

JONAH

Outlined Bible

Personal Background

The name *Jonah* (Hebrew: *Yonah*) means "dove." He was the son of Amittai, of the tribe of Zebulun (Joshua 19:13), and from the city of Gath-hepher which is in the region of Galilee. It is believed by some of the Jewish Rabbins that Jonah is to be identified with the dead son of a widow from Zarephath who was raised to life by Elijah (I Kings 17), however, there is no basis at all for such an assumption. In II Kings 14:25 Jonah is mentioned as being a prophet of God during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793-753 BC). Jonah foretold of the wide extent of this king's conquests and the expansion of Israel's territory under his leadership.

As a result of the above very popular prophecy, which was fulfilled in a relatively short time, "Jonah must have enjoyed great popular respect as a true prophet ... this may explain his reluctance to accept a less popular commission and cause him to lose substantial face" (*New Layman's Bible Commentary*).

Technically, the book of Jonah is anonymous; however Jewish tradition holds that the author is Jonah himself. In more recent years it has come to be believed that "the book is *about* Jonah rather than *by* him." "It is chiefly a book *about* a prophet instead of being a collection of oracles *of* the prophet. Only eight words are needed to report Jonah's preaching -- Jonah 3:4" (Jack P. Lewis).

Jonah is the only "minor prophet" ever to be mentioned by Jesus Christ. He is also the only OT figure that Jesus Himself likens unto Himself (Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Although some contend this book is a fable and that Jonah never actually lived, the biblical evidence is to the contrary. II Kings 14:25 speaks of him as an actual historical figure. So does Jesus Christ. Josephus (an early Jewish historian) also regarded him as historical rather than fictional (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 9, Chapter 10, Sections 1-2). Also, when Paul wrote that Jesus "was buried and that He was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures*" (I Corinthians 15:4), he may well have been alluding, at least in part, to Jonah's experience.

The intertestamental writers (*The Apocrypha*) also regarded Jonah as an actual historical figure. He is listed among "The Twelve Prophets" in Sirach 49:10. Tobit 14:4 refers to "God's word which was spoken by Jonah against Nineveh" (although the *Codex Sinaiticus* reads "Nahum" at this location rather than "Jonah"). In III Maccabees 6:8 the deliverance of Jonah is one in a series of God's great acts of mercy of the past that forms a part of the prayer of Eleazar.

The Greeks have long expressed their deep veneration for the prophet Jonah. In the 6th century AD they dedicated a church to him --- (compare this action with what Peter sought to do in Luke 9:33).

Date & Occasion

From II Kings 14:25, we know that Jonah lived during the time of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC). He was sent to Nineveh --- the capital city of Assyria --- to deliver a warning from God that unless they repented they would be destroyed. There are several historical clues which seem to point to a date for this prophecy somewhere in the late 750s BC --- perhaps around 758 BC:

During the reign of Adad-nirari III (811-783 BC), there was a swing toward monotheism. However, at his death, the nation entered a period of national weakness and even greater moral decay. "During this time, Assyria was engaged in a life and death struggle with the mountain tribes of Urartu, and its associates of Mannai and Madai in the north, who had been able to push their frontier to within less than a hundred miles of Nineveh" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7).

In 756 BC a plague struck the nation, followed by a second plague in 759 BC. In 763 BC there was an eclipse of the sun. These were "events of the type regarded by ancients as evidence of divine judgment, and could have prepared the people to receive Jonah's message" (*The Ryrie Study Bible*). "No doubt this depressed state of Assyria contributed much to the readiness of the people to hear Jonah as he began to preach to them" (Homer Hailey).

There is some historical evidence that during the reign of Ashurbanipal III (771-754 BC) a religious awakening occurred. This may have been the result of Jonah's preaching. In 745 BC Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC) came to the throne and Assyria again became a major power. Under his leadership, the Assyrians became "the rod of God's anger" (Isaiah 10:5) against His rebellious people Israel. Israel finally fell to the Assyrians with the capture of Samaria in 722 BC (through the efforts of Tiglath-Pileser's successors --- Shalmaneser V and Sargon II).

Through the preaching of Jonah and the repentance of the people of Nineveh, the city was spared at this time. However, history tells us their repentance was fairly short-lived. Soon they had fallen back into their sinful way of life. The prophet

Nahum was then sent to these same people. However, they failed to repent (as they had with Jonah), and thus were destroyed in 612 BC.

