Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and protesting himself before the House of God, a very great crowd of Israelites gathered about him, men, women, and children; the people were weeping bitterly. ²Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel of the family of Elam spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God by bringing into our homes foreign women from the peoples of the land; ^abut there is still hope for Israel despite this."³ Now then, let us make a covenant with our God to expel all these women and those who have been born to them, in accordance with the bidding of the LORD and of all who are concerned over the commandment of our God, and let the Teaching be obeyed. ⁴Take action, for the responsibility is yours and we are with you. Act with resolve!"

⁵So, Ezra at once put the officers of the priests and the Levites and all Israel under oath to act accordingly, and they took the oath. ⁶Then Ezra rose from his place in front of the House of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib; there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he was in mourning over the trespass of those who had returned from exile. ⁷Then a proclamation was issued in Judah and Jerusalem that all who had returned from the exile should assemble in Jerusalem, ⁸and that anyone who did not come in three days would, by decision of the officers and elders, have his property confiscated and himself excluded from the congregation of the returning exiles.

⁹All the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled in Jerusalem in three days; it was the ninth month, the twentieth of the month. All the people sat in the square of the House of God, trembling on account of the event and because of the rains. ¹⁰Then Ezra the priest got up and said to them, "You have trespassed by bringing home foreign women, thus aggravating the guilt of Israel. ¹¹So now, make confession to the LORD, God of your fathers, and do His will, and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women."

¹²The entire congregation responded in a loud voice, "We must surely do just as you say. ¹³However, many people are involved, and it is the rainy season; it is not possible to remain out in the open, nor is this the work of a day or two, because we have transgressed extensively in this matter. ¹⁴Let our officers remain on behalf of the entire congregation, and all our townspeople who have brought home foreign women shall appear before them at scheduled times, together with the elders and judges

^a Or "is there . . . ?"

of each town, in order to avert the burning anger of our God from us on this account." ¹⁵Only Jonathan son of Asabel and Jathzeiah son of Tikvah remained for this purpose, assisted by Meshullam and Shabbethai, the Levites. ¹⁶The returning exiles did so. Ezra the priest and the men who were the chiefs of the ancestral clans—all listed by name—sequestered themselves on the first day of the tenth month to study the matter. ¹⁷By the first day of the first month they were done with all the men who had brought home foreign women. ¹⁸Among the priestly families who were found to have brought foreign women were Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. ¹⁹They gave their words^b to expel their wives and, acknowledging their guilt, offered a ram from the flock to expiate it. ²⁰Of the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah; ²¹of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uzziab; ²²of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nehanel, Jozabad, and Elasah; ²³of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah who is Kelita, Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. ²⁴Of the singers: Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri. ²⁵Of the Israelites: of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, Iziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah, and Benajah; ²⁶of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah; ²⁷of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza; ²⁸of the sons of Behai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai; ²⁹of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Shear, and Ramoth; ³⁰of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelai, Benajah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh; ³¹of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Issujah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, and Shineon; ³²also Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah; ³³of the sons of Hashum: Martenai, Matratrah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei; ³⁴of the sons of Bani: Madai, Amram, and Uel; ³⁵also Benajah, Bedelah, Cheluh, ³⁶Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, ³⁷Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasi, ³⁸Bani, Birnui, Shimei, ³⁹Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, ⁴⁰Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, ⁴¹Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, ⁴²Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph; ⁴³of the sons of Nebo: Jelei, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benajah.

⁴⁴All these had married foreign women, among whom were some women who had borne children.^c

^b Lit. "band."

^c Meaning of Heb. uncertain.

Jerusalem, ²¹but I warned them, saying, "What do you mean by spending the night alongside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands upon you!" From then on they did not come on the sabbath. ²²I gave orders to the Levites to purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to preserve the sanctity of the sabbath.

This too, O my God, remember to my credit, and spare me in accord with your abundant faithfulness.

