

JONAH; MICAH

Jonah's Historical Context

Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Nineveh would be destroyed by 612 BC by Babylon, and the Assyrian domain would end in 609 BC. These known dates and the appearance of the name Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 offer an early date for the setting of the book—the early eighth century.¹ However, there is more under the surface. There is no direct connection between the Jonah of 2 Kings and the Jonah of the book by the same name. Jonah in Hebrew means “dove,” which was a symbol for a messenger (Genesis 9:8–12), an ironic name for the protagonist. The author does not claim to be Jonah and does not know the name of the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6; this is analogous to the way the redactors of Exodus did not know the name of the pharaoh). The text itself is dependent on later sources such as Ezekiel 27, the Elijah cycle, Jeremiah, and Joel.² Finally, as in a parable, the animals in the story fast and are “covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God” (Jonah 3:7–8).

Jonah 1

1:1–3

To have the word of the Lord come to a disciple is perhaps equivalent in today's language to saying that someone has felt an impression from the Spirit. Jonah heard the word, which came as a specific instruction: to preach to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of one of the most aggressive and warring empires of the ancient Near East: Assyria. Anciently, the more a people participated in wickedness, the higher this

¹ A book's setting and its date of composition are not always the same.

² Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990), 22–23.

sin would somehow rise until it reached God, similar to the phrase “I’ve had it up to here with your [insert behavior].” Nothing is physically rising. The message is clear—we often make mistakes, but through daily repentance and with help from an ecclesiastical authority, we can take care of the minor matters. Nineveh’s sin, on the other hand, was staring the Lord in the face.³

This command to preach in Nineveh must have come as a shock because Jonah attempted to flee to the end of the world. Tarshish is believed to represent Spain and was the last area before the endless Atlantic Ocean. Jonah had a plan and money to spare. However, hiding from the Lord is an impossible task (Genesis 3:9).

1:4–10

Jonah left on a boat, but the Lord sent storms when he was out at sea. The mariners panicked, and belongings were tossed overboard while they all cried out to their respective gods. Everyone was on deck except for Jonah, who was sleeping, oblivious to the furious winds above. He was indeed asleep during the storm and asleep to his duty to God. Nephi’s words to his brother seem appropriate here: “Ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words” (1 Nephi 17:45). It is therefore ironic when he answered the mariners, saying, “I fear the Lord, the God of heaven.”

1:11–16

Although Jonah volunteered to be thrown overboard, he never appeared to help throw any of “the wares” (Jonah 1:5) off the ship or to row hard with the others. In fact, he was too lazy to jump overboard and wanted others to pick him up and carry him. Above all, he never cried unto the Lord. The gentile believers of false gods called on the Lord before Jonah ever did. Those pagan mariners proved that they feared God, even making vows and offering sacrifices to Him. They were more obedient than Jonah.

1:17

It is important to note that both the Hebrew and the English translation say that this was a big fish, not a whale.

Jonah’s “three days and three nights” were referenced by the Savior: “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). If the Savior died Friday afternoon and was resurrected on Sunday morning, then He was not in the tomb three complete twenty-four-hour days. What is the connection? The answer comes in Jonah 2. Jonah finally cried to the Lord “out of the belly of hell” (Jonah 2:2). The word translated as “hell” is *sheol*, referring to the unknown⁴ or the realm of departed spirits. It was believed that the

³ The Hebrew word translated as “before me” literally means “to the face of.”

⁴ *Sheol* is the participle of the verb *shaal*, which means “to ask, to inquire.” *Sheol* was the place of inquiry, the questioning place, the “what is it?” place. King Saul (*Shaul*) was the “clueless one.”

travel time from the land of the living to *Sheol* was three days. There is no need to add an extra sabbath or consider any fraction of a day to count as a full day. Symbolically, by saying that He would “be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40), Jesus was stating that He would visit the departed spirits of the dead. Notice how Peter did not mention that He was gone for three days but simply said that the Lord “went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:18–19).

Jonah 2

2:1–9

Jonah did not cry unto the Lord until he found himself swallowed by a fish and stuck there for three days and nights. In this moment of despair, Jonah turned to the Lord’s “holy temple” (Jonah 2:4, 7), finally acknowledging his sin and corruption (verse 6). When Solomon dedicated the temple, he pleaded with the Lord to hear the Israelites prayers if they found themselves far from the land and “if they pray toward this place, and confess thy name, and turn from their sin” (1 Kings 8:35–36). Jonah, at this moment, was far from the promised land. He turned to face the temple to pray for the Lord’s mercy.

