

Jonah

“Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?” (Jonah 3:9)

Jonah’s ministry was important for reasons far beyond his immediate impact on certain eighth-century Ninevites. For Israel he embodied instruction about God’s compassion for all people. For the prophets he could be considered a model.¹ While the story of Jonah is known universally because of his unique encounter with a big fish, the real hero of the story is God. His compassion for a city full of Assyrians motivated and sustained His efforts to send His chosen servant with a message of judgment, aimed at repentance. The fact that Jonah refused his first commission made no difference in God’s resolve to send him to Nineveh. God’s purpose for Nineveh is surely accomplished in Jonah’s preaching. However, realization of His purpose for Jonah’s life is left up in the air. Jonah is a message about missions because missions is about people—some of whom are very undesirable—who need God.

Authorship

The title may be taken as a statement of authorship or simply as the main character of the story. Here Jonah only records his own and his father’s names (meaning “dove” and “truthful” respectively). A reference to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 adds that he was from Gath Hopher, a village in northern Israel. It is more reasonable to assume that he is the author of such a unique experience rather than someone else, unless one refuses to accept the book’s basic historicity.

¹ Bullock contends that “the book of Jonah represents prophetic activity that precedes even Amos, providing a model of Yahweh’s sovereign control over the prophet and his message, and lays a plank for moving from the preclassical to the classical era of prophecy.” (C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 43)

Date

The reference in 2 Kings places Jonah in the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). Since his ministry involved a king of Nineveh as well (3:7) the date of his visit can be narrowed to the reign of either Adad-nirari III (810-783 B.C.) or Asshur-dan III (771-754 B.C.). The known events and circumstances surrounding Asshur-dan's reign makes his realm the one most likely visited by Jonah.² Given the purpose of Jonah's prophecy (see below) there is little to commend a much later date for its composition. Therefore a date for writing of 770-750 B.C. is reasonable.³

Historical Setting

Under Jeroboam II Israel had been able to regain lost territories and experience a time of general prosperity and security. This was due in part to the fact that at this time Assyria was experiencing internal problems and strong pressure from strong enemies in the north. Asshur-dan's reign saw the revolt of rival states and dependencies externally. Internally "plague and famine struck repeatedly until the empire was left impoverished and in total disorder."⁴ This is precisely the kind of situation that God often allows in order to increase receptivity to His offer of grace.⁵

² Ibid., 51.

³ Cf. Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *The Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 771.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987, 1996), 388.

⁵ Merrill says that "this would have been an ideal time for Jonah to deliver his message of judgment and of the universal redemptive program of the God of Israel. Assyria's own pantheon and cult had failed miserably. Surely now, if ever, the king and people were prepared to hear a word from the only living God. Moreover, Assyria had already begun to function as the rod of chastening in his hand. With the passing of a few more years that role would be clarified and affirmed. How appropriate that that instrument of God's wrath should also first have had an opportunity to be the object of his grace." (Ibid.)

Original Readers / Occasion

If the above conclusions are correct, Jonah's first readers would have belonged to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, during a time of increased blessing and security. Though Jeroboam had been a wicked king, Israel had been the recipients of God's mercy and grace (2 Kings 14:23–27). Now God had poured out the same on Nineveh despite Jonah's protestations. Jonah's lesson needed to become Israel's (and Judah's) as well.

Special Issues

Theories of Interpretation. Jonah has been understood as allegory, parable, or factual history by most scholars. The first two, though legitimately found in Scripture, do not fit the language of Jonah. The driving force behind such suggestions has to do with the miraculous in the book. It is written as history and Jesus Himself uses the book historically (Matt 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–30). The problem with the miraculous is a theological and presupposition matter, not basically an interpretational one.⁶

