Introduction to the Book of Jonah

Canonization

The book of Jonah is the fifth book of the Minor Prophets, which are called the Book of the Twelve in the Hebrew Bible. The book is fifth in the order of the Hebrew text. It is only four chapters long preceded by Obadiah and followed by Micah and Nahum. In the Septuagint, Micah is third and Jonah is moved down to sixth between Obadiah and Nahum.

The Old Testament was divided into three sections: (1) The Torah (2) The Prophets (Nabhiim) (3) The Writings (Kethubim).

The first section is called the Torah meaning “the Law” contained: (1) Genesis (2) Exodus (3) Leviticus (4) Numbers (5) Deuteronomy.

The second section was the Prophets which were divided into two sections: (1) The Former Prophets (2) The Latter Prophets.

The Former Prophets: (1) Joshua (2) Judges (3) Samuel (4) Kings. The Latter Prophets were divided into two categories: (1) Major (2) Minor.

Major Prophets: (1) Isaiah (2) Jeremiah (3) Ezekiel.

The Minor Prophets were also called the Twelve because they were all contained one book: (1) Hosea (2) Joel (3) Amos (4) Obadiah (5) Jonah (6) Micah (7) Nahum (8) Habakkuk (9) Zephaniah (10) Haggai (11) Zechariah (12) Malachi.

The third and last section was called the Writings: (1) The Poetical Books: Psalms, Proverbs and Job (2) The Five Rolls (Megilloth): Song of Solomon, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther and Lamentations (3) The Historical Books: Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah (1 book) and Chronicles.

An inspired prophet could be identified using the tests for prophets in Deut. 13:1-5; 18:14-22.

Deuteronomy 18:22, “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

Moses wrote the Pentateuch (Ex. 17:14; 24:4-7; 34:27; Deut. 31:9,22,24; Ezra 7:6; Ps. 103:7; Josh. 8:31, 23:6; I Kings 2:3). Some prophets clearly state that they were ordered to write (Jer. 30:2; Ezek. 43:11; Is. 8:1) and each of the Twelve Minor Prophets call themselves prophets.

The historical books were written by prophets (I Chron. 29:29; II Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34; 32:32; 33:19). Daniel accepted the book of Jeremiah as scripture (Dan. 9:2) and Joshua received Moses’ writing as Scripture (Josh. 1:26) and Isaiah and Micah accepted each other's writings as scripture.
contemporaneously (Is. 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4). Solomon, Samuel, Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel all had dreams and visions, which squares with God’s description of a prophet (Deut. 13:1; Num. 12:6-8).

Commenting on the book of Jonah’s placement in the Old Testament canon of Scripture, Reed Lessing writes, “Jonah is the fifth book in the section of the OT known as the Minor Prophets. There are, of course, differences between Jonah and the other books that comprise the twelve Minor Prophets. For the most part, these other prophetic books are collections of oracles, with an occasional narrative about a particular prophet (e.g., Amos 7:10–15). In stark contrast, Jonah is a narrative about a prophet with only one true prophetic oracle, and a brief one at that (3:4, five words in Hebrew; see also his confession in 1:9, by which he first carries out his prophetic office). In comparison with the other eleven Minor Prophets, who generally were faithful even under persecution, Jonah’s disobedience comes as a shock. Likewise, the miraculous incident in which Jonah is swallowed by the great fish has no parallels in the other Minor Prophets. Not quite so different are the Jonah passages that refer to Yahweh speaking to the great fish and appointing the qiqayon plant, a worm, and a wind, but these do tend to distance the narrative of Jonah from the other books in this section of the OT. In spite of these differences from the other Minor Prophets, Jonah is placed in this corpus in a position that contributes to the overall message of the OT canon. Jonah follows Obadiah to temper that prophet’s diatribes against the Gentile nation of Edom: Jonah demonstrates Yahweh’s mercy toward the Gentile sailors and the people of Nineveh. Jonah precedes the book of Micah, but it is not clear what specifically connects these two books. It might simply be that Jonah precedes Micah in a chronological manner, that is, the events recounted in Jonah took place earlier in the eighth century BC, and Micah prophesied in the second half of that century and possibly into the next. Following Micah is Nahum, which celebrates Yahweh’s destruction of Nineveh for its crimes against Israel and other ancient Near Eastern peoples. This indicates that while Yahweh shows mercy to the Ninevites when they repented in the eighth century BC, he will punish the subsequent generations in the seventh century when the city goes back to its former ways. This shows that God treats the Gentile Ninevites in the same way that he treats his people Israel, whose infidelity eventually led to their fall. Moreover, although at first glance Jonah and Nahum appear to be very different, similarities do in fact exist. In both books Ninevah is the enemy that inspires dread in the hearts and minds of people. Both books refer to the same theological themes of judgment and grace. Both draw on the same text, Ex 34:6–7: ‘You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in loyal love, and changing your verdict about evil’ (Jonah 4:2), and ‘Yahweh is slow to anger and of great might, and Yahweh will by no means acquit [the guilty]’ (Nah 1:3). Both books conclude with a question (Jonah 4:11; Nah
3:19), and they are the only two books in the Bible to do so. Another possible reason for Jonah’s place in the order of the Minor Prophets is that the compilers of the canon believed they were placing these twelve books in roughly chronological sequence, just as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are in historical order. The twelve are largely in chronological order, since a number of the earlier books are from the eighth century (Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, whose ministry possibly extended into the seventh century, and perhaps Joel), some of the middle books are from the seventh century (Nahum, Zephaniah, and probably Habakkuk), and the three concluding books are from the late sixth and the fifth centuries (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). Jonah the son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1) is also named in 2 Ki 14:25, which places the prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Ki 14:23; ca. 786–746 BC). Thus it is fitting that Jonah follows other eighth-century minor prophets, Hosea and Amos, who were likely his contemporaries. Immediately preceding Jonah is Obadiah, whose date is uncertain, but it is possible that the compilers of the canon dated it to the eighth century. Jonah is slightly older than the next book, Micah, who ministered later in the eighth century and possibly into the seventh.” (Concordia Commentary: Jonah; pages 52-54)

