
JONAH

A Bible Study Workbook by Sarah de Jong

Introduction:

The story of “Jonah and the whale” is one of the more familiar stories of the Old Testament. It’s a brief book with high stakes: A guy directly defies God, runs in the opposite direction from where God tells him to go, ends up getting swallowed by a fish for three days, and then comes back and follows God’s command to preach to a wicked city that ends up saved. That pretty much sums it up.

Scripture has been compared to waters “in which an elephant can swim and a lamb can walk,” however, and in this study our goal is to wade in deeper. In this study, we’ll start to appreciate how the author of Jonah makes rhetorical and linguistic choices that combine masterfully to tell what is ultimately a tale of our sovereign, compassionate creator and savior God.

Study Methods and Goals:

Each week we will look carefully at one chapter of Jonah in particular. Though the story of Jonah may be a familiar one to many, we will do our best to move through the text slowly, feeling verse by verse the narrative suspense that the narrator carefully creates. We will look at what the text says, what it means, and what it reveals to us about God and finally about ourselves.

Along the way, we will not only become intimately familiar with the plotline of Jonah; we will also grow accustomed to the narrative elements employed by our author. We will consider the author’s word choices, as well as the use of repetition, parallel structure, and other common elements of the Hebrew historical-narrative genre. After studying each chapter in depth, in the final week we will consider the book as a whole, seeing how all of these narrative elements come together to create a structurally perfect book—the inspired Word of God, providentially preserved for us to continue learning and growing from today.

Translation Note and Acknowledgement:

While you are certainly welcome to use a translation of your choice to read throughout this study, note that this homework has been written based on Sarah's translation of the original Hebrew text (provided on the first page of each week's homework). The translation is meant to help readers unfamiliar with the Hebrew language to still be able to glean key linguistic insights that might otherwise be missed by reading from the average English translation.

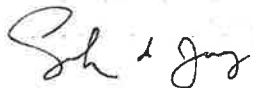
At times, we will also refer to the English Standard Version (ESV) and New International Version (NIV), on the occasions that varied translations can help English readers to appreciate multi-faceted Hebrew word choices. When completing the homework and engaging in group discussion, I encourage you to read and mark up the translation provided to you in the workbook as you consider the author's careful linguistic choices.

This translation was produced for a Hebrew Exegesis course, under the direction of Dr. Mark David Futato, Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Without his mentorship, this study would not exist.

Final Note:

As we delve into these weekly close readings of the Text, I pray that you will grow in your ability to approach Scripture in its appropriate context—written in a particular genre and in a particular cultural moment to make a particular point, and yet still very much alive, active and fruitful for modern Christian readers. Above all, I pray that you be blessed and the LORD be glorified through this study.

In Christ,



Sarah de Jong

Week 1: Introduction to Jonah

1. Who wrote the book of Jonah?
2. When was the book of Jonah written? What did Israel's world look like then?
3. Who was the original audience of the book of Jonah?
4. What do we know about Nineveh as a place and a people?
5. How does the book of Jonah fit into the Old Testament? What about the Bible as a whole?
6. What is the genre of the book of Jonah? What key themes or literary elements of Jonah should we keep in mind as we read?

Week 2: Jonah Goes Down

Jonah 1:1-16: Translation

¹And the word of the LORD [came] to Jonah, son of Amittai [“my faithfulness”], to say:

²“Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish, from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Jaffa, and he found a ship going to Tarshish. And he paid the fare, and he went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, from the presence of the LORD.

⁴But the LORD hurled down a great wind to the sea, and there was a great storm on the sea, and the ship was thinking of being broken up. ⁵And they feared, the mariners, and they cried out, each man to his gods. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship to the sea, in order to lighten it for them. But Jonah went down into the cargo hold of the ship and lay down and was fast asleep. ⁶And the commander of the sailors approached him, and he said to him, “Why are you sleeping? Arise! Cry out to your God. Perhaps the god(s) will take notice of us, that we won’t perish.”

⁷And they said, each man to his friend, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come to us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸And they said to him, “Tell us, please, on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And from where do you come? What [is] your land? And from where are your people?” ⁹And he said to them, “A Hebrew, I am; and the LORD, the God of the heavens, I fear—the one who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰And they were afraid, the men—a great fear, and they said to him, “What is this you’ve done?” For they knew, the men, that from the face of the LORD he was fleeing, for he had told [it] to them.

