

# JONAH: ONLY FOUR CHAPTERS AND EASY TO READ

## Prophets

In the Bible there are 4 “major prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and 12 “minor prophets” (pub quiz... name the 12 minor prophets and in the right order). “Minor” and “Major” depends as much on length as on spiritual importance, although Isaiah, which is the longest, is also generally reckoned the most important book of the prophets.

There are other prophets (“the former prophets”) who do not have books named after them but are still important eg Elijah and Elisha (see 1 and 2 Kings).

NB a prophet is not someone who tells the future (though some did); they are people who see God’s will and proclaim it, who see more in the world around them than other people. Do we recognise prophets today?

Jonah is a gift to Sunday School teachers and artists! The episode of Jonah and the fish (sometimes a whale) is widely known and loved – but it is only half the story.

Jonah was a real prophet (see 2 Kings 14.25) but the book called Jonah makes no attempt to be realistic. It was written later and is more like a humorous short story, but with a serious message.

## Inside the fish

God sent the fish to rescue Jonah, not to eat him. Even if Jonah realised this, the inside of a fish is not a comfortable place to be and Jonah cries out to God. Chapter 2 is his prayer, which is a great prayer for someone in deep distress but still confident of God’s grace. Also, it would fit in well as a Psalm – see Psalm 130 “De profundis”

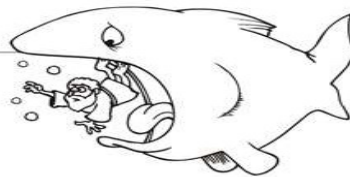
**“Out of the deep have I called unto thee , O Lord.”**

## Jonah struggles with God.

In chapter 1 God says to Jonah “Arise and go to Nineveh” but Jonah arises and goes in the opposite direction. When Nineveh repents, Jonah reproaches God for sparing them – Jonah would have preferred to see the city punished. God teaches him an object lesson. Jonah pities the vine which had sheltered him from the sun for just a day. Surely God should pity all the people in the great city of Nineveh (even though they were ignorant of God and had been enemies of Israel).

## Nineveh.

Capital of the Assyrian empire. Go to the British Museum and see their carvings. They show themselves a fierce and warlike nation. It was Assyria which utterly destroyed the kingdom of Israel and scattered the inhabitants. The Assyrians were not nice people. No wonder Jonah was scared – and puzzled. Why on earth would God want to send a message to such unspeakable thugs?



## Did Jonah succeed?

Yes and first of all with an unlikely bunch of converts. The rough and pagan sailors recognise the real God in the power of the storm, and in Jonah’s willingness to go overboard to save them and they worship Him in the calm after the storm. Later, Jonah succeeds in his task of persuading the people of Nineveh to repent – extravagantly, in sackcloth and ashes, from the King down to domestic animals.



## The last words

“..and much cattle”. God reminds Jonah that He loves the ignorant pagans of Nineveh and even their animals. God uses his creation, the fish, the plant and the worm, just like Balaam’s ass (Numbers 22) to work his will.

## The last word

Jonah is the only “book” prophet whom Jesus refers to by name (several times – see Matthew 12 .39). Jesus used Jonah to teach his hearers that just as Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish, so he would be three days in the earth; and that the people of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah will rise at the judgment to condemn those who did not listen to the preaching of one greater than Jonah.