Stuart writes, “Because Jonah is so different in form from the other prophetical books, the reasons for its placement in the prophetic canon of fifteen are often debated. No less a scholar than Karl Budde actually suggested that Jonah was included among the Minor Prophets simply to bring their number to twelve (ZAW 12 [1892] 40–43). While his suggestion is hardly tenable, it reflects the almost uniform judgment of scholars that the Jonah story is closer in type to the stories of the prophets—particularly of Elijah and Elisha—in the book of Kings than it is to the prophetic works. Several suggestions have been advanced as to the placement of Jonah as a midrash on one or another of the prophets. E. König (‘Jonah,” A Dictionary of the Bible II, 1899) opined that Jonah is a midrash on Obadiah 1; R. Coote that it is a midrash on Amos (Amos Among the Prophets [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981]) and others that it is a midrash on Joel 2:13–14. In fact, the placement of Jonah among the prophets probably resulted from a simple combination of its length, date, and subject. Self-contained and brief, it fit easily with the latter prophets, as the similar Elisha-Elijah stories, except by being stripped from their context and perhaps condensed, could not easily do. Early in date (at least in Jewish tradition and quite probably in fact) it was sufficiently early that it was not relegated to the Writings (as was Daniel for example, a book later joined with the prophets in the Septuagintal, Latin, and subsequent canonical orderings). Its subject matter was the call and preaching of a prophet, a concern not entirely removed in some aspects from a book like Haggai or even Amos (chap. 7) even though the ratio of biography to quoted revelation is reversed in Jonah. Jonah is actually atypical of the prophetical books only in quantity; as regards quality
(i.e., categories rather than percentages) there is little in Jonah that is not represented to some degree elsewhere in the prophetic corpus. (Word Biblical Commentary, volume 31: Hosea-Jonah; pages 433-434)
Authorship

Traditionally, the authorship of the book of Jonah has been ascribed to the prophet himself. However, some modern scholars have rejected this for several reasons. First of all, they claim that the book itself does not claim that Jonah is the author but this can be rejected since the introductory formula in Jonah 1:1 is parallel to that used in Hosea, Joel, Micah and Zephaniah and closing that is used in other prophetic books of whose authorship there is little or no debate.

Another reason put forth by modern scholars in rejection of Jonah as the author of the book that bears his name is that the book refers to the prophet in the third person. However, again the introductory formula demonstrates this to be common practice that is found in the works attributed to Moses, Xenophon and Julius Caesar. In the Torah, Moses always refers to himself in the third person and Xenophon in his *Anabasis* and Julius Caesar in his *Gallic Wars* does so as well.

Some modern scholars reject Jonah as the author of the book that bears his name contending that it is later than the eighth century and thus it cannot be by Jonah ben Amittai. So to accept Jonah as the author would necessitate a date in the eighth century. However, 2 Kings 14:25 relates Jonah to the reign of Jeroboam II, thus making the events in the book of Jonah as taking place during Jeroboam’s reign (793-753 B.C.), thus refuting the idea that the book of Jonah was composed later than the eighth century. This would make the date of the book of Jonah somewhere in the mid-eighth century B.C. perhaps around 760 B.C.

Therefore, Jonah wrote this book at the end of his career as he looked back on the decisive turning point of his ministry, which would account for his use of the past tense הָעַרְרָה (hāy’rāh) in referring to Nineveh (3:3) for over a period of decades it might be expected that conditions would have changed in that city since the time of Jonah’s visit (Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, page 342).