2:10

Ironically, the Lord did not answer Jonah but spoke to the fish.

Jonah 3

3:1–4

Being merciful to His servant, the Lord gave Jonah a second chance. This time, like Moses, Jonah was obedient “according to the word of the Lord” (Numbers 3:16). Certain imagery repeats itself from the previous story. The fish was “big,” and the city was “great,” which are the same word in Hebrew. Jonah was inside the fish three days, and it would take him three days to walk around Nineveh.

In verse 3, the reader is not told what words Jonah was supposed to impart. In verse 4, Jonah did not preach repentance but destruction. Jonah lacked commitment to the cause. He was only willing to walk for one day even though it took three to walk around the city.

3:5–9

With Jonah’s message of destruction, the people, led by their king, repented.⁵ Whereas Jonah fled after hearing the word of the Lord the first time, the wicked people of Nineveh repented upon receiving the

⁵ There is no other historical record of this ever happening. The message is to not judge other nations and to let God prevail in His omniscient plans.

message the first time. In fact, the animals who fasted and put on sackcloth were more obedient than Jonah (fasting and sackcloth show repentance; verses 7–8).

3:10

Another repeated motif is the Lord’s mercy on the people. On the ship, the mariners cried unto the Lord, and He saved them from death at sea. In Nineveh, the people turned from their evil ways, and the Lord spared them.

Jonah 4

4:1–3

For the second time, Jonah cried unto the Lord. The first time it was from the belly of a fish. This time, he was upset with the Lord’s mercy. The people had repented, and the Lord had suspended His judgments. Jonah’s anger seems odd—had not the fish been an act of mercy? Yet, Jonah had always been fully aware of the Lord’s mercy, almost repeating Moses’s words in his prayer: “And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6–7). But the Lord’s mercy toward Nineveh was too much for Jonah and he said he would rather die. How ironically childish!

4:4–11

Although the Lord directly asked Jonah if he had any right to be angry, Jonah turned his back and left. Clearly, Jonah did not have a strong relationship with the Lord. He received inspiration but disagreed and went his own way. In fact, the only physical labor that Jonah ever did was to make himself “a booth” for his own exclusive benefit, though it does not seem to have provided very good shade (Jonah 4:5). God had to help him by preparing a plant to provide more shade, specifically over his head. When the plant withered, the text states that “the sun beat upon the head of Jonah” again, showing that the booth was not effective from the start (verse 8). Not only was Jonah disobedient but he was also incapable of providing for his own needs.

In his despair, Jonah wished to die (verse 9). When Elijah cried, “O Lord, take away my life,” he was being chased by a wicked king and false prophets (1 Kings 19:4). Jonah, on the other hand, was not being persecuted or chased by anyone. He simply did not build a shelter capable of giving him shade.

Ultimately, the Lord demonstrated to Jonah his inconsistent behavior. Jonah was mourning more for the plant that had withered than rejoicing for the people of Nineveh who would be spared. The

Lord blesses whom He wants. He told Abraham, “I will bless them that bless thee” (Genesis 12:3). The Ninevites had blessed Jonah by receiving his message. Israel *was* God’s people, but so were the Ninevites. To declare the equality of all people, the Lord told Amos, “Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). All God’s children can be blessed and led by Him.

Micah’s Historical Context

The prophet Micah was a contemporary with Isaiah (compare Micah 1:1 to Isaiah 1:1). He was from Moreset Gath, an area in the old Philistine territory. Much of the book’s message is directed to the Kingdom of Israel to the north (Samaria) and the Kingdom of Judah to the south (Jerusalem). The book can be divided into three blocks, each beginning with a call to action (Micah 1:2; 3:1; 6:1). Like the name Michael, the name Micah means “like unto Jehovah.” The book of Micah ends by stating, “Who is a God like unto thee” (7:18). The name of the prophet and this closing statement serve as bookends.

Micah 1

1:1–5

The Lord spoke to Micah from the end of the eighth century to the beginning of the seventh century BC, during the reign of three kings: Jotham (742–735 BC), Ahaz (735–715 BC), and Hezekiah (715–687 BC).⁶ Despite the power of the monarchy, Micah exhorted the people to know that the Lord God was witnessing their wickedness from His temple—the symbol of God’s power, justice, and mercy (Micah 1:2).

