

Jonah

Introduction

Jonah is remembered as the prophet who was swallowed by a whale or great fish. Because of the taunts of the critics, many scholars seek to play down the issue of historicity which they say "has obscured its literary beauty and theological significance" (IOT 391).

1A. Historical Background

Jonah is the main character of the book (all other characters are nameless). He was a prophet in the north during the reign of Jereboam II (786-746).

The main city, Nineveh, was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. During the time of Jereboam, Assyria was just beginning its journey to world dominance; its apex of glory was yet a hundred years down the road when it extended its control to the heart of Egypt (taking Thebes, 664 B.C., cf. IOT 404-405).

Jonah's prophetic ministry thus pre-dates the apex of Assyrian power over the northern kingdom by a couple of decades. Assyria is a somewhat distant but threatening enemy during Jereboam's time (Jereboam expanded territories to the north, 2 Ki. 14:25 into areas that had once been taken by Assyria in its earlier and weaker/ambivalent days). The final decline of Israel begins with Jereboam and takes us to the Assyrian captivity of Israel in 722 B.C.

So, the Nineveh of Jonah's day is a serious enemy of Israel that in thirty or forty years will overrun her borders and destroy Samaria, her capital (as described by Amos; the enemy from the north that will take you to a pagan land *since you live like pagans in the "holy" land*).

If we add the testimony of the book itself our picture of actual history is confirmed. It opens with the phrase, "the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai" which is followed by the command of God directing Jonah to go to Nineveh (1:2). Likewise the word of the Lord came to Haggai (1:1) and Zechariah (1:1).

The command to go to Nineveh is the word of the Lord to his prophet and not an introduction of a parable (if it were how would the other prophetic introductions be kept from being parables).

Interesting note from the text: the book is fascinating and rich because Jonah acts so much like a real person with "roundness of character" (394).

On the other hand, given the arguments for historicity, the book is so life-like because it actually happened and the writer captured the realism.

2A. Literary Analysis

1B. Structure

Longman suggests that there are two scenes, each beginning with God's commission to "Go to the great city of Nineveh" (1:2; 3:2).

But the story line unfolds in four locations: 1) on the ship, 2) in the sea in the fish, 3) in Nineveh, and 4) east of the city. (do we really have two scenes then? We do have two key events that move the story line, God's commission given twice!)

The action of the prophet can be outlined at each location: disobeying, praying, preaching, repining.

A seeming break in the unity of the text is found in the thanksgiving Psalm in the belly of the fish where we might expect a lament psalm; here the prophet expresses great confidence in the Lord (the Lord answered, 2:2; you brought my life up from the pit, 2:6; I will make good my vow, 2:9).

Actually, this psalm gives a central and powerful theme: Salvation is of the Lord.

2B. Genre

Given the argument above, the genre of the book is prophetic enactment; it is an historical account of the experience of the prophet by which he received a word from God.

Thus, God spoke in word and deed. So we have God's action intertwined with the actions of the prophet.

3B. To whom? Audience

Granted Jonah's preaching at Nineveh is reported in a single sentence: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed" (3:4). Audience is not the Ninevites; they were *his audience* but they are not the *audience of the book*.

But the entire book reports God's word to him; God speaks to the prophet in word and deed (Go, 1:2; the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, 1:4; the Lord provided a great fish, 1:17; Go, 3:2; God saw and had compassion, 3:10; the Lord replied, 4:4; God provided a vine, 4:6; God provided a worm, 4:7; God provided a scorching east wind; God said to Jonah, 4:9; and the Lord said, 4:10). Thus, from him it becomes a message from God to the covenant people of God.

3A. Message

The message of the book is about the Ninevites and records briefly what Jonah preached to them. But the book's message is to the prophet and thus to Israel about their relationship to the Ninevite Gentiles, and ultimately about God's relationship to Israel and the nations.

Jesus connects his miraculous deliverance from death with Jonah's experience.

What point is being made in the book? How does Jonah point ahead to Christ? Jonah is an Israelite, the only Israelite of the book. He is a prophet. His experience in the fish is a pit, grave, and death experience from which he is delivered after three days in order to bring good news to the Gentiles.

In all this, the Jonah event prefigured the coming of Christ, the Israelite, prophet of prophets, king of kings (greater than Jonah; greater than Solomon, Matt. 12) in whom God's promises converge and through whom they will be realized. [repenting animals shows restoration of whole creation]

The seed of Eve, the seed of Abraham, the greater Isaac, will not be spared the knife but will be delivered from death in three days in order to bring good news of God's compassion to the nations (Abraham believed in resurrection of his seed; Jonah indicates that this refers to a three day experience of the prophet to the nations).

Thus, though the Gentiles are enemies of God's people, and underserving cruel sinners, if God sets his love upon them they will be saved. This is why Jonah flees to Tarshish. He is not afraid of the Ninevites though deep fear of them would be very reasonable. He is afraid that God will bless them through his message.

The contrast between Jonah and Jesus

Jesus did not have this exclusivist spirit. When lifted up on the cross, he will draw men of all nations to himself (Jn. 12:32). Jonah disobeyed, reluctantly preached, and repined at God's mercy. Jesus obeyed and willingly gave his life for his sheep which includes many others besides a remnant from the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Jn. 10).

We have here an OT version of the golden rule in the shade giving vine event. "What the vine did for you giving shade, comfort, and protection for your well-being, you ought to do for others." And the greater than Jonah, Jesus, did exactly that when he secured the deliverance of Jew and Gentile alike through his death and resurrection.