Commenting on the late date of composition for the book of Jonah that is put forth by liberal scholarship, Archer writes, “Liberal critics date the composition of Jonah about 430 B.C. on the supposition that it was composed as an allegory of a piece of quasi-historical fiction to oppose the “narrow nationalism” of Jewish leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, at a time when the Samaritans were being excluded from all participation in the worship of Yahweh at Jerusalem, and all the foreign wives were being divorced under the pressure of bigoted exclusivism. It was most timely for some anonymous advocate of a more universalistic ideal to produce a tract for the times that would call the nation back to a more liberal viewpoint. Thus the chief ground for the 430 date is a theory of the sequence of the development of ideas in the history of Israel’s religion. Following through with this concept of Jonah, its allegory is interpreted as follows: Jonah himself represents...
disobedient Israel; the sea represents the Gentiles; the whale stands for the Babylon of the Chaldean period; and the three days of Jonah’s confinement in the whale’s belly points to the Babylonian captivity. Just as Jonah was commanded to be true to his evangelistic responsibility to the heathen, so also it was the will of God in fifth-century Judah for the Jews to rise to their opportunities of witness to the one true faith and cast aside the hampering limitations of hidebound exclusivism. As for the miraculous gourd whose sudden demise so grieved Jonah’s heart, this has been interpreted by some to refer to Zerubbabel. A closer examination of the text, however, shows that numerous features of the narrative can scarcely be fitted into the allegorical pattern. If the whale represented Babylon, what did Nineveh represent? As for the ship that set sail from Joppa, it is hard to see what this would correspond to in the allegory; nor is it clear why three days should be selected to represent seventy years of captivity. Furthermore, there is not the slightest historical evidence to show the existence of any such universalistic sentiment among the fifth-century Jews, as this theory predicates. While there were undoubtedly some Jews who believed in maintaining harmonious relations with pagan neighbors, their motives seemed to have been materialistic and commercial rather than missionary in character. For critics to point to the books of Jonah and Ruth as testimonies to this zeal is simply a bit of circular reasoning: these two books must have been written at this period because they fit in with the supposed stage attained by Jewish thought as attested by these two books. (Gleason Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, pages 342-343)

Some like Stuart contend that it is “highly unlikely” that Jonah was the author of the book that bears his name “in that the story is so consistently critical of Jonah.” (Douglas Stuart, Word Biblical Commentary, volume 31, page 432). However, in Exodus, Moses records himself murdering an Egyptian and in Numbers, he records himself as disobeying the Lord. The gospel of Mark, which is attributed to Peter, records the latter denying the Lord three times. Paul calls himself the chief of all sinners in 1 Timothy 1:15. So Stuart’s argument does not hold water.

“Jonah” is the Hebrew proper name yônâ (יֹונָה), which means “dove.” Jonah does not live up to his name since with respect to Nineveh, he was a “hawk” in that he wanted God to make war against Nineveh and not peace. Jonah 1:1 and 2 Kings 14:25 identified Jonah as “the son of Amittai” (אַמִּיתָי), whose name means “truthful.”

The prophet’s home was in Gath-hepher, which is in Zebulun (Joshua 19:13) situated 2.5 miles northeast of Nazareth in Galilee (Note the error of the enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ in John 7:52). He was a prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel, whose predecessors were Elijah and Elisha. Hosea and Amos would likely have been Jonah’s contemporaries.
Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet to attempt to go AWOL and run from performing his duty as a prophet of God. He was one of four Old Testament prophets whose ministries were referred to by the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Mt. 12:41; Lk. 11:32). The others were Elijah (Mt. 17:11-12), Elisha (Lk. 4:27) and Isaiah (Mt. 15:7).

His ministry had some parallels to his immediate predecessors, Elijah (1 K. 17-19; 21; 2 K. 1-2) and Elisha (2 K. 2-9; 13) who ministered to Israel and also were called to Gentile missions in Phoenicia and Aram. He was a contemporary of both Amos and Hosea who were sent by the Lord to the nation of Israel to warn them of the impending fifth cycle of discipline upon the northern kingdom of Israel. Assyria was the nation used by God to execute His judgment upon the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophecies of Amos and Hosea were fulfilled in 722 B.C. when Sargon II carried the northern kingdom into captivity (2 K. 17). These prophecies of Amos and Hosea may explain Jonah’s reluctance to preach in Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. He feared he would be used to help the enemy that would later destroy his nation.

The prophet communicates that which he received from direct revelation from God. His authority is based upon direct revelation from God. In the Old Testament, there were a number of activities that the prophets of God were involved in such as communicating doctrine, issuing judgments, communicating future events, serving in the Temple, performing miracles, proclaiming Messianic prophecies, and interceding through prayer for the people (Hab. 3). The role of the New Testament prophets was much the same.

During the church age, the gift of prophecy involved not only communicating with regards to the future but also communicating messages from God to the church that were consistent with the completed canon of Scripture, which was not yet complete when this gift was extant.

