

Jonah

Overview and Summary

Author:

- ⇒ There is no author mentioned in the actual book, but from history and from its detailed account of the events at play it can easily be assumed that Jonah is the author of this book.
- ⇒ Jonah was a prophet to the northern nation of Israel.
- ⇒ Jonah is the only prophet to be specifically sent to a foreign people group to prophesy, so in one way Jonah is a foreign missionary.

Date:

- ⇒ Jonah's date of birth and death are unknown.
- ⇒ The book contains no actual reference to the timing of the events detailed in Jonah's account, so dating these events must be done by outside sources.
 - The only other reference to the prophet Jonah in the Old Testament narrative comes in the single mention of the prophet in 2 Kings 14:25. In the New Testament, Jonah is mentioned three times (Matt 12:39-41, 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Each of the New Testament references plays off of the typological connection of Jonah to Jesus.
- ⇒ In 2 Kings 14:25 we read, "He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher."
 - This reference places Jonah's prophetic ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753BC), making Jonah a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Amos.
 - Some scholars believe one can further narrow down the dates of these events by looking at the history of Assyria. Around 760BC Assyria was experiencing famine, economic turmoil, political upheaval, and even a solar eclipse. Such events left Assyria in a vulnerable state to hear and receive Jonah's proclamation to repent. If this is true, then the events in this book can be further narrowed to 760-753BC.

Audience:

- ⇒ There is no audience mentioned in the actual book, but since Jonah is mentioned as a prophet to Jeroboam we can assume his primary prophetic ministry was to the northern nation of Israel. However, because of the content of Jonah's book, it can

also be assumed that his message was intended for the southern nation of Judah as well.

Assyria:

- ⇒ During the time of Jonah's ministry Assyria was still a very strong nation on the world stage. The capital of Assyria was not Ninevah, nor was Ninevah the largest city in the nation. A century before Jonah, Assyria's capital had moved from Assur to Calah which was 20 or so miles southeast of Ninevah.
 - Ninevah and its surrounding area had approximately 300,000 people at the time of Jonah.
- ⇒ The Assyrians were not only a strong nation, but they were known for their cruelty over those they captured. A record of their cruelty has been found in the annals of Ashurnasirpal which states, "I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city. With their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool, [and] the rest of them the ravines and torrents of the mountain swallowed. I carried off captives [and] possessions from them. I cut off the heads of their fighters [and] built [therewith] a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls."

How to Interpret Jonah:

- ⇒ Made up of only four Hebrew words, Jonah only contains one instance of actual prophecy. Jonah 3:4b states "Yet forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown." Unlike other prophets to Israel and Judah, Jonah's message is not contained in his actual prophetic oracles but in the overall storyline of the book. We may conclude that the book of Jonah has more to do with the historical books of the OT than the actual prophetic books.
- ⇒ Scholars over the centuries have struggled with how to interpret this book. With the miraculous swallowing of Jonah by a whale to an entire city (animals included) repenting (of which we have no historical record), many have decided to interpret this book (with its miracles) as allegory, parable or midrashic.
 - Allegory – Jonah represents the nation of Israel and the swallowing of Jonah by the whale represents the upcoming Assyrian/Babylonian exiles.
 - Parable – The Jonah story is made up, meant to relay the importance of God's justice and mercy or is a parable to condemn the exclusivism of the Israelite people and promote God's concern for all people, even Gentiles.
 - Jonah was a real person but his history has been embellished to promote certain ideals.
- ⇒ The preferred means of interpretation is to see this book as a history.

- Miracles are not to be scientifically explained away and just because we do not currently have historical record of an event happening in Assyria over 2800 years ago, does not negate that these events really did occur.
- If we believe God is sovereign over creation, than God can easily perform miracles that go outside of scientific or historical explanation.

Problematic Texts:

⇒ Besides the miraculous events of this book, there are two primary text that have given interpreters trouble. However, each are easily understood and explained away with a little historical digging.

- Jonah 3:3b states, “Now Ninevah was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk.” What seems to be implied by this statement is that Ninevah was such a large city that it took three days to walk across it. However, estimates suggest Ninevah city limits was only around 1.5 sq/mi, a size that would not have taken three days to walk across. Many suggest that the term “three days walk” does not refer to the size of the city but the time it would take Jonah to complete his prophetic mission in Ninevah. Others suggest that the term “three days walk” refers to Ninevah and it’s surrounding areas. Still others suggest that a prophet would take three days to declare his prophecy, opposed to simply coming one day, preaching, and then immediately leaving.
- Jonah 3:6 says, “When the word reached the king of Ninevah.” This text is problematic for some because there was no king in Ninevah. As was suggested before, Ninevah was not the capital, Calah was. This term seems to refer, not to the king of Assyria but to a “king” of Ninevah. The Hebrew word for “king” could simply refer to a ruling authority of Ninevah, such as a governor or some other dignitary.