Interpretation of the Book of Jonah

Perhaps the greatest difficulty connected with this book is the matter of determining the method of interpretation. Until the 18th and 19th centuries, Jonah was regarded almost exclusively as a historical fact. However, in the 20th century, many other theories have been put forth as to how this book should best be interpreted. The following are the *major* theories of interpretation proposed:

ALLEGORICAL --- "An allegory is a story consisting of a series of incidents which are analogous to a parallel series of happenings that they are intended to illustrate." Thus: Jonah = Israel ...Jonah's flight = Israel's failure to fulfill its spiritual mission to the nations ...The "great fish" = Babylon, which swallows up Israel in captivity ...Spitting out Jonah = the restoration of Israel to their homeland ... Etc. ...Etc. (Jeremiah 51:31 speaks of Babylon "swallowing" Israel "like a monster," and it "filled his stomach." Then, in vs. 44, God says He will "bring forth out of his mouth that which he hath swallowed up.") --- Some regard this as biblical proof of their theory that Jonah is merely an allegory.

PARABOLIC --- "A parable is a short, pithy story with a didactic aim." The moral of this story --- God's love for the nations. Jonah typifies "the narrow-minded, exclusivistic Jew with no love for the nations beyond its borders."

MYTHICAL --- This point of view assumes that the whole story is nothing but a myth or legend which arose around some incident in the history of Israel.

HISTORICAL --- This view holds that the narrative describes events which actually took place. This is the most likely view. Those who object to this view do so primarily on the basis of the miraculous element in the account (the "great fish" incident, for example). "Jesus placed His sanction on the story as historical fact ... therefore, the historical interpretation is the only interpretation worthy of acceptance to all who believe that Jesus is the Christ" (Homer Hailey). "The effort to say that Jesus was only a man of his day and accepted certain views prevalent among those about him carries implications that we are not ready to accept" (Jack P. Lewis).

The fact that this account should be regarded as historical, however, does *not* mean there are no parabolic or allegorical or spiritual lessons to be derived from it. "This does *not* rule out the presence of *typical* lessons illustrated by the *historical* incidents" (*The Ryrie Study Bible*).

The Miracles of the Book of Jonah

The fact that there are obvious miracles recorded in this book has caused some --- who *doubt* or *deny* the miraculous power of God --- to label this work as fiction. There are several miracles recorded here, but "so much has been made of the 'fish story' that one is tempted to forget all else about the book of Jonah" (Jack P. Lewis). The various miracles recorded in the book of Jonah are:

- **God raising up a storm --- 1:4**
- **God calming the storm --- 1:15**
- **God's commissioning of a great fish to swallow Jonah -- 1:17**
- **Jonah surviving three days & three nights inside the fish -- 1:17**
- **God commanding the fish to vomit Jonah out on dry land -- 2:10**
- **A city the size of Nineveh experiencing such a wide-spread repentance -- 3:5-9**
- **The Lord raising up a plant, a worm, and a scorching east wind --- 4:6-8**

Dag Gadol is the Hebrew phrase which literally means "great fish." The Jews had no special word for "whale" (the word used in the KJV). Since the word *dag* may refer to a fish of any species, including the whale (which technically is not a fish at all), "it is reasonable to adhere to the traditional interpretation at this point, since no true fish --- as opposed to a marine mammal --- is known to possess a stomach as capacious as a whale's" (Gleason L. Archer, Jr.).

"The ability or inability to accept a miracle depends on whether or not one spells his God with a capital 'G'" --- Homer Hailey

The Major Messages of Jonah

The overall message of the book is basically twofold:

1. God's love and concern is for *all* people, and *anyone* who is willing to repent and turn to God can find salvation (Acts 26:19- 20; II Peter 3:9).
2. God is a *universal* God. There is but *ONE* God, and He alone is to be the God of *all* people. Jonah preached to a monotheistic people, but the god they worshipped was *Nebo*. He warned them they must repent and turn to Jehovah, and worship and serve Him only.