The gift of prophecy ranks second only to the gift of apostleship according to the lists in 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11. As with all the spiritual gifts, the gift of prophecy was bestowed upon church age believers for the first time on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16). Only a few Christian prophets are mentioned in the New Testament directly such as Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32), the prophets at Antioch (Acts 13:1), Agabus and the prophets from Jerusalem (Acts 11:27) and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 11:9). 1 Corinthians reveals that there were several of them in the Corinthian church. Some of them moved about from church to church (Acts 11:27; 21:10). It is evident that the functions of the prophet must sometimes have crossed those of the apostle, and so we find Paul himself described as a prophet long after he had been called to the apostleship (Acts 13:1).
During the church age, the gift of a prophet was designed to minister to the church (1 Corinthians 14:4, 22) and often his message was one of “edification, and exhortation, and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:3). Sometimes, the prophet was empowered to make an authoritative announcement of the divine will in a particular case (Acts 13:1). The first century apostolic church was not to despise prophetic utterances (1 Thessalonians 5:20) and was also given the gift to discern if a message from a so-called prophet was of God or not (1 Corinthians 14:29). In rare instances we find him uttering a prediction of a future event (Acts 11:28; 21:10).
Historical Setting

Gerald B. Stanton writes, “Jonah lived and ministered in some of the darker days of Israel’s history. Assyria was the world empire, and Nineveh, built on the river Tigris and grown rich from the loot of scores of conquests among the lesser nations, its capital. The power of Assyria lay in its cruelty, while the brutality ascribed to the nation by the Bible has been confirmed abundantly by archeology. Assurbanipal, one of its rulers, was accustomed to tear off the hands and the lips of his victims. Tiglathpileser flayed them alive and made great piles of their skulls.” (The Prophet Jonah and His Message, part 1, Bibliotheca Sacra, volume 108, number 430, page 239).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary states, “Jeroboam II, in whose reign Jonah prophesied, was the most powerful king in the Northern Kingdom (cf. 2 Kings 14:23-29). Earlier the Assyrians had established supremacy in the Near East and secured tribute from Jehu (841-814 B.C.). (On the atrocious nature of the Assyrians, see the comments on the Book of Nahum.) However, after crushing the Arameans, the Assyrians suffered temporary decline because of internal dissension. In the temporary setback of Assyrian imperialistic hopes, Israel’s Jeroboam was able to expand his nation’s territories to their greatest extent since the time of David and Solomon by occupying land that formerly belonged to Aram (northeast toward Damascus and north to Hamath). However, the religious life of Israel was such that God sent both Hosea and Amos to warn of impending judgment. Because of Israel’s stubbornness, the nation would fall under God’s chosen instrument of wrath, a Gentile nation from the east. Amos warned that God would send Israel ‘into exile beyond Damascus’ (Amos 5:27). Hosea specifically delineated the ravaging captor as Assyria: ‘Will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?’ (Hosea 11:5) So Assyria, then in temporary decline, would awake like a sleeping giant and devour the Northern Kingdom of Israel as its prey. This prediction was fulfilled in 722 B.C. when Sargon II carried the Northern Kingdom into captivity (2 Kings 17). The prophecies of Hosea and Amos may explain Jonah’s reluctance to preach in Nineveh. He feared he would be used to help the enemy that would later destroy his own nation. (volume 1, pages 1461-1462)

The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, “The major power in the Middle East during Jonah’s time in the early eighth century B.C. was Assyria, of which Nineveh was a major city. Since the ninth century the Assyrians had been sending savage military expeditions west into Syria-Palestine. When Jonah prophesied, however, Assyria was in a weakened state, making possible the expansion of Jeroboam II in Samaria and Uzziah in Judah. Jonah and all Israel would p 942
have been glad if Assyria had continued to disintegrate. However, Assyria regained power in the later eighth century, conquered Syria-Palestine again, and in 722 B.C. destroyed Samaria and deported its citizens. Jonah was not pleased when God commanded him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. The Assyrians worshipped the vicious god Ashur and a multitude of other gods and goddesses. Assyrian brutality and cruelty were legendary. The Assyrians were known to impale their enemies on stakes in front of their towns and hang their heads from trees in the king’s gardens. They also tortured their captives—men, women, or children—by hacking off noses, ears, or fingers, gouging out their eyes, or tearing off their lips and hands. They reportedly covered the city wall with the skins of their victims. Rebellious subjects would be massacred by the hundreds, sometimes burned at the stake. Then their skulls would be placed in great piles by the roadside as a warning to others. Jonah decided that he would rather quit the prophetic ministry than preach to such people. Nineveh was about 500 miles to the east, so he headed for Tarshish, probably what is now Spain, the farthest western location he knew, about 2,000 miles.” (Pages 941-942)
Historicity

The Gospels record the Lord Jesus Christ making mention of the prophet Jonah in Matthew 12:29-41; 16:4 and Luke 11:28-32, which indicates that Jonah was a much revered prophet in the days of our Lord.

Matthew 12:38, “Then some of the experts in the law along with some Pharisees answered him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.” 39 But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. 41 The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented when Jonah preached to them – and now, something greater than Jonah is here!’” (NET Bible)

Matthew 16:1, “Now when the Pharisees and Sadducees came to test Jesus, they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. 2 He said, ‘When evening comes you say, ‘It will be fair weather, because the sky is red,’ 3 and in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, because the sky is red and darkening.’ You know how to judge correctly the appearance of the sky, but you cannot evaluate the signs of the times. 4 A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’ Then he left them and went away.” (NET Bible)

2 Kings 14:25 records that Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II in approximately 793-753 B.C.

2 Kings 14:23-25, “In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin. He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.”

