I. TITLE

A. The book is named after its principal character, whose name means “dove”
   1. The name conjures up characteristics of innocence.
   2. The term can also carry a derogatory meaning, as God uses it in Hos 7:11 to describe Ephraim "a dove, easily deceived and senseless"
   3. The term can also portray a spirit of timidity, as in Hos 11:11: “They come trembling . . . like doves from Assyria.”
   4. The term also is used as a term of endearment, as in 74:19, “Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts.”

B. The meaning of the name significantly contrasts with the contents of the book—Jonah was anything but the above, “innocent,” “deceived,” “timid,” etc.

II. AUTHOR

A. Though the book does not identify its author, tradition has ascribed it to the prophet himself, Jonah son of Amittai (1:1), from Gath Hepher (2 Kgs 14:25) in Zebulun Josh 19:10,13) — NRS 2 Kings 14:25 He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.

B. This prophet was the successor to Elisha.
   1. He was active in a long and honorable prophetic movement started by Elijah.
   2. As such he would be filled with great pride — more on this later.

III. POLITICAL BACKGROUND

A. In the half-century during which the prophet Jonah ministered (800-750 B.c.) King Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753) restored her traditional borders.
   1. This ended almost a century of sporadic seesaw conflict between Israel and Damascus.
2. Jeroboam, in God's providence (2 Kgs 14:26-27), capitalized on Assyria's defeat of Damascus (in the latter half of the 9th century), which temporarily crushed that center of Aramean power.

3. Prior to that time, not only had Israel been considerably reduced in size, but the king of Damascus had even been able to control internal affairs in the northern kingdom — *NRS 2 Kings 13:7* "So Jehoahaz was left with an army of not more than fifty horsemen, ten chariots and ten thousand footmen; for the king of Aram had destroyed them and made them like the dust at threshing."

4. However, after the Assyrian campaign against Damascus in 797, Jehoash, king of Israel, had been able to recover the territory lost to the king of Damascus — *NRS 2 Kings 13:25* "Then Jehoash son of Jehoahaz took again from Ben-hadad son of Hazael the towns that he had taken from his father Jehoahaz in war. Three times Joash defeated him and recovered the towns of Israel.

5. Internal troubles in Assyria subsequently allowed Jeroboam II to complete the restoration of Israel's northern borders.

6. Nevertheless, Assyria remained the real threat from the north at this time.

7. The prophets of the Lord were speaking to Israel regarding these events.

   a. About 797 B.C., Elisha spoke to the king of Israel concerning future victories over Damascus

   *NRS 2 Kings 13:14-19* "Now when Elisha had fallen sick with the illness of which he was to die, King Joash of Israel went down to him, and wept before him, crying, 'My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' Elisha said to him, 'Take a bow and arrows'; so he took a bow and arrows. 16 Then he said to the king of Israel, 'Draw the bow'; and he drew it. Elisha laid his hands on the king's hands. 17 Then he said, 'Open the window eastward'; and he opened it. Elisha said, 'Shoot'; and he shot. Then he said, 'The LORD's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram! For you shall fight the Arameans in Aphek until you have made an end of them.' 18 He continued, 'Take the arrows'; and he took them. He said to the king of Israel, 'Strike the ground with
them'; he struck three times, and stopped. Then the man of God was angry with him, and said, 'You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Aram until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Aram only three times.'"

b. A few years later Jonah prophesied the restoration that Jeroboam II accomplished (2 Kgs 14:25).

8. But soon after Israel had triumphed, she began to gloat over her new-found power.

a. Because she was relieved of foreign pressures—relief that had come in accordance with encouraging words from Elisha and Jonah

(1) She felt jealously complacent about her favored status with God

(2) *NRS* Amos 6:1 Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts!

b. She focused her religion on expectations of the “day of the LORD,” when God's darkness would engulf the other nations, leaving Israel to bask in his light.

