

Jonah Studies – questions for four sessions

Characteristics of our Style of Engagement

The group that created these studies did so by initially undertaking the studies themselves. So, every 3-4 weeks, we 'met' via Skype to undertake Bible study together. Two of the group wrote each study and together we engaged with each portion of the Scriptures. As these group 'meetings' went on a distinctive style of engagement began to emerge. We offer this style as a way of engaging, not just with Ruth, but as a model for exploring any part of Scripture. We identified 7 characteristics of the way we engaged with Scripture:

1. *Slowing down the process of engagement.*
2. *Focusing on a whole book or a substantial unit of text.*
3. *Focusing on the details of the text (e.g. specific words used).*
4. *Exploring the texts via open-ended questions.*
5. *Occasionally supplementing questions with a few brief informational notes (a maximum of 1-2 notes per session).*
6. *Reading with close attention to contemporary contexts, in their social and material specificity.*
7. *As the group responsible for writing these studies: attending to the dynamics of reading across the Communion, with a willingness to stand by what we have written as well as with respectful awareness of the diverse constituencies which we ourselves represent and the even more diverse constituencies which will use the studies*

Introduction for participants

These Bible studies have been designed to be participatory. Fundamental to the Bible study process is that the members of each group feel free to share their interpretations, their experiences, their contexts.

We have made the Bible studies as accessible as possible, using a series of questions in each case as the basic format of the Bible study. There are no right answers to the questions! Through the questions we invite you to engage with the biblical text and your context. Each question is designed to take you deeper into the biblical text or deeper into the engagement between the biblical text and your context.

We do encourage you to follow the format of each Bible study, allowing sufficient time for engaging with the questions and the input. If you use these Bible studies in a group setting, it will be useful to appoint someone as a facilitator, whose task it will be to enable everyone to participate and complete the Bible study within a given time period.

It is important that the facilitator for each Bible study devote some time in advance of the Bible study to read through the Bible study by way of preparation. This will enable the facilitator to have a sense of the 'shape' of each particular study and to draw other group members into the tasks of reading and praying.

It might be helpful to begin these studies by hearing the whole of the Book of Jonah read in one go. One way that might be helpful is to use a dramatised reading and we have included one based on the New Jerusalem Bible at the end of the study questions.



Session 1 – Jonah chapters 1 & 2

1. What do God's initial call and Jonah's response tell us about Jonah, and how do they shape the rest of the story?
2. In what ways are the sailors religious? How do their actions (verse 5, 13, and 16), their questions (verses 8-10), and their prayer (verse 14) help us to answer this question?
3. Who are 'the sailors' in your context and how does the church engage with them?
4. Compare what Jonah says with what he does in these two chapters: in what ways is he religious?
5. What role does the non-human creation play in this story? [1:17, 2:10, 3:7-8, 4:6-7, and 4:11.] How does this compare with experience and attitudes in your context?
6. Based on Jonah's prayer in Chapter 2 how might you expect the story to continue?

Session 2 – Jonah chapters 3 & 4

1. Everyone in chapter 3 behaves differently - from what they had done before (Jonah), from what we might expect (Ninevites) and from what had been announced (God). What is the relationship between human action and God's action?
2. The first readers of this story would recognise that Nineveh was the capital of the oppressive and violent Assyrian empire. What would it mean for a state or other powerful institution and the individuals associated with it to "turn from their evil ways and violence" (3:8)?
3. What is God like according to 4:2 and why do you think Jonah has a problem with this?
4. How does Jonah's attitude to the Ninevites compare with the sailors' attitude to him? Does this challenge attitudes in your community?
5. How do we as readers respond to the final question in the book?
6. In what ways do you see in this book the compassion of God that we also see in the compassion of Christ?

Session 3 – Jonah: an overview

1. There is an earlier story about Jonah's ministry in 2 Kings 14:23-27. In light of that story and of your reading of the book of Jonah, what kind of prophet do you think Jonah was?—encouraging, positive, committed, successful, faithful, rebellious, stubborn, imperceptive? What other descriptions might you add?
2. Does the story in the book of Jonah make you smile, and if so, when and how and why? Do you think it is designed to make its readers smile? Why might it be so designed? How might humor help to get its message across to people?
3. God's call to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3) is the foundation call story in the Bible. How would you compare what Moses and Jonah are each called to do and the way each of them responds?
4. Jonah is sent to Nineveh because it was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which controlled the Middle East, rampaged through it making war, and milked it of resources for a century. The other book that refers a lot to Nineveh is Nahum (it comes about eight pages after Jonah). Read chapter 3, which actually represents the way Jonah would have preached—though not the way the book of Jonah itself sees things. Imagine a conversation between Nahum, Jonah, and the narrator of Jonah's story. What would each of them say to the others?
5. In what contemporary contexts could the different messages of Nahum and the book of Jonah each be heard and valued?