So according to 2 Kings 14:23-25 Jonah lived when Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom of Israel was king. The Prophet Jonah’s prediction that Israel’s boundaries would extend under Jeroboam II came true. Therefore, Jonah was the most prestigious prophet of his day.

was an historical character and that the events recorded in the book of Jonah were historical events.

A.C. Gaebelein writes, “The highest authority that Jonah lived and had the experience recorded in this account is the Lord Jesus Christ. The words which He spoke, who is the Truth, are plain and unimpeachable. There can be no secondary meaning…Our Lord tells us that there was a Prophet by the name of Jonah and that he had the experience related in the book which bears his name. To deny this is paramount with denying the knowledge and the truthfulness of the Son of God. This is exactly what sneering critics do. They have even gone so far as to say that if our blessed Lord knew better than He spoke, He acted thus for expediency’s sake, so as not to clash with the current opinions among His contemporaries. Others boldly say that He did not know, for He had not access to the sources which are at our command today. In other words, the destructive critic claims to have more knowledge than the Lord Jesus Christ possessed in His days on earth…The truth is that the Lord Jesus Christ placed such emphasis upon the book of Jonah because it foreshadowed His own experience as the Redeemer and because He knew of what apostate Christendom would do with this book and its record. There is no middle ground possible; either this book of Jonah is true, relates the truth and miraculous history of this Prophet, or the Lord Jesus Christ is not the infallible Son of God. His Person and His Work stand and fall together with the authenticity of Jonah.” (The Annotated Bible: The Holy Scriptures Analysed and Annotated, volume V: Daniel to Malachi, pages 156-157).

James E. Smith writes, “Why are modern scholars reluctant to accept the Book of Jonah as historical? The following arguments have been advanced: 1. The book lacks historical particulars. The author, for example, has not pinpointed the spot where Jonah was ejected from the fish, the specific sins of the Ninevites, or the name of the king of Nineveh. Yet a critic could make this argument against any historical work. No historian relates all the facts about any event. The Book of Jonah does in fact cite a number of very specific details which would be superfluous in a parabolic narrative. 2. The book ends abruptly, thus signaling that the author was trying to teach a truth and not necessarily relate true facts. Recognizing the didactic purpose of the book, however, does not prove that the book is unhistorical. An historical episode can be related for didactic purposes. 3. If taken as sober history, the behavior of Jonah is incomprehensible. On the other hand, however, would any writer slander a prominent prophet by attributing to him such negative actions? The account makes sense only if Jonah himself is the author of this material, and if he is writing this account as a confession of sinful attitudes and actions. 4. If Jonah is history, why was this material not placed with the historical books? The history of the organization of the Old Testament canon is quite complex. The early historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings
were considered to be prophetic books in one early arrangement. 5. The king of Assyria is inaccurately designated ‘the king of Nineveh’ in Jonah. Biblical writers, however, sometimes called kings after the name of their capital. Ahab the king of Israel is called ‘king of Samaria’ (1 Kgs 21:1), and Ben-hadad king of Syria is called ‘king of Damascus’ (2 Chr 24:23). 6. The conversion of the Ninevites is historically improbable. History, however, is full of improbabilities. To be sure the Ninevite conversion must have been short lived. While to date no concrete evidence of even a temporary change of heart in Nineveh has been discovered, neither is there any data which would refute this claim of Jonah. In truth the history of Assyria during the period of Jonah is virtually a blank. 7. The circuit of the city of Nineveh was only about eight miles, a size which hardly would have required a three day walk (3:3). The language of Jonah, however, may have included the cluster of villages which surrounded Nineveh; or the length of time required to preach to all the people there. 8. The book contains an overabundance of the miraculous—twelve miracles in forty-eight verses. This more than any other reason causes modern scholars to question the historicity of Jonah. While the arguments against the historicity of Jonah are not decisive, several arguments can be advanced to support the historical nature of the book. 1. Argument from style and language. Simply stated, the book appears to be historical. Technical language, totally out of place in a parable, is used in the sailing episode and in the decree of the king. 2. Argument from didactic purpose. Without question this book has a didactic purpose. It teaches God’s universal love for all human kind. Only if the story is actually true, however, would it have had much of an impact. 3. Argument from canonicity. The book practically slanders a prophet. It would not have been allowed to remain in the canon unless it was regarded early on as true. 4. Argument from historical accuracy. Jonah was a historical character. Nineveh was notorious for moral depravity. The description of the size of Nineveh in the text is accurate. The mourning of men and cattle is documented by the Greek historian Herodotus (9:24). Joppa and Tarshish were historical cities. 5. Argument from tradition. The Book of Tobit (14:4–6, 15), written during the intertestamental period, understood Jonah as historical. Josephus (Antiquities, 9:10.2) the Jewish historian also interpreted the book as sober history. 6. Argument from analogy. The analogy between the Book of Jonah and the account of Elijah is striking. Certainly the Elijah record was meant to be taken historically. 7. Argument from the behavior of Jonah. It is unlikely that an eminent prophet would have been selected to be represented as so foolish, so wayward and so out of harmony with God if in fact he had not so proved himself. 8. Argument from authority. Jesus referred to Jonah’s stay in the belly of the great fish (Matt 12:39ff.; 16:4) in such a way as to indicate that he regarded it an an actual occurrence. Even more decisive is Jesus’ reference to the men of Nineveh “rising up in the judgment” to condemn those who had
rejected him (Luke 11:32). Men in a parable will not be present in the resurrection. Thus Jesus puts his endorsement upon the historical understanding of the Ninevite conversion. Sandwiched between the reference to the ‘sign of Jonah’ and the reference to the Ninevites in the resurrection Jesus mentioned the visit of the Queen of the South to the court of Solomon. Certainly this was an historical incident. Jesus regarded the references to Jonah to be just as historical as that to the Queen.” (Old Testament Survey Series: The Minor Prophets)

