

**T**he one thing that everybody knows about Jonah is the big fish incident. Everybody knows that he got swallowed by a fish (or maybe it was a whale because it's not like the ancient people of Israel knew the difference between fish and marine mammals) and that he survived and came out three days later. Many people think that that is the most unbelievable part of Jonah's story, but they're actually wrong. There is something that would have been far more fantastic for ancient Israelite readers than the whole whale of a tale. But in order to understand that, you need to understand more about Jonas' story.

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Jonah stood just outside the massive gates of the city of Nineveh. He looked through them and out over what seemed to be an endless sea of houses and industries, streets and a constantly churning crowd of people and beasts of burden. There were more people than Jonah had ever seen together in his life before.

His nose was assailed by terrible odours – the smell of tanneries and latrines, manure and burning pitch. But actually, the smell wasn't what bothered him the most. To tell the truth, it was a bit of a relief to smell something that wasn't the stench of rotting fish that he had been totally unable to get out of his clothes and skin and hair. No, he didn't hate them because of the smell, had hated them because they were Assyrians.

These were not people, they were bloodthirsty animals, all of them. Just looking at them he could tell that they all loved nothing more than raping, pillaging, looting and killing. And, what's more, he knew in his heart of hearts that they would never change. They had spread like a cancer over the face of the earth.

They had destroyed the Kingdom of Israel and taken its people away into exile. They had come this close to doing the same to the Kingdom of Judah. And those were just two examples. How many other tribes and nations and peoples had suffered under the genocidal Assyrians? And yet Yahweh, the God of Israel, had sent Jonah to preach to them. **“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city,”** God had said, **“and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”**

It was all the same to Jonah, of course, if his God wanted to destroy the Assyrians. He had been praying for that for years. But he worried about the reason why God would want him to warn them. He knew that Yahweh was **“a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”** The thought that his God might just squander that kind of grace and mercy on the bloody Assyrians – well that just made him feel sick! He wanted nothing to do with it.

So Jonah had gone in exactly the opposite direction – had found a ship heading for Tarshish and got onboard. As he watched the shores of the Promised Land recede, he had been so sure that he was free, that he had escaped the presence of Yahweh.



Jonah, the Passive-Aggressive Prophet

He had been so wrong. He knew that what had happened to him next would haunt his nightmares, likely for the rest of his life. When he closed his eyes sometimes, he could still feel the movement of the unceasing waves in the storm. And the beast that had swallowed him, the sight of it would remain etched in his memory for the rest of his life just like the stench of it, he suspected, would never leave him.

And so when, by some miracle that he would never understand, he actually survived and saw the light of day again, he knew that active disobedience was no longer an option. But surely there was another way for him to make his feelings clear. Oh, he would go and he would do as he had been ordered, but God hadn't said anything about *how* the job was to be done.

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So here Jonah stood outside the gates of the great city. The message he had been given was clear and succinct. And, as a prophet who had often preached the word of the Lord to the people of Israel, Jonah knew a thing or two about how to speak persuasively and convincingly. He determined to forget everything he had ever learned about that.

So Jonah took a deep breath, straightened his tunic and took one step into the steady stream of foot traffic passing through the gate and... immediately stumbled into a burly trader. "Hey, watch it buddy. I'm trying to walk here!"

Jonah sprang back embarrassed and confused. He just felt so disoriented in the midst of such a mob of people. He mumbled a few words of apology which, of course, only seem to offend the trader even more. "Speak up, you Israelite hick. Don't you know how to speak to your betters?"

Now that got Jonah mad and there really is nothing quite like an angry Jewish prophet. "Oh yeah? Oh yeah?" he yelled, "Well, you know what? Um, uh, **forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**"

The man just laughed, but Jonah, it seemed, had his message. He realized, with a prophet's certainty that those were the words that Yahweh had sent him to deliver. But, there was nothing in his contract that specified how those words were to be delivered. So this is what Jonah did. He continued to walk into the bustling city and, as the day went on, he had various encounters with the locals and just sort of slipped the line into his conversation.

He purchased a little bit of street food at a small counter – it was nasty Assyrian stuff to his Israelite palate, but he was hungry so it would have to do. He haggled for a price and was sure that the savvy vendor was cheating him, and so, as he walked away he just casually said it over his shoulder. "Oh, and by the way, **forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**"

By the end of the afternoon, he had given the message to about 20 people. He was feeling tired and parched and so he found a nice little ale house on a corner. He went inside to discover that it was filled with some locals who were taking a break. Jonah figured that he had been working pretty hard too, so he pulled up a stool and joined them.

About an hour and several rounds later, Jonah was feeling as if he was surrounded by a bunch of new friends. But, Jonah intended to be outside the city gates before nightfall so he swallowed the drags of his ale pot and sadly bid them

adieu. “Hey, friends, it was nice to meet you. It almost makes me sad to know that...” And with that the entire room joined in the chorus, **“forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** The laughter echoed as he went back out into the streets.