¹¹And they said to him, “What [shall] we do to you, to silence the sea for us?” for the sea was growing stormier and stormier. ¹²And he said to them, “Pick me up, and throw me to the sea; and the sea will grow quiet from upon you, for I know it is on my account that this great storm is upon you.” ¹³But they rowed, the men, to turn back to the mainland; but they were not capable, for the sea was growing stormier and stormier.

¹⁴And they cried out to the LORD, and they said, “O LORD, do not let us perish on account of the life of this man, and don’t lay upon us blood of innocence; for you, LORD, do as you please.” ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea, and the sea stood still from its [or “His”] raging. ¹⁶And the men feared the LORD—a great fear. And they sacrificed a sacrifice to the LORD, and they vowed vows.

1. Summarize **Jonah 1:1-16** in one sentence.

2. **Keyword Tracking:** One of the keywords of the book of Jonah is גדול (*gadol*, "great"). The author will frequently use this word to reverse our expectations and communicate key theological truths. List the things described as "great" in **Jonah 1:1-16**. (If the same thing is described as "great" more than once, note that as well.)

Note: Names in Hebrew Narratives

Names frequently have theological significance in the context of Hebrew stories.

Take for example the opening chapters of Genesis. Adam means "humanity," and Adam is the representative of the human race. Eve means "living," and she becomes the "mother of all the living." Cain means "acquired," and Eve only acquired Cain with the help of the Lord. Abel means "vanity," and his life ended up being in vain, as he was killed in the prime of his life. Seth means "replacement," and Eve celebrated him at his birth as a replacement for the son she had lost.

Another example is found in the name Elijah. (The Elijah story has many literary features in common with the Jonah story.) Elijah means "my God is Yah(weh)" and tells the whole story of his ministry, which strove to answer the question, "Who is God, Baal or Yahweh?"

A third example is found in the book of Ruth. Elimelech means "my God is king," yet Elimelech did not trust his God to provide in a time of famine but left the presence of his God to go to Moab, where, by the way, he died. His life contradicted his name. Naomi means "pleasant," but she requested that her name be changed to Mara, which means "bitter," because the Lord had dealt bitterly with her. Ruth means "friendship," and she is the quintessential example of true friendship. Boaz means "strength is in him," and he is the quintessential example of strong moral character. The other kinsman redeemer, who refused to take care of his responsibilities, had no name in the story, because he had no character. The son born to Naomi was named Obed, which means "servant," because he would serve Naomi in her old age.¹

¹ Futato, Mark D. *Jonah Commentary*, 5.

3. Jonah's full name means, "Dove son of my faithfulness." To see how doves were symbolically thought of to an ancient Israelite, see Hosea 7:11:

"Ephraim is like a dove,
_____ and _____."

Knowing that, what theological message might we understand through Jonah's name?

4. The phrase "the word of the LORD came to" signals to us that Jonah was a prophet, a fact confirmed in 2 Kings 14:25. Though Jonah was a prophet, the author never refers to him directly as such in this book. Why do you think that might be?

5. According to **2 Kings 14:25**, Jonah came from a place called Gath-hepher—a town in Galilee, just five kilometers north of Nazareth. Look at the map below. What appears to be Jonah's strategy as he chooses a destination?



6. Circle each time in **Jonah 1** you see the phrase, "But the LORD" or "But Jonah." What tension is the author creating by using these phrases?

7. **Keyword tracking:** The title of this week's lesson is, "Jonah goes down." In the book, Jonah will "go down" (from the root ירד, *yarad*) four times. Note Jonah's downward trajectory:

- He went down to _____. (1:3)
- He went down into _____. (1:3)
- He went down into _____. (1:5)

What point do you think is being established here? How does it connect to the tension mentioned in Questions 5 and 6?

8. Meanwhile, several times in this chapter, the pagan sailors' actions are described using language similar to that used to describe the LORD's actions.

The LORD	The Pagan Sailor(s)
Jonah 1:1: The LORD says to Jonah, "_____! Go to Nineveh, that great city, and _____ against it."	Jonah 1:6: The captain says to Jonah, "_____! _____ to your god!"
Jonah 1:4: "But the LORD _____ a great wind upon the sea."	Jonah 1:5: "And they _____ the cargo that was in the ship to the sea." Jonah 1: "So they picked Jonah up and _____ him into the sea."