Some of the other great lessons of the Book of Jonah are:

- • "God's judgments, even when declared in prophecy, can be averted by genuine repentance." This is a "crucial theological truth relating human repentance to escaping from anticipated judgment" (*New Layman's Bible Commentary*). "Jeremiah 18:7-8 --- "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it."
- • National sin demands national repentance! Just as this principle applied to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, so also does it apply to the nations of today!
- • This book is a stern rebuke of the narrow exclusiveness that characterized the Israelites. Jonah, whose attitude was typical of his people, had no desire to see the Assyrians saved --- they were the enemy! He fled rather than preach such a distasteful message to this distasteful people. And even after finally preaching it, he sat outside the city waiting to see if God would change His mind and still destroy them. When he realized God was indeed going to show mercy to these people, he prayed to die rather than have to witness such a thing! (Jonah 4:1-3).
- When we today hold to such an attitude --- "We are the only ones God favors" ... "We would rather die than see *those* people saved!" ... "We're not about to preach the gospel to *that* bunch" --- then we have repeated the sin of Jonah. Further, we have failed to perceive the universal love of God. Jonah symbolizes a narrow, sectarian spirit!
- One cannot run away from God (Psalm 139:7-12). "Jonah learned, and through his valuable experience millions have learned, that when God enjoins a disagreeable duty, it is far easier to go and do it than to run away from it" (J.W. McGarvey). "When one sets out to baffle God, there is bound to be a storm" (George L. Robinson).
- • "The infinite concern of God for life is shown in contrast to the concern of man for the material" (Homer Hailey). "The withering of the prophet's gourd, with the regrets it excited, strikes home in all ages, as it must have done in Jonah's day, the contrast between the infinite love of God and the selfish coldness of man. The growth of a night can be pitied when it touches ourselves; but unspeakably higher claims too often awaken no tenderness where we are not personally concerned" (Cunningham Geikie).
- • In Jonah one sees "the forerunner of the universal gospel message" and messenger (Hailey). Also, we see the principle that "the most unpromising mission fields are often the most responsive" (*The Ryrie Study Bible*). "From the human standpoint Assyria was the last place an Israelite would choose for a missionary venture, so Jonah took a trip in the opposite direction" (Samuel J. Schultz).
- • "There is no remonstrance and no mention of Jonah's former call and flight (Jonah 3:1-2). The Lord passes this over in gracious silence" (Homer Hailey). The Lord is willing to forgive and forget!

JONAH

Summarized Bible

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish where he found a ship bound for that port. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, ‘How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.’”

“The sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity’ and the lot fell on Jonah. So, they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” Jonah answered, ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.’ This terrified them and they asked, ‘What have you done?’ (They knew he was running away from the Lord because he had already told them so.)

“The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So, they asked him, ‘What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?’ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.” (Jonah 1:1-11, 15-16)

“The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah where he was for three days and three nights. Then he prayed to the Lord his God. He said: In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me. I called for help and He listened to my cry. ... When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ... Salvation comes from the Lord.” (Jonah 1:17- 2:1-2, 7, 9)

Comment: Jesus was in the grave three days and nights. (Matt 12:40)

“Now that the Lord has his attention, He again says ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. He proclaimed: in ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. The king took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust and issued a proclamation in Nineveh: Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” (Jonah 3:2-9)

“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, ‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’”

Comment: Jonah’s attitude was not of love but hate, probably because they were not Jews.

“Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’ But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’ ‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die.’ But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’” (Jonah 4:5-11)

Key Points from Jonah

- God said to Jonah and to us go preach against sin and wickedness.
- Jonah refused to go and attempted to hide from God.
- Again, God said go, so Jonah reluctantly went and preached God’s message.
- The people heard God’s message, believed it, and repented.
- Jonah was not concerned about the physical or spiritual wellbeing of the Ninevites. He did not want them spared.
- God is compassionate and merciful about those who hear, believe and repent.
- God’s message under the covenant given through Moses was to the Jews, now under Christ’s message, salvation is offered to all mankind.
- All God’s servants are to proclaim His message to repent and obey Him before it is too late for them.

- • One cannot run away from God (Psalm 139:7-12). "Jonah learned, and through his valuable experience millions have learned, that when God enjoins a disagreeable duty, it is far easier to go and do it than to run away from it" (J.W. McGarvey). "When one sets out to baffle God, there is bound to be a storm" (George L. Robinson).
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