*NRS* Amos 5:18 Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

B. It was in such a time that the Lord sent Amos and Hosea to announce to his people Israel that he would “spare them no longer” (Amos 7:8; 8:2)

1. God would send them into exile “beyond Damascus” (Amos 5:27), i.e., to Assyria (Hos 9:3; 10:6; 11:5).

2. During this time the Lord also sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn it of the imminent danger of divine judgment.
IV. JONAH’S PERSONALITY

A. Politics:

1. The victories under Jeroboam II had brought unparalleled peace, security and prosperity to the nation.

2. Assyria was the only threat.

3. Jonah was a typical of his time, i.e., selfish, conceited, and sectarian.

4. Having access to the crown he was alert to the threat of Nineveh.

5. His patriotism knew no normal bounds.

6. More than anything he wanted Assyria destroyed.

B. Personality and Ego:

1. A prophet like Elijah?

   a. Elijah had caused a drought and brought the kingdom to its knees several years before, 1 Kgs 17:1ff.

   b. He rained fire down on the sacrifice, proving that Yhwh was God and killed the 450 prophets of Baal, 1 Kgs 18.

   c. Elijah had also rained fire down on 102 of the king’s soldiers, 2 Kgs 1:1ff.

2. A Prophet like Elisha?

   a. When Elisha succeeded Elijah, he became known as “the chariotry and horse of Israel,” due to the “chariotry and horse of fire that surrounded him” — 2 Kgs 2:11-12; 6:17; 7:1-7

   b. King Jehoash was in great grief for his country wondering what he would do when such a warrior died, 2 Kgs 14:14

   c. But God raised up Jonah to take is place! 2 Kgs 14:25

3. These were huge shoes to fill!

   a. Elijah rained fire and punished God’s enemies.
b. Elisha succeeded Elijah, was designated “the chariots and horses of Israel,” and had “chariots and horses of fire” surrounding him, by which he struck down God’s enemies.

c. Surely, Jonah would be allowed the privilege of raining a little fire on Nineveh.

d. After all, he succeeded them, he had the power!

V. DATE OF WRITING

A. For a number of reasons, including the preaching to Gentiles, the book is often assigned a postexilic date.

1. At least, it is said, the book must have been written after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C.

2. But these considerations are not decisive.

   a. The similarity of this narrative to the Elijah-Elisha accounts has already been noted.

   b. One may also question whether mention of the repentance of Nineveh and the consequent averted destruction of the city would have had so much significance to the author after Nineveh's overthrow.

   c. And to suppose that proclaiming God's word to Gentiles had no relevance in the eighth century is to overlook the fact that already in the previous century Elijah and Elisha had extended their ministries to foreign lands (1 Ki 17:7-24; 2 Ki 8:7-17).

   d. Moreover, the prophet Amos (c. 760-750) set God's redemptive work in behalf of Israel in the context of his dealings with the nations (Amos 1:3-2:16; 9:7,12).

B. Perhaps the third quarter of the eighth century is the most likely date for the book, after the public ministries of Amos and Hosea and before the fall of Samaria to Assyria in 722-721.
VI. INTERPRETATION AND LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

A. Evidence given for the ahistorical nature of the book.

1. The legendary character of some of the events (e.g., the episode involving the great fish) has caused them to suggest alternatives to the traditional view that the book is historical, biographical narrative.

2. Specific suggestions range from fictional short story to allegory to parable, they share the common assumption that the account sprang essentially from the author's imagination, despite its serious and gracious message.

3. We will note some of these.

B. Legend—a story dealing with holy men, holy places, or holy ceremonies as examples, etc., (Jepsen) has generally been discounted (Wolff, 81), since Jonah is not presented as a model of proper conduct.

C. Midrash—“an investigation into something that is worth learning” (Wolff, 81) is possible, but does not take into account “the story’s specific artistic form” (Wolff, 81).

D. Novella—“short fictitious with a plot and usually a point” (Tucker, Form Criticism, 40) is accepted by many (Wolff, 82ff) since the book contains many of the characteristics.

E. Comedy-Satire-Irony—are specific minor types of the novella genre (Wolff, 84ff).

F. Parable—“a type of figurative speech involving a comparison which is distinguishable from the simple metaphor on the one hand and allegory on the other, yet which contains, or may contain, elements of both, particularly the ‘shock’ quality of the metaphor and, occasionally, several points of comparison” (Soulen, 137). Allen (179ff) opts for this genre.