Historical issues regarding Nineveh. Nineveh is referred to as a great city that was somehow associated with a "three-day journey" (3:2). Archaeological excavations had established the physical boundaries of the city at various periods and the difficulty is in trying to determine to what exactly the "three-day journey" was referring. Various solutions have been proposed that fit both the biblical and archaeological evidence.⁷ Another issue is the term "king of Nineveh" since in Jonah's day the city was not the capital of Assyria during Jonah's time nor a principle royal residence. At any rate there is no in-

⁶ See Bullock, *Prophetic Books*, 44-46, 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

formation to overturn the biblical use of the term “king” and there are several options for how it is being used.⁸

Message

God is intent on extending His blessings to all the peoples of the earth through His gracious offer of salvation; He will sovereignly use whatever instruments He chooses to accomplish that end, whether or not the instrument agrees with His intentions, though he works to produce servants who share His compassion for all the lost and afflicted.

Outline

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| I. | Commission and Flight: Jonah receives Yahweh’s call to preach but flees His presence. | 1:1–16 |
| | A. Jonah is identified as the son of Amittai (“truthful”). | 1:1 |
| | B. Jonah is entrusted with a message of judgment for Nineveh. | 1:2 |
| | C. Jonah flees from the presence of Yahweh. | 1:3–16 |
| | 1. He proceeds to Joppa and flees to Tarshish. | 1:3 |
| | 2. He is pursued by Yahweh who flings him into the sea. | 1:4–16 |
| | a. Yahweh prepares a great storm on the sea. | 1:4–5 |
| | b. Yahweh exposes Jonah’s disobedience to the seamen. | 1:6–9 |
| | c. Yahweh disciplines Jonah’s disobedience through the seamen. | 1:10–16 |
| II. | Deliverance and Prayer: Jonah experiences Yahweh’s deliverance and expresses his gratitude in prayer. | 1:17—2:10 |
| | A. Jonah is delivered from drowning by a prepared fish. | 1:17 |
| | 1. Yahweh had prevision of Jonah’s need. | 1:17a |
| | 2. Yahweh made provision for Jonah’s deliverance. | 1:17b |
| | B. Jonah delivers to Yahweh a prayer of thanks—a psalm of praise. | 2:1–9 |
| | 1. He summarizes his praise. | 2:1–2a |
| | 2. He recalls his predicament. | 2:2b–6a |
| | 3. He relates his deliverance. | 2:6b |
| | 4. He delivers his sacrifice of praise. | 2:7–9 |
| | C. Jonah is disgorged from the fish back onto dry ground. | 2:10 |
| III. | Recommission and Obedience: Jonah delivers Yahweh’s message and sees Nineveh’s repentance. | 3:1–10 |
| | A. Jonah is instructed to go and preach to Nineveh. | 3:1–2 |
| | B. Jonah obeys Yahweh and proclaims his messages. | 3:3–4 |
| | C. Jonah observes Nineveh’s response. | 3:5–10 |
| | 1. The people believe and humble themselves. | 3:5 |

⁸ Ibid., 47.

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| | 2. | The king repents and proclaims a fast. | 3:6–9 |
| | 3. | God sees their works and stays His judgment. | 3:10 |
| IV. | | Displeasure and Instruction: Jonah is angered at Nineveh’s response and receives Yahweh’s rebuke. | 4:1–11 |
| | A. | Jonah becomes angry over Yahweh’s mercy. | 4:1–3 |
| | B. | Jonah receives instruction about sovereignty and grace. | 4:4–11 |
| | 1. | Yahweh’s question focuses the issue. | 4:4 |
| | 2. | Yahweh’s demonstration clarifies the issue. | 4:5–8 |
| | | a. He appoints a gourd over which Jonah rejoices. | 4:5–6 |
| | | b. He appoints a worm about which Jonah is chagrined. | 4:7–8 |
| | 3. | Yahweh’s admonition forces the issue. | 4:9–11 |
| | | a. Jonah’s pity was for that over which he had not labored. | 4:9–10 |
| | | b. Yahweh’s pity was for those who were the result of His creative work. | 4:11 |

