

# Introduction to Jonah

Kenneth J. Morgan  
February, 2013

## Background

### Prophet's Name

Jonah's name, יוֹנָה, is somewhat unusual in that it has no theophoric quality. It is simply the noun *dove* and is often used in that sense in Scripture (Gen. 8:8; Lev. 1:14 ["pigeon"]; Cant. 1:15; Isa. 38:14; Jer. 48:28; etc.)

### Identification

The Old Testament mentions Jonah only once outside his book (2 Kgs. 14:25). His father is mentioned (Amitai) and so his family probably had some importance. He was from Gath-hepher in lower Galilee of the tribe of Zebulun and thus a citizen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

From 2 Kings 14:25 it is obvious that his prophetic ministry was broader than just his message to Nineveh. Prior to that eventful commission recorded in the Book of Jonah, he had prophesied the restoration of the original borders of Israel under the great military king Jeroboam II (793-757). One receives the impression (cf. Jonah 4:1-2) that Jonah was fiercely nationalistic and was delighted to give the prophecy regarding victory of his nation over the Syrians, who had been conquering more and more of the northern part of Israel.

However, he was not at all delighted to go to Nineveh. It was not because he was afraid. His reason is given in 4:1-3. He knew if Nineveh repented, God in his mercy would spare the city; Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed.

### Date

#### *Conservative Estimate*

Though Nineveh and its suburbs had long been part of the Assyrian Empire, it did not become the official capitol until Sennacherib (705-681) located the seat of government there. However, prior to

that it had served as a residence for Assyrian kings. Who was the king in power during Jonah's visit? According to Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, p. 167, there are five possibilities for Jonah's visit:

Adad-nirari III (810-783)  
Shalmaneser IV (782-773)  
Ashur-dan III (772-755)  
Ashur-nirari V (754-745)  
Tiglath-pileser III (745-727)

However, Freeman, Archer (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 311), and Unger (*Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, p. 346) all regard Adad-nirari III or Ashur-dan III as the most likely possibilities. During either reign a congenial atmosphere for Jonah's message could have been found:

- Both fell during that inactive period from 824 to 745 in which there was no conflict with Israel. (Ahab had fought Shalmaneser III, 859-824, but it was not until Tiglath-pileser III, founder of the Second Empire, that Assyria became the great enemy of both Israel and Judah.)
- Under Adad-nirari III a spirit of monolatry prevailed in Assyria and almost approached monotheism in the worship of Nebo (or Nabu), the Babylonian god of literature and science.
- Under Ashur-dan III a total eclipse of the sun occurred in 763 and from 765 to 759 a series of plagues menaced Assyria according to their own records.

The Book of Jonah was probably composed about 760, during the closing years of Jonah's life (Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 308).

### *Liberal Estimate*

Liberal critics generally hold that the Book of Jonah was written by an unknown author about 430 B.C. Certain insertions were later made, also by authors unknown, notably the so-called "thanksgiving psalm" of 2:2-9. Arguments:

- A writer in 760 B.C. would never have referred to the king of Assyria as the "king of Nineveh" (3:6).

- Nineveh is spoken of in the past tense in 3:3 (Hebrew perfect: הִיְתָה): *was*.
- The enormous size attributed to Nineveh in 3:3 is a fabulous element of the book written by someone who lived long after the city was destroyed.
- The universalistic character attributed to Yahweh is impossible in Israel's preexilic mentality.
- The book contains a significant number of Aramaisms.

Since this is not a course in Old Testament introduction, we will not deal with these issues. See Archer, pp. 309-15, and Freeman, pp. 165-66, for refutations.

### Basic Theme

According to Archer, p. 307, "the theme of this prophecy . . . is that God's mercy and compassion extend even to the heathen nations on condition of their repentance. It is therefore Israel's obligation to bear witness to them of the true faith; and a neglect of this task may bring the nation, like Jonah himself, to the deep waters of affliction and chastisement."

### **Outline**

- I. Jonah's first commission and his flight, 1:1-16
- II. Jonah's rescue and deliverance, 1:17-2:10
- III. Jonah's second commission and his obedience, 3:1-10
- IV. Jonah's displeasure and rebuke, 4:1-11

### **Important Passages and Problems**

#### The Nature of the Book

At least six different views have been suggested:

1. Mythological (H. Schmidt)
2. Symbolic (Oesterly and Robinson)
3. Fiction (R. H. Pfeiffer): a religious short story with a moral

4. Allegory (Cheyne, G. A. Smith, et al.)
5. Parable (J. A. Bewer)
6. Historical: traditional Jewish and Christian view

### The "Whale"

Hebrew had no special word for the animals we now call "whales." The phrase used by Jonah in 1:17 is **גָּדוֹל גָּד**, which means *great fish* or *big fish*. The word **תַּנִּין**, meaning *serpent, dragon, or sea-monster*, was not considered appropriate. Thus, the only possibility was **גָּד**, *fish*. However, since no known fish, as opposed to a marine mammal, has a stomach large enough to swallow a man whole, it is reasonable to accept the traditional interpretation that the "great fish" was a whale. The Hebrew verb as used in 1:17, **מָנָה** in the Piel, means *to appoint* or *to ordain*. God did not create a special fish, and the only "fish" really appropriate for the job was a whale. Curiously, the Greek in both the LXX and Matthew 12:40 has *κῆτος*, *sea-monster*, rather than *ἰχθύς*, *fish*.