With climactic, even apocalyptic imagery, Micah described how the landscape and “high places” of false worship would be overturned. Jacob, representing the kingdom of Israel, was identified as having a center of wickedness in the capital city of Samaria. As for Judah, Jerusalem was conducting idolatrous worship in its “high places” (verse 5).

The meaning of the name Moresheth-gath (a town mentioned in verse 14) is “that which is inherited by or belongs to Gath.” Gath was a Philistine city, home of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:4). If Micah had Philistine ancestry, he may have been another foreign prophet like Samuel the Lamanite (Helaman 13:2).

⁶ See J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, eds., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 659.

1:6–9

Destruction would befall Samaria. Israel had many water sources compared to Judah,⁷ and the Lord's judgment against Israel would be enacted against its vineyards and agricultural valleys. The graven images, idols, and wages (not "hires") that were used to pay the cultic prostitutes would lose their worth. Verses 8 and 9 describe ancient mourning practices as the people lamented over God's judgment.

1:10–16

The place-names in this section apparently came from the area southwest of Judah, near to and in Philistine territory.⁸ Ancient annals do describe an invasion from Sennacherib, king of Assyria, in this area.⁹ Lachish was a fortress on the border of the Philistine lands that fell to Assyria in 701 BC.¹⁰

To be made bald can either imply mourning or purification through judgment.¹¹

Micah 2

2:1–3

The people on their "beds" were committing adultery with their idols (creations "of their hand"). They were taking land and houses away from the unfortunate. The wickedness of the people was such that it would affect all the people—that is, the family.

2:4–6

The people would begin to complain against the Lord after they saw their people diminished and their land divided among others (2 Kings 17:24). In that day, they would tell the prophets not to prophesy. Therefore, the Lord would not allot the land with a cord, or in other words, they would be left without their inheritance.

2:7–11

The Lord told the people that they were "named the house of Jacob." In other words, they were Israel in name only, not in practice. They were not the city on a hill (Matthew 5:14). They had stolen clothes from

7 The north has rivers, a lake, and snowfall.

8 The place-names are believed to be a play on words: Aphrah (dust), Saphir (horn), Beth-ezel (house of firm foot), Maroth (sour). See John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *Comentario del contexto cultural de la Biblia: Antiguo Testamento* (El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2021), 891. They also propose that Zaanán means "she leaves," perhaps because it sounds mildly similar to "come . . . forth" in the same verse.

9 See J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, eds., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 661.

10 See John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *Comentario del contexto cultural de la Biblia: Antiguo Testamento* (El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2021), 892.

11 See Jeremiah 41:5; Leviticus 14:8–9; Numbers 6:9.

each other as if the war were between the members of the house of Jacob. The women and children were left destitute. They would rather hear a prophecy about wine than about their own sin.

This is not the rest that the Lord had wanted for His people (Micah 2:10). In Deuteronomy, the Lord had told the Israelites that they had not yet “come to the rest and to the inheritance” that He had prepared for them.¹² The rest He had planned was associated with the temple, “the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there” (Deuteronomy 12:5). Thus, the Lord had prepared the temple to be their place of rest, but the Israelites had chosen wickedness. In the Book of Mormon, when Antionah asked Alma how our first parents could partake of the tree of life, the prophet described it as entering “into the rest of the Lord” (Alma 12:12–21, 36), saying that “whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest” (Alma 12:34). The Lord’s rest, the temple, and the Garden of Eden are linked together.

2:12–13

The Lord covenanted to gather Israel as sheep of His fold, noise and all. The Hebrew word *bozrah* means “fold, or enclosure.” However, the one who would breach the enclosure was already present (perhaps Assyria.) He would cause the sheep to leave, passing through the gate. In their distress, they would not be alone. The Lord would be with them to lead them away.¹³

Micah 3

3:1–4

The leaders of Israel, their heads of government, and their princes must have felt immune to judgment. For them, all was well in Samaria. They believed they could live in evil and oppress the people around them. Because of Assyria’s siege of Samaria, the people must have resorted to cannibalism. This is not hard to believe as this very thing had happened in 2 Kings 6:28–29.

3:5–7

The false prophets were condemned. They must have preached the same as the prophets of falsehood mentioned in Micah 2:11—that wine and strong drink would solve their problems. Peace would not come, but apostasy would. The prophets would be in spiritual darkness with no visions. The sun would set on revelation. Seers and diviners would be cut off.

¹² Deuteronomy 12:9. The same word for “rest” is used in Hebrew in both passages.