Session 4 – Jonah and the New Testament

1. What parallels can you discern between the actions and attitudes of the characters in the book of Jonah (including God), and the actions and attitudes of the characters in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32)? In what ways are we challenged by both stories?
2. Jonah describes God as 'gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love' (4:2). These words come from the key text in which Yahweh God declared his character to Moses (Exodus 34:6; compare with Psalm 103:8-10). Read Romans 8:31-39 and discuss how the New Testament expands our understanding of the love of God. In the light of 1 John 3:16-18 and 4:7-2, how should our response to it differ from Jonah's?
3. In Matthew 12:38-41, Jesus refers to Jonah's experience as a pointer to his own resurrection. In what sense do you think Jonah's experience at the end of chapter 2 is a kind of 'resurrection', and does the rest of Jonah's story prefigure in any way the ministry of Jesus Christ after his resurrection?
4. In Luke 11:29-32, Jesus says Jonah is a sign to the present unbelieving generation because of their failure to repent, as the Ninevites did. What lesson is there in this for the church today? What might the people of Nineveh say to us, in the light of Jesus' words (noting the immediate context of Lk. 11:28)?
5. The book of Jonah shows God's surprising concern for outsiders, foreigners, those who 'don't belong'? What examples or teachings in the New Testament demonstrate the same surprising (even subversive) nature of the gospel? (You could start with Ephesians 2:11-13, but think of other examples in the Gospels and Epistles). Are we ever tempted to respond as Jonah did?



Dramatised text of the Book of Jonah

NARRATOR

The word of Yahweh was addressed to Jonah son of Amittai:

YAHWEH

Up! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to them that their wickedness has forced itself upon me.

NARRATOR

Jonah set about running away from Yahweh, and going to Tarshish. He went down to Jaffa and found a ship bound for Tarshish; he paid his fare and boarded it, to go with them to Tarshish, to get away from Yahweh. But Yahweh threw a hurricane at the sea, and there was such a great storm at sea that the ship threatened to break up. The sailors took fright, and each of them called on his own god, and to lighten the ship they threw the cargo overboard. Jonah, however, had gone below, had lain down in the hold and was fast asleep, when the boatswain went up to him.

BOATSWAIN

What do you mean by sleeping? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps he will spare us a thought and not leave us to die.

SAILORS

Come on, let us draw lots to find out who is to blame for bringing us this bad luck.

NARRATOR

So they cast lots, and the lot pointed to Jonah.

SAILORS

Tell us, what is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? What is your nationality?

JONAH

I am a Hebrew, and I worship Yahweh, God of Heaven, who made both sea and dry land.

NARRATOR

The sailors were seized with terror at this,

SAILORS

Why ever did you do this?

NARRATOR

They knew that he was trying to escape from Yahweh, because he had told them so.

SAILORS

What are we to do with you, to make the sea calm down for us?

NARRATOR

For the sea was growing rougher and rougher.

JONAH

Take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will calm down for you. I know it is my fault that this great storm has struck you.



NARRATOR

The sailors rowed hard in an effort to reach the shore, but in vain, since the sea was growing rougher and rougher. So at last they called on Yahweh.

SAILORS

O, Yahweh, do not let us perish for the sake of this man's life, and do not hold us responsible for causing an innocent man's death; for you, Yahweh, have acted as you saw fit.

NARRATOR

And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea stopped raging. At this, the men were seized with dread of Yahweh; they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows to him.

Now Yahweh ordained that a great fish should swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. From the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed to Yahweh, his God:

JONAH

Out of my distress I cried to Yahweh and he answered me,
from the belly of Sheol I cried out; you heard my voice!
For you threw me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the floods closed round me. All your waves and billows passed over me;
then I thought, I am banished from your sight;
how shall I ever see your holy Temple again?
The waters round me rose to my neck,
the deep was closing round me, seaweed twining round my head.
To the roots of the mountains, I sank into the underworld,
and its bars closed round me forever.
But you raised my life from the Pit, Yahweh my God!
When my soul was growing ever weaker, Yahweh, I remembered you,
and my prayer reached you in your holy Temple.
Some abandon their faithful love by worshipping false gods,
but I shall sacrifice to you with songs of praise.
The vow I have made I shall fulfil! Salvation comes from Yahweh!

NARRATOR

Yahweh spoke to the fish, which then vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

The word of Yahweh was addressed to Jonah a second time.

YAHWEH

Up! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it as I shall tell you.

NARRATOR

Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of Yahweh. Now Nineveh was a city great beyond compare; to cross it took three days. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city and then proclaimed,

JONAH

Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.



NARRATOR

And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth and sat down in ashes. He then had it proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his nobles:

KING

No person or animal, herd or flock, may eat anything; they may not graze, they may not drink any water. All must put on sackcloth and call on God with all their might; and let everyone renounce his evil ways and violent behaviour. Who knows? Perhaps God will change his mind and relent and renounce his burning wrath, so that we shall not perish.

NARRATOR

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil ways. And God relented about the disaster which he had threatened to bring on them, and did not bring it.

This made Jonah very indignant; he fell into a rage. He prayed to Yahweh.

JONAH

Please, Yahweh, isn't this what I said would happen when I was still in my own country? That was why I first tried to flee to Tarshish, since I knew you were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster. So now, Yahweh, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living.

YAHWEH

Are you right to be angry?

NARRATOR

Jonah then left the city and sat down to the east of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. Yahweh God then ordained that a castor-oil plant should grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and soothe his ill-humour; Jonah was delighted with the castor-oil plant. But at dawn the next day, God ordained that a worm should attack the castor-oil plant -- and it withered. Next, when the sun rose, God ordained that there should be a scorching east wind; the sun beat down so hard on Jonah's head that he was overcome and begged for death.

JONAH

I might as well be dead as go on living.

YAHWEH

Are you right to be angry about the castor-oil plant?

JONAH

I have every right to be angry, mortally angry!

YAHWEH

You are concerned for the castor-oil plant which has not cost you any effort and which you did not grow, which came up in a night and has perished in a night. So why should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?