²³Also at that time, I saw that Jews had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women; ²⁴a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean. ²⁵I censured them, cursed them, flogged them, tore out their hair, and adjured them by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters in marriage to their sons, or take any of their daughters for your sons or yourselves. ²⁶It was just in such things that King Solomon of Israel sinned! Among the many nations there was not a king like him, and so well loved was he by his God that God made him king of all Israel, yet foreign wives caused even him to sin. ²⁷How, then, can we acquiesce in your doing this great wrong, breaking faith with our God by marrying foreign women?" ²⁸One of the sons of Joiada son of the high priest Eliashib was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; I drove him away from me. ;

²⁹Remember to their discredit, O my God, how they polluted the priesthood, the covenant of the priests and Levites. ³⁰I purged them of every foreign element, and arranged for the priests and the Levites to work each at his task by shifts, ³¹and for the wood offering [to be brought] at fixed times and for the first fruits.

O my God, remember it to my credit!

7

And my prayer came before You,
 Into Your holy Temple.
 9 They who cling to empty folly
 Forsake their own welfare,^a
 10 But I, with loud thanksgiving,
 Will sacrifice to You;
 What I have vowed I will perform.
 Deliverance is the LORD's!

¹¹The LORD commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land.

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ²"Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you." ³Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with the LORD's command.

Nineveh was ^b"an enormously large city" a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

⁵The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. ⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! ⁸They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. ⁹Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish."

¹⁰God saw what they did, how they were turning back

a Meaning of Heb. uncertain

b-b Lit. "a large city of God."

9: The final line of the verse conveys more than one meaning. *Forsake their own welfare*, "forsake their (true) loyalty," "forsake their bounty" are all possible understandings. Further, since *empty folly* can be understood as a reference to idols, and since *cling to* connotes worshipping, then the final line may be understood also as "forsake their idols," as some medieval Jewish commentators interpreted it.

3:1-10: Jonah's second call and the repentance of the Ninevites.
 1-2: Jonah's call to prophesy from ch 1 is replayed, but this time Jonah accepts his commission.
 3: *An enormously large city*, another case of double meaning. The text also means "a large city that belongs to God" (cf. translators' note *b-b*). According to NJPS, and many scholars, the text states that the city was a three-day walk across, an impossibly large distance for an

ancient city. The text may be stating that the city was at a distance of three days' walk from Jonah's place. 4: What Jonah means and what he is saying are not exactly the same. Jonah means to say, "Forty days more, and Nineveh is undone" but the readers notice that he is actually saying, "Forty days more, and Nineveh is overturned." Jonah chooses language that is reminiscent of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. ch 19. But the careful readers of the book notice the irony of the situation: Jonah's words potentially carry two, opposite meanings: (a) "Nineveh is undone," and (b) "Nineveh turns over (i.e., reforms itself)." One feature of his proclamation is unambiguous: Jonah's proclamation is extremely short and includes no call to repentance, unlike many other prophetic proclamations: 5-9: Still it is the most effective, since the entire city immediately turns from its ways and repents. (Sackcloth, ashes, and fasting are typical signs of repentance.) Jonah does not wish to be a prophetic voice calling for repentance, and does not ask for the divine judgment to be turned into mercy (contrast Abraham in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, Gen. 18:16-32), but he is still the most successful prophet in the Bible who achieves both in an unparalleled, complete, and immediate way—even the animals repent! The message is that the success of the prophet is not dependent on his attributes or rhetorical power, but on the will of God. And yet, there is a second reading. Jonah's message "Nineveh is undone" was fulfilled in history, as the readers of the book know well. If so, Jonah's understanding of his prophecy was fulfilled too. The problem was then that Jonah erred by believing that his prophecy must be fulfilled in his own days. The latter may well be an important message for readers of prophetic books in the Persian period. Prophetic words, especially those concerning the ideal status of the restored Israel, will be fulfilled,