¹³ Compare the note on Ezekiel 1:26–28.

3:8–12

Micah, as a prophet called of God, had the authority to provide exhortation against the whoredoms of the leaders of the nation. As a kingdom, they were all corrupt, including Mount Zion and the holy city of Jerusalem. The leaders, priests, and prophets were all taking money for their services. In Levitical law, priests were left with all the meat, bread, and leather of the sacrifices (Leviticus 7:5–9). Now the leaders and prophets were doing the same. Ultimately, Zion and Jerusalem would be wasted, and the temple would be left like any other destroyed high place. The temple was now being compared to the idolatrous apostate high places of worship (Leviticus 26:30; Numbers 33:52).

Micah 4

4:1–2

In the future, the wasted temple mount would be restored (compare Micah 3:12). Assyria came from Mesopotamia, where large buildings called ziggurats were erected to resemble mountains.¹⁴ This mountain in Jerusalem would be the “top of the mountains.” Nations would flow to it and invite others there to learn the ways of the Lord. This vision may be connected to the promised but unachieved rest referenced in Micah 2:10. An identical passage is found in Isaiah 2:2–3.

In the restoration, the Lord’s modern Israel has flowed up to the mountain-temples to receive and make covenants with Him. At almost every general conference, the prophet announces more temples that will dot the world.

4:3–7

Eventually, true peace would reign, not the peace declared by the false prophets (Micah 3:5). Weapons of war would be turned into agricultural tools. In fact, people would no longer learn of war but would rest peacefully in the shade of their own garden plants.

Most likely because of the temple, the people would bear the name of the Lord. With the Lord’s name upon them, they would walk as the Lord gathered all His people who were lame (“her that halteth”), driven out, and afflicted.

4:8–10

Micah, speaking directly to Jerusalem, the “daughter of Zion,” declared that she would have her dominion. However, calamity and despair would prevail, and judgment would come as a “woman in travail.” Whether

¹⁴ See J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, eds., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 663.

a prophecy or a later addition, the text speaks of the exile to Babylon, a major theme in the Old Testament. During the exile, many writings were redacted and updated to include the people's present reality.¹⁵

4:11–13

Nations would mock Jerusalem, the city of the Lord. The Lord had other plans. He would gather the enemy nation and have them trampled by His people. This type of language can often either be hyperbolic or simply communicate the feelings of the author or redactor.¹⁶

Micah 5

5:1–3

In the same vein as in the previous chapter, the Lord's people would be gathered to battle. The enemy had laid siege to the city and would smite the leader (judge) with a rod. When the situation looked hopeless, a ruler from Bethlehem whose origin is unknown ("from everlasting")¹⁷ would hand over the invaders to judgment until the travailing woman gave birth (see Micah 4:9). Only then would the remnant of Israel return.

In the New Testament, Matthew used this passage and applied it to Jesus in the first century. Of course, in the first century Jesus did not participate in any violent defense of Judah. According to the book of Revelation, Jesus will not participate in a violent defense of Judah in the end days.¹⁸ When a violent battle appeared to begin in an unidentified location (Revelation 19:19), a swift, effortless victory occurred: "And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:2). However, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, Matthew read Micah and found his Savior there.¹⁹ Disciples of Jesus Christ, like Matthew, have the blessing of being able to find Christ everywhere they look.

5:4–7

The ruler from Bethlehem would stand with the flock, feeding and strengthening them (compare John 21:17). He would come in the time of Assyria's invasion (Micah 5:5–6) when they would enter their land

¹⁵ See Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2007).

¹⁶ See Michael R. Ash, *Rethinking Revelation and the Human Element in Scripture: The Prophet's Role as Creative Co-Author* (Redding, CA: FAIR, 2021).

¹⁷ The Hebrew word often translated by Christians as "eternal" or "everlasting" conveys the idea of unknown time.

¹⁸ Although this goes against Christian tradition, Joseph Smith received an end-times interpretation of the Apocalypse (Doctrine and Covenants 77). The imagery in the book of Revelation sits well in the first century AD.

¹⁹ Perhaps similar to the way Nephi read his writings into the sealed book of Isaiah 29. See Book of Mormon Central, "Why Does Nephi Use Isaiah 29 as Part of His Own Prophecy? (2 Nephi 26:16; cf. Isaiah 29:4)," *KnowWhy* 52 (March 11, 2016), <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-does-nephi-use-isaiah-29-as-part-of-his-own-prophecy>.

and palaces. Israel would raise an army and fight with a sword. Assyrian land would be delivered over to the people of Israel.²⁰ This prophecy did not come about during the time of Assyria. In fact, Judah became a vassal to Assyria after Israel's destruction (2 Kings 18:15). Jesus Christ was the final fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus has victory over His foes: death and the grave ("O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" [1 Corinthians 15:55]).