Argument

I. Commission and Flight: Jonah receives Yahweh’s call to preach but flees His presence (1:1–16).

This is a most unusual beginning for a book about a prophet of God. Perhaps that is why it does not appear at the head of his prophetic grouping in the Hebrew (and English) canon.⁹ Yahweh’s commission to go to Nineveh is understood by Jonah to have a potentially positive outcome, namely, their repentance, and so he flees in the opposite direction. He would much prefer to see Nineveh perish, given their character and history among the nations. However, God is not to be resisted and he sovereignly retrieves his recalcitrant prophet by producing a life threatening storm and making sure that Jonah’s shipmates come to understand why they were about to perish. The book is full of opposite effects. The seamen’s worship (1:16) anticipates Nineveh’s positive response to Jonah’s negative message.

⁹ See Bullock’s comments on Jonah as introductory to the prophets, *Ibid.*, 41-44.

II. Deliverance and Prayer: Jonah experiences Yahweh's deliverance and expresses his gratitude in prayer (1:17—2:10).

To save his servant from drowning, the Lord had prepared a fish (according to His fore view of its need) to swallow Jonah (1:17). After a three day stay, Jonah offers a prayer of thanksgiving for his recent deliverance from the sea (2:1–9). It follows the standard form of a Declarative Psalm of Praise, beginning with a summary statement of praise (2:1–2a), proceeding to a recalling of his predicament, in this case his plunge toward the bottom of the sea (2:2b–6a), and a statement relating his deliverance, which was in this case the fish (2:6b), and concluding with a vow to offer a sacrifice of praise (2:7–9). Upon hearing Jonah's vow of praise (2:9) Yahweh instructed the fish to disgorge His servant onto dry ground so that he might keep his pledge by reciting the psalm before the congregation (2:10). All of this just to send a preacher to Nineveh!

III. Recommission and Obedience: Jonah delivers Yahweh's message and sees Nineveh's repentance (3:1–10).

Jonah has another chance to accept Yahweh's commission, which is another act of grace. God is very patient, and persistent, with His servants. This time Jonah goes to Nineveh, preaches the message given to him by the Lord, and then realizes his worst fear—they respond positively! The fact that Assyria, for the most part, remained a cruel and brutal nation should not be construed as a denial that these people had exercised genuine faith. Beyond this, an individual's eternal relationship is up to him and God. Their repentance, not necessarily to be equated with their initial belief, was geared toward, and actually secured, God's relenting of the temporal judgment He had threatened

(3:6–10). A greater triumph of grace could not be produced in all of history. However, not everyone was happy about it. Jonah still has some growing to do in this area.

IV. Displeasure and Instruction: Jonah is angered at Nineveh's response and receives Yahweh's rebuke (4:1–11).

In another inexplicable display of impertinence Jonah complains about God's stay of execution for Nineveh. His own confession of God's gracious and merciful character flies in the face of his own lack of compassion. What will God do with him? Jonah wishes to die; but God chooses to instruct. As the despondent prophet sets himself to observe God's dealings with Nineveh, the Lord produces a gourd to shade Jonah from the scorching heat, which is also a divine circumstance. Jonah is happy for the gourd, but then discouraged when a god-appointed worm causes it to wither. The lesson, from God's own mouth, is that if Jonah can show concern for a gourd that he had nothing to do with making, then the Creator certainly has a right to have compassion on those creatures for whom He was directly responsible. The point is so obvious to the reader. But what about Jonah? The text gives no answer.

Conclusion

The reader is left wondering if Jonah ever came to possess even a little of his Lord's compassion for the lost. The answer is not to be found in the text itself. The answer, if it is to be found at all, lies in the very existence of the book. Was it written by someone who cared not to see God's compassion extended to the unbelieving Gentile world? Or was it penned by one who had come to have a deep sympathy with the God of all the earth who so passionately desires that its peoples come under His protective grace?

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