

Jonah

Introduction:

A. Author

1. Jonah, whose name means “dove,” was a servant of God from Gath-hepher (2 Kgs. 14:25). Gath-hepher was a village in the tribe of Zebulun (Josh. 19:10, 13) about 2-4 miles from Jerusalem.
2. Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kgs. 14:25 as having prophesied of the conquests of Jeroboam II (795-753 B.C.). This prophecy indicated that the borders would extend under Jeroboam.
3. He is described as self-determined and self-centered in his character. His outlook is narrow and his focus is nationalistic. He seemed to be totally unconcerned about the salvation of others outside of Israel.
4. Denny Petrillo: *His behavior might be more easily understood when we see that he is a zealous patriot for the Jews. The Assyrians were inflicting a lot of suffering in the world. It was more logical to destroy than save them. The companion book to Jonah is Nahum. Jonah tells about Nineveh's salvation but Nahum tells them it is too late and they are going to be destroyed. Nahum's date is about 630 B.C. and in 612 B.C. Assyria no longer existed.*
5. Jonah was one of four OT prophets whose ministries were referred to by Christ (cf. Matt. 12:41; Lk. 11:32). The others were Elijah (Mt. 17:11-12), Elisha (Lk. 4:27) and Isaiah (Mt. 15:7).
6. Jonah's ministry had some similarities to his immediate predecessors. Elijah (1 Kgs. 17-19, 21; 2 Kgs. 1-2) and Elisha (2 Kgs. 2-9, 13), who ministered to Israel and also were called to Gentile missions in Phoenicia and Aram (2 Kgs. 5 ref. Naaman; not a mission journey, but a different purpose).
7. Some have said that Jonah was not the author of the book because he is referred to in the third person (cf. Jonah 1:3, 5, 9, 12; 2:1; 3:4; 4:1, 5, 8-9). This, however, is not a strong argument. Moses, who wrote the Pentateuch, often used the third person when describing his own actions. Isaiah and Daniel used the same form (e.g., Isa. 37:21; 38:1; 39:3-5; Dan. 1:1-7:1). However, since all of the book of Jonah is written in the third person some scholars believe this book was written by a prophet other than Jonah soon after the events. A good question to be asked here is, “Who else but Jonah would know what he prayed from the belly of the great fish?”

B. Date

1. Since 2 Kgs. 14:25 relates Jonah to the reign of Jeroboam II, the events in the book of Jonah took place sometime in Jeroboam's reign (793-753 B.C.). Jonah's prophecies about the borders under Jeroboam may indicate that he made that prophecy early in Jeroboam's reign. This would make Jonah a contemporary of both Hosea and Amos (cf. Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1).
2. Jonah's reference to Nineveh in the past tense (3:3) has led some to suggest that Jonah lived later, after the city's destruction in 612 B.C. However, the tense of the Hebrew verb can just as well point to the city's existence in Jonah's day.

C. Historical Setting (John D. Hannah, class notes)

1. Jeroboam II was the most powerful king in the Northern Kingdom (cf. 2 Kgs. 14:23-29). Earlier, the Assyrians had established supremacy in the Near East and secured tribute from Jehu (841-814 B.C.). However, after crushing the Arameans, the Assyrians suffered temporary decline because of internal dissension. During this time 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).
2. 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 Kgs. 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.
3. Nineveh was located on the east bank of the Tigris River, about 550 miles from Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom. Nineveh was large and, like Babylon, was protected by an outer wall and an inner wall. The inner wall was 50 ft. wide and 100 ft. high. Before Jonah arrived at this seemingly impregnable fortress-city, two plagues had erupted there (in 765 and 759 B.C.) and a total eclipse of the sun (accompanied by a severe earthquake) occurred on June 15, 763 B.C. These were considered signs of divine anger and may help explain why the Ninevites responded so readily to Jonah's message, around 759.