Lessing commenting as to whether or not the book of Jonah is fact or fiction, writes, “To interpret the genre of Jonah as narrative history—with equal emphasis on its narrative art and historical accuracy—brings us directly into the eye of the tornado in Jonah studies that can be described in a five-word question. Is Jonah fact or fiction? The tendency to view Jonah as fictional is a relatively recent development. By way of contrast, the vast majority of early Jewish and Christian writers believed that the events recorded in the narrative actually occurred. Among Jewish writers, Josephus clearly views the book of Jonah as historical and incorporates the story into his history of the Jewish people. He writes: ‘But, since I have promised to give an exact account of our history, I have thought it necessary to recount what I have found written in the Hebrew books concerning this prophet [i.e., Jonah].’ R. H. Bowers writes about how the early church interpreted Jonah: The written documents, then, of the first five centuries of Christianity, provide consistent recording of the apologetic use of the Jonah legend [sic] as a proof-text for eschatological assertion, in which Judaic typology based on the concrete reality of historical events, rather than Greek allegory based on abstractions, is most evident. For over two thousand years, most Christians and Jews have viewed the book of Jonah as a historical narrative—as fact. Such unanimity of tradition cannot be easily dismissed. Yet there has emerged, in more recent centuries, a perspective that views the narrative more like one of Christ’s parables. This debate has made the book of Jonah one of the most visible outposts along the liberal-conservative battle line. Theological conservatives defend the historicity of the book, while liberals have aimed much of their arsenal of ridicule toward ‘fundamentalist literalism’ at the traditional position on Jonah…When some assert that Jonah is fictional—whether they view it as an allegory, a parable, or a fable—they have been influenced by the principle of analogy articulated by Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch’s argument was that the distinguishing mark of reality is harmony with the normal, customary, or frequently attested events and conditions as people experience them. People are to view the records of the past in terms of their experience of the present and arrive at judgments on what is historical by reflecting on their ‘normal experience.’ This principle of analogy has been a central reason why many people reject the historicity of Jonah: it is certainly not a ‘normal human experience’ to be swallowed by a great fish, vomited up onto dry land after
spending three days and three nights in the belly of that same fish, witness an instantaneous conversion of a huge pagan city (along with its animals), and see a big plant come and go in a day! However, even if we are somehow able to ascertain what events are ‘customary’ or ‘frequently attested,’ why should we think that a claim is untrue simply because it does not conform to our ‘common human experience’? For example, using this criterion, we would not believe as real history’ that Hannibal crossed the Alps with his elephants or that a man landed on the moon! These events have no analogy in our common human experience. Obviously, if Troeltsch’s argument is consistently applied to the study of the past, it would lead to absurdities, for we would be required by his tenets to reject otherwise compelling testimony about unusual or unique events. The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to define what “common human experience” is, and even if we could define it, why should it be accepted as the touchstone of historical reality? Appeal to ‘common human experience’ is in truth nothing other that a rhetorical device of great use to those who favor a ‘scientific’ (naturalistic) view of the universe, in which God never intervenes—a device whose deployment is intended to obscure that it is the evaluator’s interpretation of his own individual experience (an interpretation perhaps shared by other people who have the same worldview as the historian). C. S. Lewis writes: The canon, ‘If miraculous, unhistorical,’ is one they [historical-critical scholars] bring to their study of the texts. … But if one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the Biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.’ The principle of analogy in fact never operates in a vacuum. It relies on the critic’s subjective interpretation of his own historical context. There is always ‘an intimate relation between analogy and its context or network of background beliefs.’ Therefore, no good reason exists to believe that just because one testimony does not violate our sense of what is normal and possible, it is more likely to be true than another. Neither is there any reason to believe that an account that describes the unusual or the unique is for that reason to be suspected of unreliability. And so history—and in this case, the historicity of Jonah—cannot be based on predictability. It is better to base it upon testimony.” (Concordia Commentary: Jonah, pages 8, 10)
Genre

The book of Jonah’s historicity helps to make clear the genre of the book. Based upon the historicity of the book we can conclude that it is an historical narrative account of a single prophetic mission or “prophetic narrative” with a didactic purpose. Its story is developed in two parallel cycles, which call attention to a series of comparisons and contrasts.