What irony does the author create by drawing these parallels between pagan sailors and the LORD? How does Jonah fit into this picture?

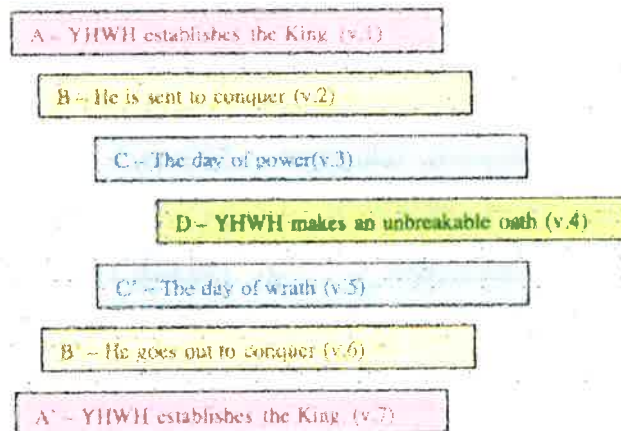
Note: Chiasmic Structures in Hebrew Texts

In modern Western stories, we typically expect the punchline to come at the very end. Fables and fairy tales are easy, consistent examples of this. Think of one of Aesop's famous fables, "The Hare and the Tortoise." We are introduced to the titular characters and the main conflict at the start; we get the dramatic story of their race next; and at the end, we get the main point: "The race is not always to the swift," or as we've come to know the expression, "Slow and steady wins the race."

In school, too, Western students are taught to spend a lot of time carefully crafting introductions and conclusions, and we instinctively look to the beginnings and ends of both essays and stories to find an author's main points.

The ancient Hebrew mindset was quite different, and because of that, it can be quite difficult for an inexperienced reader to accurately identify the true focus of a text. Often, the author's main point (perhaps we might more fittingly say the author's "central point") comes not at the end but at the *center* of the text. A Hebrew author (as with authors across various ancient literary traditions) would craft a text symmetrically so that readers could readily identify the unique center point. If you were to create a visual outline of such a text, it would look like an X. Hence, the name *chiasm* [*Chi* is the Greek letter X, and *χίασμα* (*chiasma*) means "crossing"]. When a text employs chiasm, we say that it has a chiasmic structure.

Chiasmic structures are especially common in Hebrew poetry. Psalm 110 is a brief and clear example:



From this visual outline, we can see readily that God's infallibly faithful fulfillment of His promises is the central point of this psalm. While we might often expect this kind of creative expression in poetry, we can find it in Hebrew narratives, too. The author of Jonah uses them frequently, and even layers individual chiasms so that the whole book contains one grand chiasm (yet with an unexpected twist). By the end of the study, we'll see how all those layers fit together. For now, let's focus on the story's very first chiasm, found in Jonah 1.

9. Jonah 1:4-16 has a chiastic structure, which the author uses to focus our attention on one key matter. All of the blanks in the outline below can be filled in with the same word. What word?

(1:4-5) Storm starts...sailors _____
 (1:5-6) Sailors pray and throw
 (1:7) "on whose account" is it?
 (1:8) "What?" questioning Jonah
 (1:9) The LORD...I _____
 (1:10) Sailors _____ a great _____
 (1:10-11) "What?" questioning Jonah
 (1:12) It's "on my account"
 (1:14-15) Sailors pray and throw
 (1:15-16) Storm stops...sailors _____ a great _____—of the LORD

Look up the following verses and note what they say about this concept:

Psalm 111:10

Psalm 145:18-19

Matthew 10:28

What do these verses add to your understanding of what is happening in Jonah 1?

10. Around this central theme, the author draws several contrasts between Jonah and the pagan sailors. On Jonah's side of the column, answer each question with "Yes" or "No".

The Pagan Sailor(s)	Jonah
Jonah 1:5: They pray to their gods. Jonah 1:14: They pray to the LORD.	Does Jonah ever pray in this scene?
Jonah 1:6: The captain expresses concern about everyone perishing. Jonah 1:14: The sailors pray that they not perish if Jonah is an innocent man.	Does Jonah appear concerned whether people (i.e. those in Nineveh) perish?
Jonah 1:16: They sacrifice to the LORD and make vows, evidencing their newfound faith.	Does the author include any evidence of Jonah's faith?