### NT Citation: Matt. 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-32

1. Was Jonah a sign to the Ninevites or to the people of Jesus' day?

Jonah's miraculous deliverance from drowning at sea and his preservation in the belly of the fish very likely was known in Nineveh at the time of his arrival. So Jonah's very presence was a "sign" to the Ninevites of the truth of his message to them. But the "sign" requested by the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day (Matt. 12:38-39) would consist only of "the sign of Jonah," namely, the analogous experience of Jesus in the grave for three days and then his miraculous resurrection.

2. The nature of Messianic fulfillment: is Jonah a "type" of Christ? Did Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection "fulfill" a "prophecy" in Jonah?

The word "fulfill" is used in a number of different ways in the New Testament. Jonah's experience is not a direct prediction of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. However, it serves as an

analogy or type of the experience that the Messiah would go through, probably in two senses. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so Jesus will be three days and three nights in the grave (Matt. 12:40; Luke 11:29-30). However, in Matt. 12:41, 16:1-4, and Luke 11:32, Jonah and Jesus share another analogy: as a preacher of repentance to an evil generation. The men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, but the generation of Jesus did not repent, though he was greater than Jonah. That is why the men of Nineveh in the great judgment will stand up and condemn that generation of Jesus' day.

Nevertheless, the Book of Jonah in both the Jewish and Christian canons was grouped with the prophets rather than the history books. Feinberg (*The Minor Prophets*, pp. 138, 147) argues that Jonah serves as a picture or type of the nation of Israel from Jonah's own time to the Messianic age.

"Therefore, the mission of Jonah, as Keil correctly observes, had symbolic and typical significance which was intended to enlighten Israel in regard to the *future* adoption of the repentant heathen nations into the fellowship of the blessings of salvation prepared in Israel for all nations (cf. Gen. 12:1-3)." (Freeman, p. 163; emphasis original.)

Unger describes the Book of Jonah as "*predictive or typical history*" (Unger, p. 345; emphasis original).

### The Ninevite Repentance

What makes the Ninevites repent just because a foreign prophet of a foreign God comes with a message of judgment? There are several possibilities.

As already suggested, the Ninevites were likely familiar with Jonah's experience, which served as a "sign" that repentance brings deliverance. Depending on the actual time that Jonah was there, the eclipse or plagues might have influenced them.

### Casting Lots

1. Achan (Josh. 7:16)
2. Joshua (Josh. 15:1)
3. Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:36-42)
4. Matthias (Acts 1:26)

General: Prov. 16:33

### Jonah Had Studied Joel

Compare Jonah 4:2 with Joel 2:13.

### The Object Lesson of the Gourd

The lesson taught is God's great concern for Gentile cities and nations which he "labored" to produce (cf. 4:10).

The last verse of the book of Jonah quotes the Lord speaking:

And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?

Although it is not certain, those "who do not know the difference between their right and left hand" probably refers to very young children, making the population of "Greater Nineveh" (1:2; 3:2-3) possibly as high as 600,000. Now God does not delight in the death of the wicked; he would rather have them repent and live (cf. Ezek. 18:23). Therefore, God was anxious to save Nineveh, the home of so many people.

However, what is most interesting is that God also had great reluctance to destroy the animals in the city. The animal creation has also been drawn into suffering for man's sin and wait for the same release from the bondage of sin's corruption. Their fate has always been intimately tied with ours. See Joel 1:18-20; Isa. 11:6-9; 35:1-10; Ps. 36:6; Rom. 8:19-25. What we see in Jonah 4:11 is that while animals were not created in the image of God, he nevertheless loves the animals in his creation and has no desire to see them destroyed for man's sin.

Regarding God's love for the animals he has created, Feinberg makes the following comment (pp. 146, 151):

That God has regard for both man and beast is clearly stated in 4:11, the climaxing verse of the whole book....[The comment about "many cattle" is] a touch of much tenderness showing God cares even for them.

Compare also Habakkuk 2:17.

## The Miraculous in Jonah

1. The storm
2. The lot
3. The subsiding of the sea
4. The great fish
5. Jonah's preservation
6. Jonah's ejection from the fish
7. The plant
8. The worm
9. The east wind
10. The repentance of Nineveh

## Why Did Jonah Flee to Tarshish?

Too often people get the idea that Jonah fled to Tarshish because he was afraid to go to Nineveh. That is absolutely wrong. Verses 4:1-3 make his reason very clear. Jonah was intensely nationalistic (cf. 2 Kgs. 14:25). Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed.

## **Bibliography**

Archer, Gleason L., Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament* Introduction. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.

Feinberg, Charles. *The Minor Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976.

Freeman, Hobart E. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968.

Unger, Merrill F. *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1951.