5:8–15

Scattered Israel (including those of Judah) would be a force to reckon with. They would be lions among the weaker gentile nations. Although the original readers probably had war in mind, this power can be understood in the context of the gospel and missionary work. The Gospel of John says that the disciples are given the power to be sons of God (John 1:12). This power might be what would lead the people to "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks" (Micah 4:3). After ridding them of war horses (5:10), the participants of witchcraft, soothsayers, and graven and standing images, the Lord would "pluck up" all the Asherah groves from the land (verses 12–14). The people would then have the opportunity to accept the truths that lead to eternal life. Today's images and false practices are obstacles to true faith.

Micah 6

6:1–5

The Lord began by calling on the mountains and hills as witnesses to the dispute between Him and His people. The Lord had always been protective and loving, but the people had become wearied, lacking trust and confidence. The Lord rehearsed Israel's story after the Exodus (Micah 6:4–5). When the Lord reminded the people of their faith journey, one may recall Moroni's closing words: "Behold, I would exhort you . . . that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts" (Moroni 10:3). A history of walking with God can nurture faith. This is why journal keeping is so important: we should record our personal faith journey.

6:6–9

The sacrifices and offerings of oil were not signs of righteousness.²¹ Sacrifice, tithes, and offerings must have the goal of building the kingdom and blessing God's children. Jesus said to "let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). A true disciple is just, is righteous, is merciful, and walks humbly with God.

²⁰ It may be possible to indirectly connect this prediction with 2 Kings 19:35–37.

²¹ Compare Isaiah 1:11; Amos 5:21–24. The practice of offering a firstborn may have been an ancient practice in Israel and was specifically condemned by the Abraham and Isaac story (Genesis 22).

The prophet might have been telling the people to hear the rod, as in the word of God (see 1 Nephi 15:23–24).

6:10–15

The people were wickedly accumulating wealth with skewed balances and false weights. Violence and lies were abundant. When judgment came, they would be left sick and desolate. Every plan and project done in iniquity would not come to fruition. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matthew 6:19–20). These were not only signs of Israel’s end-times but also signs of unrighteousness then and now. It would have done them well to follow John the Baptist’s words in Luke 3:10–14.

6:16

Kings Omri (884–872 BC) and Ahab (871–852 BC) of Israel had enacted statutes and performed works that led the people to sin. As a result, they would experience the people’s reproach as depicted in Micah 5:4–14.

Micah 7

7:1–2

The land was left desolate. No harvest and no fruit were left. Righteousness was no more, and violence was on the horizon.

7:3–4

The wicked sought to be paid to participate in evil. They were no better than briars and thorns that poke and cause pain. Confusion would reign.

7:5–7

With wickedness rampant, trust among those of the same household would cease. Families would not stand together; they would fall apart. Only hope and faith in the Lord would bring salvation. Satan has often targeted the family, the backbone of society.

7:8–13

Micah appeared to be speaking on behalf of the people. Though wicked nations mocked, the Lord would be a beaming light unto His people. The wicked nation, depicted as a woman, would suffer shame by being trodden down and trampled. Enemies would come from both Assyria (the Euphrates River) and Egypt (the

“fortress”).²² They would be judged by their fruit. “And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 3:10).

7:14–15

The people, as sheep, would be shepherded (fed) with the staff (rod). Mount Carmel, in the northwest, was the location of Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). Bashan and Gilead were in the northeast. These lands may have been the first to fall to Assyria. Those lands would be restored, and the people would witness a marvelous work and a wonder (see Isaiah 29:14).

7:16–20

The wicked oppressors would be confounded, speechless, and hard of hearing (certainly selectively). Like slithering serpents, they would hide from the Lord in every hole they could find (compare Isaiah 2:19). Yet only the Lord could pardon their iniquity. He is merciful and slow to anger (Psalm 103:8). The covenant blessing of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be restored unto the people.

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²² It has been proposed that the fortress (*masor*) represents Egypt, though there is not complete consensus. See Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 587. This interpretation would coincide with Isaiah, who was Micah’s contemporary (Isaiah 19:23).