And that was it. The city of Nineveh was so huge that it took three days for anyone to cross it. Jonah had barely made it into the business district and had come nowhere near the royal palace and the heart of the government. He didn’t care. The orders that he had been given had been carried out to the letter and only to the letter. He had gone into the city and he had spoken the warning of the Lord. And now Jonah was determined to do one thing. He would wait and he would see it all happen. He would watch Nineveh burn and he would enjoy it.

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But, inside the gates of the great city, something was happening that Jonah would never believe. Somehow all of the people who had met with Jonah during that strange day remembered what he had said. And they told a few friends and their friends told a few friends. Before long the words that Jonah had said so casually, **“forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”** seemed to take on a truly menacing tone, as people overheard it being passed around on the streets and marketplaces. A few people started to become alarmed. Maybe there was something to this crazy warning?

Word began to spread to the upper classes and, before long, it was brought even into the palace of the great king. By this point it had also become mixed up with various rumors, that always seemed to swirl about the city, of the attack of this or that enemy. People began to openly speculate about whether the Assyrian Empire had finally gone too far in inflicting pain and suffering upon the nations of the world. And so, by the time it came into the king’s court, the king felt that he had no choice but to do something that would stave off the panic that was beginning to form. He could not afford another time of unrest.

So the king put on sackcloth and sat in ashes and made a show of repenting of many of the destructive policies of the empire. A fast was proclaimed throughout the city and people began to talk about a new beginning for the people of Assyria.

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Jonah was ignorant of all this however. His message proclaimed, his assignment accomplished, he could have left and returned to his own country. But Jonah was not about to do that. Did I mention how much he hated the Assyrians? He had vowed to himself that he was not going anywhere until he had seen the complete and utter destruction that he had foretold. He found a nice spot on a hill overlooking the great city and built himself a small shelter. He settled in to wait to see it all come to pass.

Now, forty days is a very long time to wait for anything, but Jonah didn’t care. The sight of Nineveh in flames would be recompense enough for everything that he had put up with throughout this whole miserable affair. Oh yes, Jonah would wait.

But then, when forty days had come and gone, and the city was still standing, Jonah kind of lost it. **“O Yahweh! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in**

**steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Yahweh, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”**

He sat and he sulked. And while he sat there feeling oh so miserable, a castor bean plant grew up and sent its vines to climb on the shelter that Jonah had built. And, when it spread its broad leaves, they sheltered Jonah from the sun and made his day almost feel pleasant. But then, the very next day, the castor bean plant turned brown and shriveled and died away. And on that day Jonah felt the heat of the sun all the more keenly. And that’s when Jonah got really angry and he cried out to God in frustration, “If you are going to treat me like this, then kill me now!”

Yes, Jonah was that angry. But even as his anger burned, a question began to bother him. Why was he so angry? He was angry about a plant – a plant that didn’t even exist a couple of days ago and he was angry that it was dead. It didn’t make any sense, but he really did care. He cared about that castor bean plant that had made one day of his life just a little bit less miserable.

And he began to wonder, if he could care that much about a bean plant, enough to want to die because it was dead, then was it really so ridiculous that the God of Israel might care about the people of a city, maybe especially the common people and even the animals who really had nothing to do with the policies of the Assyrian king and his armies – was it really so ridiculous that God might be willing to spare their lives?

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I think it is perfectly clear that the ancient people of Israel for whom the Book of Jonah was written understood that the story was a fantasy. What would have convinced them of that? Not the part about the big fish. There was something far more ridiculous than that in the story. The most unbelievable part of the story was the mere idea that the Assyrians might have repented of all their evil.

They were almost universally despised, hated and feared. And they never showed any sign of having any regret for what they had done. They never repented and, in the end, they suffered destruction by the Babylonians in their turn. So the people who first read this story knew very well that it hadn’t happened and that it couldn’t have happened.

So what is the point of the story? I suspect the author is asking his readers to ask themselves a difficult question, “How great is the grace and mercy of our God and could it possibly even extend to people as evil as the Assyrians, if they were to repent? And Jonah, in all his passive aggressive anger, is the representative of the readers of this story who are scandalized at the very idea of God’s grace and mercy.

This book is meant to make us think long and hard about the hatred we hold for those who have hurt us or who have hurt the people we love. It is meant to teach us about how the grudges we hold eat away at us and keep us from being our best selves – how they trap us underneath a miserable shelter as we put our lives on hold waiting for the kind of punishment of our enemies that really serves no good purpose and only takes a little bit of the pleasant shade out of our world. This story is there to make you think again about the hatreds that you hold close to your heart and how very useless they are.