11. **Key Theme Tracking:** Throughout the book, we will see Jonah prefiguring Christ (and not always in a good way). Read **Mark 4:35-41**. What parallels can you find between these verses and Jonah 1? How is Jonah painted like Christ? How is he different?

12. **Apply:** Jonah is a prophet commissioned by the LORD to take His Word to Nineveh, but he senselessly disobeys and runs away. He publically confesses his faith in the LORD, but he demonstrates no real evidence of that faith. Like Jonah, all of God's children are prone to disobey and run from the LORD.

Ⓐ **1 John 1:8-9** tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

With that in mind, take a moment to confess to the LORD at least one way in which you are currently disobeying or running from His Word as Jonah did, and pray that He forgive and cleanse you in Christ.

Ⓑ The sailors' response to the LORD was to offer a sacrifice and make vows. In **Romans 12:1-2**, the apostle Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

With that in mind, what can you do this week to present your body as a living sacrifice? Try to make one concrete goal, and pray today and throughout the week that the Holy Spirit work in you to enable you to fulfill that goal.

Week 3: From the Belly of Sheol

Jonah 1:17-2:10: Translation

¹⁷The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. ¹Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish ²and said,

I called out from my distress
to the LORD, and he answered me.
From the belly of Sheol I cried for help,
and you heard my voice.

³You cast me into the watery depths, into the heart of the seas,
and the current surrounds me.

All your breakers and your waves
crossed over me.

⁴And I, yes I, said, "I have been driven
far from your eyes.

Surely, I will continue to look
toward your holy temple.

⁵Water swirled around me up to my neck;
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.

⁶To the foundations of the mountain I went down,
the earth—its bars behind me forever.

But you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.

⁷When my life grew faint upon me,
I remembered the LORD.

My prayer came to you,
to your holy temple.

⁸Those who revere worthless idols
abandon their covenant commitment.

⁹But I, with a voice of thanksgiving,
I will sacrifice to you;
that which I have vowed I will repay.

Salvation belongs to the LORD!

¹⁰Then the LORD said to the fish.... And the fish vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

1. Summarize **Jonah 1:17-2:10** in one sentence.
2. Write a brief paraphrase of Jonah's prayer to the LORD.
3. Before going through the rest of this week's study: Do you think Jonah's prayer demonstrates a change of heart?

Yes

No

Briefly explain why you think so.

4. **Keyword Tracking:** List any things described as "great" in **Jonah 1:17-2:10**.
5. **Keyword Tracking:** This week's passage introduces us to another keyword in the book of Jonah: **יָמַן** (*yeman*, "he appointed"). This word occurs four times in Jonah, each time with the LORD as the subject. By the end, we will note a trend in when it is used. This time, what does the LORD appoint, and what is that thing appointed to do?
6. **Keyword Tracking:** In **Jonah 2:6** we get the fourth and final occurrence of Jonah going "down." Where does he go this time?

"To _____ I went down."

At this point, Jonah is figuratively as far away as he could possibly get from something very important. **Jonah 1:3** indicates what:

“from _____.”

7. In this chapter, with his own life in peril, Jonah finally calls out to the LORD. His prayer is provided to us in the form of a beautiful psalm of thanksgiving and deliverance.

In the belly of the fish, what is Jonah thankful for?

In the belly of the fish, what does Jonah need delivered from?

Note: “From the Belly of Sheol”

While in the belly of a fish, Jonah also says that he is in “the belly of Sheol.” Sheol (שְׁאוֹל) is a Hebrew word that often refers to the grave, as in these examples:

Job 17:16: “Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
Shall we descend together into the dust?”

Isaiah 38:10-11: “I said, ‘In the middle of my days
I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.’
I said, ‘I shall not see the LORD,
the LORD in the land of the living;
I shall look on man no more
among the inhabitants of the world.’”

Note that in each of these verses, Sheol is a place described as having “bars” or “gates.” (For more examples, see Isaiah 38:17, Psalm 9:13, Psalm 107:18, and Matthew 16:18). Scripture describes a clear boundary line between the lands of the living and the dead, and in Jonah 2:6, Jonah refers to this boundary when he says, “[T]he earth—its bars behind me forever.” Though the language of his prayer gives the impression that Jonah literally died and went to Sheol, the language is hyperbolic. The point is that Jonah was perilously close to death—as good as dead, barring sovereign intervention. This sort of language is typical of psalms of thanksgiving. (See Psalm 30, for example.)