The book is not an allegory. Stuart writes that an allegory is a “kind of extended analogy, sometimes including extended metaphors, in which the meaning of the story is not to be found in the concepts and actions presented, but in concepts and actions outside the story, to which the story points analogically. It would be an unusual allegory indeed that waited to the end (the fourth chapter in the case of Jonah) to reveal the point of its hero’s actions. Allegories are distinctly constructed so as to point beyond themselves at each stage. The figures in an allegory are patently symbolic and fictional, and the audience must realize this at once if the allegory is to be effective. Jonah does not fit this pattern, either.” (Word Biblical Commentary, volume 31, page 436).

Neither is the book a Midrash. Commenting on this, the New American Commentary writes, “First suggested by K. Budde, this designation for the Book of Jonah has more recently been advocated by P. Trible. She explains that a midrash is a commentary on a portion of ancient Scripture whose purpose was to adapt it to an immediate situation. While it can comprise legal material, it is usually in the form of ‘tales which exalted the acts of God.’ Various passages have been offered as the basis for the book, including 2 Kgs 14:25 (Budde’s view) and scattered portions of Isaiah, Jeremiah (18:8), Ezekiel, Joel (2:13–14), Amos (7:9), 1 Obadiah. Trible argues that Jonah is a midrash based on the declaration of God’s mercy in Exod 34:6 (cf. Jonah 4:2). More precisely, however, she says the midrash takes the form of a legend, which is a narrative with a historical core embellished by imagination. The historical core is the prophet Jonah and the geographical locations referred to. The story ‘may have grown out of some incident(s) in the life of Jonah,’ being gradually ‘embellished considerably by mythological and folk-tale motifs.’ It may even have ‘originally existed as a folk-tale independent of the prophet Jonah’ and then been associated with him by a Hebrew storyteller. Although many have recognized that Jonah may have a midrashic element, few scholars have been satisfied with this label for the genre. As Trible herself acknowledges, even if Jonah is postexilic it would be one of the earliest examples of midrash. The only other example is from two references in 2 Chronicles (13:22; 24:27), the nature of which is unknown. Another problem with the designation is the difficulty of getting agreement on what passage is being expounded. Yet as
Tribe explains, the text should be ‘evident in the midrash itself.’ As Stuart says, ‘By its nature Jonah appears far more likely to be not the midrash but the primary material, so that any midrash would be secondary, i.e., a discussion of the truth contained in Jonah.’ Regarding Tribe’s proposal to read Jonah as a legend, Wolff objects that ‘what we have here is not really a story about Jonah at all. It is a story about Yahweh’s dealing with Jonah.’ Furthermore, if the story recounts actual incidents in Jonah’s life, as we shall argue, then it is not ‘embellished by imagination.’ Nor is it a fanciful commentary on some other passage, designed to extol the greatness of Israel’s God of history by means of a fictitious story.” (The American Commentary: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Billy K. Smith; Frank S. Page; pages 210-211)
Lessing commenting on the text of Jonah, writes, “Jonah is a remarkably well-preserved text. Its reliability is virtually unquestioned. Even the Targum, which is significantly expansionistic in other books of the Minor Prophets, contains a relatively small number of explanatory glosses in Jonah. Of the seven scrolls of the Minor Prophets found in Qumran cave 4, two preserve fragments of Jonah. These fragments, along with a Hebrew copy from Wadi Murabba‘at, dating to the early second century AD, and a Greek text from Nahal Ḥever from the late first century BC, demonstrate the text’s remarkable stability. A comparison between the Masoretic Text and the Wadi Murabba‘at document proves that the differences are minimal, thus attesting to the faithful transmission of Jonah. In the few cases where the text may need emendation there are several good textual studies available. The critical edition of the Masoretic Text in BHS is used in this commentary. The assumption in this commentary is that the Masoretic Text is not a clumsy redaction, but faithfully preserves the text of the artful narrative of Jonah.”

Simon Uriel writes, “The scroll of the Minor Prophets found in one of the caves of Wadi Muraba‘at and dated to the beginning of the second century C.E. (before the Bar Kokhba rebellion) is the oldest text that has survived. Jonah is preserved almost intact and is practically identical with the consonantal Masoretic text (except for three minor discrepancies, of which the most interesting is naqi, without the final ‘alef, in 1:14). We cannot rely on the Aleppo Codex, the most prominent representative of the Ben Asher textual tradition, because of the Minor Prophets only Hosea and Amos (through 8:12) survive. We must rely instead on the Leningrad Codex B19a, written in the year 1009. The vocalized and cantillated text of this manuscript is almost identical to the standard text crystallized in the Venice edition of the rabbinic Bible (Miqra‘ot gedolot) of 1525–1526. Medieval manuscripts do not offer any significant differences either. Of the seven textual variants recorded by De Rossi, only one is interesting: instead of ve-qara‘ ‘eleha, “cry out to it” (3:2), one manuscript reads ve-qara‘ ‘aleha, “cry out against it,” as in 1:2 (the Aramaic Targum Jonathan also renders both verses in the same way.”