1. Such interpretations, often based in part on doubt about the miraculous as such, too quickly dismiss:

   a. The similarities between the narrative of Jonah and other parts of the OT.

   b. The pervasive concern of the OT writers, especially the prophets,
for history.

c. Also, OT narrators had a keen ear for recognizing how certain past events in Israel’s pilgrimage with God illumine (by way of analogy) later events.

(1) The events surrounding the birth of Moses illumine the exodus, those surrounding Samuel's birth illumine the series of events narrated in the books of Samuel

(2) The ministries of Moses and Joshua illumine those of Elijah and Elisha.

(3) Similarly, the prophets recognized that the future events they announced could be illumined by reference to analogous event of the past.

(4) Overlooking these features in OT narrative and prophecy, they have determined that a story that too neatly fits the author's purpose must therefore be fictional.

G. On the other hand, biblical narrators were more than historians.

1. They interpretatively recounted the past with the unswerving purpose of bringing it to bear on the present and the future.

2. In the portrayal of past events, they used their materials to achieve this purpose.

3. Nonetheless, the integrity with which they treated the past ought not to be questioned.

4. The book of Jonah recounts real events in the life and ministry of the prophet himself.

VII. LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

A. Narrative Account:

1. Unlike most other prophetic parts of the OT, this book is a narrative account of a single prophetic mission.
2. Its treatment of that mission is thus similar to the accounts of the ministries of Elijah and Elisha found in 1,2 Kings, and to certain narrative sections of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

3. As is often the case in Biblical narratives, the author has compressed much into a small space.
   a. Forty verses tell the entire story (eight additional verses of poetry are devoted to Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving).
   b. In its scope (a single extended episode), compactness, vividness and character delineation, it is much like the book of Ruth.
   c. Like Ruth, the author uses structural symmetry effectively.
      (1) The story is developed in two parallel cycles that call attention to a series of comparisons and contrasts.
      (2) The story’s climax is Jonah's grand prayer of confession, “Salvation comes from the Lord”—the middle confession of three from his lips (1:9; 2:9; 4:2).
      (3) The last sentence emphasizes that the Lord's word is final and decisive, while Jonah is left sitting in the hot, open country outside Nineveh.

4. The author uses the art of representative roles in a straightforward manner. In this story of God's loving concern for all people, Nineveh, the great menace to Israel, is representative of the Gentiles.

5. Correspondingly, stubbornly reluctant Jonah represents Israel's jealousy of her favored relationship with God and her unwillingness to share the Lord's compassion with the nations.

6. Specific literary types (cf. Allen, 175ff.)
   a. **Surprise**–A prophet traveling to Nineveh, etc., to deliver a message is not expected.
   b. **Refusal**–by a prophet like Jonah is unexpected—prophetic tradition
is replete with prophets protesting their call, but not refusal.

c.  

Ancient Flavor—of the story reminds of stories like the flood and Sodom and Gomorrow.

B. The book depicts the larger scope of God’s-purpose for Israel: that she might rediscover the truth of his concern for the whole creation and that she might better understand her own role in carrying out that concern.

VIII. OUTLINE: THE BOOK EASILY DIVIDES INTO FOUR PARTS

A. Jonah runs away from God, 1
   1. Jonah’s commission and flight, 1:1-3
   2. The sailors cry to their Gods, 1:4-6
   3. Jonah’s disobedience exposed, 1:7-10
   4. Jonah’s punishment and deliverance, 1:11-17

B. Jonah runs back to God, 2

C. Jonah runs with God, 3
   1. Renewed commission and obedience, 3:1-4
   2. The endangered Ninevites repent and appeal to God, 3:5-9
   3. The Ninevites’ repentance is acknowledged, 3:10

D. Jonah runs ahead of God, 4.
   1. Jonah prayerfully reveals his true feelings, 4:1-3
   2. God responds to Jonah’s prayer, 4:4
   3. Narrative description of Jonah’s actions during the 40 days, 4:5-8
   4. God questions Jonah’s actions and feelings and Jonah responds, 4:9-11
      a. God questions Jonah’s actions and feelings, 4:9a
      b. Jonah answers, 4:9b
      c. God answers, 4:10-11