D. Message (Hannah's notes cont.)

1. This record of Jonah's episode and mission to Nineveh was addressed to Israel. The book was written not simply to record a historical narrative; in addition it conveyed a message to the Northern Kingdom. Also in one sense Jonah is not the principal person in the book; God is. The Lord had the first word (Jonah 1:1-2) and the last (4:11). God commanded the prophet twice (1:2; 3:2). He sent a violent storm on the sea (1:4); He provided a great fish to rescue Jonah (1:17); He commanded the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land (2:10); He threatened Nineveh with judgment and relented in compassion (3:10); He provided a vine to shade His prophet (4:6); He commissioned a worm to destroy the plant (4:7); and He sent a scorching wind to discomfort Jonah (4:8).
2. What then is the message God was seeking to deliver to Israel through His dealings with Jonah, the Ninevites, and natural phenomena?
 - a. First, one apparent message to Israel is God's concern for Gentiles. God's love for souls of all people was supposed to be mediated through Israel, God's elect and covenant nation. Through Israel the blessing of His compassion was to be preached to the nations (Isa. 49:3; 42:6). The book of Jonah was a reminder to Israel of her missionary purpose.
 - b. Second, the book demonstrates the sovereignty of God in accomplishing His purposes. Though Israel was unfaithful in its missionary task, God was faithful in causing His love to be proclaimed. Jonah praised God for delivering him, indicating that salvation comes from God (2:9). Israel failed to proclaim God's mercies, but His work was completed in spite of human weakness and imperfection.
 - c. Third, the response of the Gentiles served as a message of rebuke to God's sinful nation Israel. The spiritual insight of the seamen (1:14-16) and their concern for Jonah contrasted sharply with Israel's lack of concern for the Gentiles. Jonah's spiritual hardness illustrated and rebuked Israel's callousness. Nineveh's repentance contrasted sharply with Israel's rejection of the warnings of Jonah's contemporaries, Hosea and Amos.
 - d. Fourth, Jonah was a symbol to Israel of her disobedience to God and indifference to the religious plight of other nations. Hosea graphically portrayed the unending love of God for His people by loving a prostitute. Similarly, Jonah symbolized Israel by his disobedience and disaffection. God's punishment of Jonah shows His wrath on Israel. Yet, the Lord's gentle, miraculous dealings with Jonah also show His tender love and slowness of anger. As Jonah wrote the book from a repentant heart, God desired that the nation would heed the lesson Jonah learned and repent as Jonah and Nineveh had done.

E. Authenticity and Historicity (Hannah, cont.)

1. Critical scholars begin with presumptions that the Bible is not inspired and that predictive prophecy is impossible. They have denied the authenticity of the book of Jonah for several reasons.
 - a. Critics scoff at the miracle of the great fish swallowing the prophet. But others have demonstrated the validity of such an event. The “great fish” was possibly a mammal, a sperm whale. They are known to have swallowed unusually large objects including a 15-ft. shark. Others have written that whale sharks have swallowed men who later were found alive in the sharks’ stomachs.
 - b. Some have questioned the size of Nineveh as described in the book. This refers both to its size (3:3) and its population (4:11). True, the circumference of the inner wall, according to archaeologists, was less than eight miles. So, the diameter of the city, less than two miles, was hardly a three-day journey. There are several possible answers:
 - 1) “The city” probably included the surrounding towns that depended upon Nineveh. Three such cities are mentioned in Gen. 10:11-12.
 - 2) Taking three days to go through such a city and its suburbs is reasonable since Jonah stopped and preached along the way (3:3-4). More will be said about the population in the discussion of the text. A city of two miles diameter was a colossal size in the ancient Near East. So it is not surprising that it was called a great city (1:2; 3:2-4; 4:11).
 - c. The reference to the king of Assyria as “the king of Nineveh” (3:6). However, substituting a principle city (e.g. Nineveh) for the particular country (e.g. Assyria) is fairly common in the OT. Ahab of Israel is called “king of Samaria” (1 Kgs. 21:1), Ahaziah of Israel is also called “the king of Samaria” (2 Kgs. 1:3), and Ben-Hadad of Aram is referred to as the “king of Damascus” (2 Chron. 24:23).
 - d. Some reject the book of Jonah because of the sudden repentance of the Ninevites. If Jonah had gone to city during the reign of the Assyrian king Ashur-dan III (772-754 B.C.) the prophet may have found the city psychologically prepared for his message by two foreboding famines (765 and 759) and a total solar eclipse on June 15, 763. People in those days often took such events as indicators of divine wrath.
 - e. Some scholars reject the authenticity of the book because of the rapid growth of the vine (4:6). This plant, however, was probably the castor bean known for its rapid growth, tall height, and large leaves. Note: We must not worry too much about trying to prove this scientifically because the text clearly indicates that this was a miraculous act of God.