8. **Key Theme Tracking:** Now, read the following Scripture verses, filling in the blanks and reflecting on how they add to your understanding of the foreshadowing significance of Jonah's time in Sheol in this week's text:

Psalm 16:10	"For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let _____ see corruption."
Acts 2:31	"[David] foresaw and spoke about the _____ of _____, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption."
Matthew 12:38-40	"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of _____. For just as _____ was three days and three nights in _____, so will _____ be three days and three nights in _____."

9. Even while in the realm of the dead, Jonah says, "Surely, I will continue to look toward your holy temple" (2:4). To better understand this line, read **1 Kings 8:37-44**, which is a portion of Solomon's prayer to the LORD at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. Using the passage, answer the following questions:

- Whose prayers does Solomon ask the LORD to respond to? How does this connect to our Jonah story so far?

- What reaction does Solomon hope people will have to the LORD? How does this connect to our Jonah story so far?

- How does Solomon ask the LORD to respond to Israel's prayers? In **Jonah 2:7**, Jonah affirms that his prayer "came to" the LORD. Let's see how the LORD responds to Jonah's prayer (and to prayers throughout the rest of the story).

Though Jonah serves profoundly as a type, foreshadowing a greater One to come, the end of this week's text makes clear for us that Jonah remains very much a shadowy figure. The author establishes this for us both through Jonah's concluding words in his prayer, and through the LORD's reaction to the prayer. Let's take a look at both.

10. Fill in the blanks of the final verse of Jonah's prayer (**Jonah 2:9**):

"Those who revere _____
abandon their covenant commitment.
_____, with a voice of thanksgiving,
I will _____ to you;
that which I have _____ I will repay."

Given the story's immediate context, to whom do you think Jonah is contrasting himself here?

Based on what you know from **Jonah 1**, and particularly from **Jonah 1:16**, what do you think about Jonah's words here?

11. After Jonah's prayer, the LORD does not directly reply to Jonah. To whom does the LORD speak instead?

Typically, the phrase "the LORD said" is naturally followed by *what* the LORD actually said. However, the author of Jonah skips that part (making what appears to be an incomplete sentence but is actually a literary technique called "gapping"). Instead, the author goes straight to the fish's immediate and obedient response. What point do you think that makes?

Note: The LORD's Response

Occasionally in Old Testament narratives, an author will directly indicate the LORD's evaluation of the narrative's events. For example, in 2 Samuel 11:27, the narrator writes, "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD." More often, however, narrators will indicate the LORD's evaluation more indirectly (or expect you to know the LORD's evaluation based on His revealed Law as it was given to Moses). Clearly, Jonah 2:10 is an example of the more indirect approach.

In addition to the "gapping" technique mentioned in the previous question, the author indirectly communicates the LORD's evaluation of Jonah's prayer through careful word choice.

The fish "vomits" (אָפַח, *yache*) Jonah up onto the dry land. This word sounds just as uncomfortable in Hebrew as it does in English, and it carries with it a very clear negative connotation. This verb in this particular conjugation (the *hiphil* conjugation, for the habitually curious) is consistently used in contexts where God's displeasure is in view, as in the following verses:

Leviticus 20:22: "You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out."

Job 20:15: "He swallows down riches and vomits them up again;
God casts them out of his belly."

The author could have used any of a number of Hebrew words to indicate how the fish got Jonah back onto dry land. The fact that he chose a repulsive term is significant.

12. In **1 Samuel 16:7**, the LORD tells Samuel, "[T]he LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

What is the outward appearance of Jonah's prayer in this week's text?

Based on what we've noted from Jonah 2:10, what does the LORD seem to see in Jonah's heart?

13. **Apply:** In Jonah 1, Jonah confessed to the sailors his faith in the LORD, but we saw no evidence of his faith. This week, in Jonah 2, Jonah finally prays to the LORD, and he even exclaims one of Scripture's most profound truths: "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" Yet, through the LORD's immediate response and through the next weeks' passages, we can see that while Jonah articulates confidence in the LORD, he still harbors great anger in his heart.

Think of a time that you've given someone advice that you yourself haven't always followed and write about it below:

Next, read **Romans 7:18-8:11**. Reflecting on Jonah's story and your own experiences, write the verse or phrase that stands out most to you below:

Finally, pray that God work in your heart to make you less and less like Jonah, more and more like Jesus Christ.