(The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah; page xlii)
Purpose

The book of Jonah teaches that God is a God of deliverance and that He is omnipotent, sovereign, gracious and compassionate who loves both Jew and Gentiles.

The Teacher’s Bible Commentary, “The book of Jonah was written to teach readers of all times that the universal God is impartial in his dealings, patient with the worst offenders, and ready to grant forgiveness to all who repent. It provides an Old Testament foundation for Christian missions.” (Page 556)

Lessing writes, “We may arrange the themes in Jonah into three categories: 1. Jonah teaches that all people need repentance (contrition and faith). See the sailors in 1:14; Jonah in chapter 2; and the Ninevites in 3:5–9. This encourages Israel to repent. It shows the possibility of even the most sinful unbelievers repenting and being saved through faith. And it identifies repentance as the correct response to prophecy. 2. Jonah teaches that even Gentile unbelievers may be converted. See the sailors in 1:16 and the Ninevites in 3:5–9. This encourages a missionary concern. It condemns Israelite exclusivism. And it condemns Israel’s reaction against God forgiving the Gentiles. 3. Considering Jonah in its canonical context invites this question: Why does Yahweh save Nineveh in this book and then later allow the Assyrians to destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel? Two answers can be given: First, it affirms God’s freedom to act graciously by saving Gentiles, as well as his justice in executing deserved judgment for those members of his people who become apostate (cf. Romans 9–11; 2 Pet 2:17–22). And second, it balances the relationship between God’s mercy and his justice. Category 2 has been, by far, the most popular option among interpreters of the narrative. It depends on equating Jonah with Israel; that is, Jonah is a representative of the values and opinions of skewed Israelite theology. One of the book’s major themes, then, is to urge Israel not to act like Jonah. Category 3 focuses more on understanding Yahweh’s methods and his attributes through the agency of Jonah’s situation. Category 1 urges Israel to identify with Nineveh; that is, instead of urging Israel to not act like Jonah, the book is urging that Israel should respond as Nineveh responded. The narrative nowhere drives home that point explicitly, but it may be implicit. Alexander rightly observes that this approach ignores the inclusion of chapter 4. If the lesson were only that Israel should have as willing to repent as Nineveh was, the narrative could have ended after chapter 3. While not discounting these themes, the viewpoint taken in this commentary is that narrative’s main theme is the triune God’s use of Law and Gospel to judge and forgive the sailors, the Ninevites, and Jonah himself. Yahweh is fully justified in condemning all people as sinners who deserve both temporal punishment and eternal death. Yahweh hurls the storm that
threatens the lives of the sailors and disobedient Jonah (1:4–15), and through his prophet he pronounces judgment upon pagan Nineveh (3:4). All these people deserved to perish. Yet Yahweh proves himself to be a gracious God (Jonah 4:2), just as he proves time and again throughout the Scriptures, culminating in Christ’s redemptive work for the sake of all people. It is Yahweh himself who turns from his wrath to show mercy toward the undeserving because of his own gracious character. Thus Yahweh calms the storm that he himself had sent, sparing the lives of the mariners, who turn to him in true faith (1:16). He sends the fish to rescue Jonah from a watery grave (2:1 [ET1:17]), and after three days Yahweh ‘raises’ Jonah to new life (2:11 [ET2:10]) as a type of Christ’s resurrection. Yahweh moves even the fierce unbelieving Ninevites to repentance and saving faith (3:5–10). The book concludes with Yahweh’s question that coaxes resentful Jonah to acknowledge Yahweh’s propriety in having pity on those he has made (4:11). (Concordia Commentary: Jonah, pages 56-57)
Outline

I. The Disobedience of Jonah (1-2)
   A. The divine commission of the prophet (1:1-2)
   B. The disobedience of the prophet (1:3)
   C. The consequences of the prophet’s disobedience (1:4-2:10)
      1. The storm (1:4-16)
      2. The great fish (1:17)
      3. Jonah’s prayer for deliverance and of thanksgiving (2:1-9)
      4. God delivers Jonah (2:10)
II. The Obedience of Jonah (3-4)
   A. The recomissioning of the prophet (3:1-2)
   B. The obedience of the prophet (3:3-4)
   C. The conversion of the Ninevites (3:5-10)
      1. The action of the people (3:5)
      2. The action of the king (3:6-9)
      3. The action of God (3:10)
   D. The sorrow of the prophet (4)
      1. The displeasure of Jonah (4:1-5)
      2. The explanation of the Lord (4:6-11)

Alternative outline for the book of Jonah:

II. Jonah and the Permissive Will of God (1:3).
III. Jonah Out of the Geographical Will of God (1:4-2:10).
V. Jonah’s Obedience to the Directive Will of God (3:3-5).
VII. Jonah’s Lack of Compassion for the Ninevites (4:1-5).
VIII. The Lord’s Rebuke of Jonah (4:6-11).