2. Several arguments support the historicity of the book:

- a. Known cities are mentioned in the book, including Nineveh (1:2; 3:2-4, 6-7; 4:11), Tarshish (1:3; 4:2) and Joppa (1:3).
- b. Jonah is viewed as a historical person, not a fictional character. He was said to be a prophet from Gath Hepher (2 Kgs. 14:25) who lived in the reign of a historical person, Jeroboam II.
- c. Jesus recognized the historicity of Jonah (Matt. 12:41; Lk. 11:29-30, 32), and called him a prophet (Matt. 12:39), assenting to the great miracle of Jonah's recovery from the fish (Matt. 12:40). Jesus based His call to repentance in His day on the validity of Jonah's message of repentance (Matt. 12:41; Lk. 11:29-32). If the story of Jonah is non-literal, such a literary form is highly unusual, different from the other prophetic books.

F. Three major manners of interpretation:

1. Mythical – grew out of some incident in the history of Israel. It is like a fairy tale or folklore.
2. Allegorical – allegory of Israel's captivity, repentance and restoration in the land (later date required).
3. Historical – real man, real fish and real vine grew up to provide shade for him.

G. The book of Jonah is unique in many ways:

1. It is about a prophet rather than a collection of oracles of the prophet.
2. His preaching consists of only eight words (3:4).
3. The only "latter prophet" written in narrative form.
4. Only major prophet in which a miracle plays a prominent role.
5. Only one who preaches exclusively to a foreign nation.
6. Only minor prophet mentioned by Jesus

Outline

I. The Disobedient Prophet (1:1-2:10)

A. Jonah's Flight 1:1-3)

1. Jonah's commission (vs. 1-2)
2. Jonah's disobedience (vs. 3)

B. The Storm (1:4-6)

Note: Jonah 1:4-16 is presented in the form of a "chiasm." A chiasm is a "cross-shaped" depiction of ideas in a given text. This was a somewhat common Hebrew literary device. This chiasm is taken from *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* by Yehuda Radday.

- a. The sailors' fright (vv. 4-5a)
 - b. The sailors' prayer to their gods (vs. 5b)
 - c. The sailors' unloading the ship (vs. 5c)
 - d. The captain's speech to Jonah (vs. 6)
 - e. The sailors' word to each other (vs. 7a)
 - f. The sailors' question to Jonah, Who are you? (vv. 7b-8)
 - g. Jonah's confession (vs. 9)
 - f. The sailor's question to Jonah, What have you done? (vs. 10a)
 - e'. The sailor's question to Jonah, What shall we do? (vs. 10b-11)
 - d'. Jonah's words to the sailors (vs. 12)
 - c'. The sailors' rowing of the ship (vs. 13)
 - b'. The sailor's prayer to the Lord (vs. 14)
 - a'. The sailor's fear of the Lord (vv. 15-16)

1. The distress of the sailors (vs. 4-5a)
2. The complacency of Jonah (vs. 5b-6)

C. Jonah's Responsibility (1:7-9)

D. Jonah's Rejection (1:10-16)

E. Jonah's Protection (1:17-2:10)

1. The swallowing of Jonah (1:17)

2. The praise by Jonah (2:1-10)

- a. Summary of his experience (vs. 1-2)
- b. Description of his experience (vs. 3-7)
- c. Expression of his thankfulness (vs. 8-10)

II. The Obedient Prophet (3:1-4:11)

A. Jonah's proclamation (3:1-4)

- 1. The recommissioning of the prophet (vs. 1-2)
- 2. The obedience of the prophet (vs. 3-4)

B. Nineveh's Repentance (3:5-10)

- 1. The action of the people (vs. 5)
- 2. The action of the king (vs. 6-9)
- 3. The action of God (vs. 10)

C. Jonah's Sorrow (4:1-11)

- 1. The displeasure of Jonah (vs. 1-5)
- 2. God's explanation (vs. 6-11)

Conclusion:

- A. Jonah is a tragic example of the plight of the nation of Israel
- B. The two Minor Prophets who deal most exclusively with Nineveh – Jonah and Nahum – each end with a question (cf. Nah. 3:19).