Structure & Content:

⇒ The book of Jonah can be outlined by each of its four chapters¹:

- Chapter 1 – Jonah and the pagan sailors who turn to the Lord
 - Chapter 2 – Jonah and the Lord: Jonah's song of thanksgiving for his salvation
- Chapter 3 – Jonah and the pagan Ninevites who turn to the Lord
 - Chapter 4 – Jonah and the Lord: Jonah's anger over the Lord's compassion on Ninevah

⇒ Chapter 1

- Jonah is presented as a prophet to whom the word of the Lord came, telling him to “get up” and go to the Assyria city of Ninevah to pronounce judgment upon the people for their great evil. The text shows us Jonah's perception of this judgment through his actions. Instead of “getting up” to go to Ninevah, Jonah “went down” to Joppa. From this point the idea that Jonah “went down” instead of standing up to go, is played out four times in this chapter. From Jonah's prayer in chapter two we can see that the prophet recognizes at this point that he is “going down” to Sheol. Jonah 1:3 highlights this decline in our prophet by saying that Jonah went “away from the presence of the LORD.” Jonah's destination, Tarshish, is under some dispute, but many believe it to be on the eastern banks of Spain. In any case, Jonah is fleeing in the complete opposite direction than Ninevah, which lays inland, north and east of Israel.
- At this point, a large windstorm surrounds the ship in the Mediterranean Sea. It is important to note that the narrative tells us that this was not mere coincidence but “that the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea.” Here, we begin to see another motif of the book of Jonah, namely God's omnipotence and omniscience. Specifically in chapter one we see God in control of the wind, the casting of lots, and a large “fish” that swallows Jonah. Nothing is given to fate or chance, but each aspect of this true story is attributed to the hand and will of God.
- As the windstorm prevails over the sea, threatening to rip the ship apart, Jonah has “gone down” into the hull of the ship to sleep. He is awoken by the Captain who pleads for him to do as his fellow sailors are doing, crying out to their various gods. When that did not work, the sailors decided to cast lots to decide who was to blame. God's hand was over the lots, which then pointed to Jonah being the problem. Confronting the prophet, the sailors begin to

¹ Taken from “The Message of the Twelve” by Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. & Gary E. Yates

pepper Jonah with question about his person, nature, and reasoning why his God would be angry with him. Interestingly enough, in answering their questions, Jonah says “I am a Hebrew and I fear the God of heaven.” As a reader, his fear seems misplaced as we know that he has responded to God’s word by running away from it, not embracing it. Later on in the chapter we will see that it is actually the sailors who fear God, not the prophet of God (1:6).

- Wondering what they might do to appease God and turn His anger, Jonah, sacrificially and selflessly, suggests that he be thrown overboard. The other sailors reject this solution and press on by rowing even harder, but to no avail.
- At the end of their whit, we read that the sailors call upon the name of the Lord pleading for their innocence as they prepare themselves to throw Jonah overboard. Interestingly, once again we see that the pagan sailors call out to the Lord before the prophet of God. The author seems to be playing on the idea that pagans are responding properly to God while Jonah, who should know better, is not. The sailors then pick up Jonah and throw him into the sea, and the sea immediately ceased from its raging. After seeing the work of the Lord God of Israel the storyline of the sailors ends by saying, “Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.
- Chapter 1 ends with another picture of God’s omnipotence as we read that the Lord “appointed” a great fish (maybe a whale) to swallow Jonah and keep him in his belly for three days and three nights. Whether it was a fish or a whale, we do not know, but the point is that miraculously God appointed a sea creature to swallow Jonah for a specific amount of time.

⇒ Chapter 2

- The second chapter switches pace a bit as the story moves from narrative to a poem spoken by Jonah from within the belly of the great fish. The poem centers around Jonah’s position of distress in the darkness of the whale’s belly, yet there is a glimmer of hope littered throughout his poetic prose suggesting that Jonah has hope for redemption and reconciliation with God.
- Verse three provides us with yet another indication of God’s sovereign omnipotence over Jonah’s life and predicament. “For you cast me” suggests that Jonah recognizes that while it was the sailors who literally cast him overboard, it was God’s plan and direction that was over it all along. Jonah continue by saying, “your breakers and your wave passed over me” once again indicating that God is sovereign over all of creation.

- A note of future redemption is seen in verse four, “yet again I shall look upon your holy temple.” It seems Jonah trusts in God enough to realize that God is not done with him yet and he will one day once again look upon the temple of God in Jerusalem.
- Verses 5 and 6 poetically recount Jonah’s dying, as he was overtaken by the waves and waters, but 6c then moves forward to say, “Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord My God.” The pit refers to his watery grave, and his bringing out of that pit was by the swallowing of the whale. In this sense, Jonah sees the whale not necessarily as a punishment but as a rescuer from his impending death.
- Verse seven recounts when Jonah was near death he “remembered” the Lord, which is a common command given by God to the Israelites to spur on their faithfulness to the Lord. It is reasonable to assume that when Jonah suggests he remembers the Lord, he remembered specifically God’s promises and His faithfulness to His covenant people. Therefore, Jonah could have hope that God would remain faithful to him, even as he is tossed to-and-fro by the waves.
- Verse nine concludes Jonah’s poem by once again hinting at Jonah’s restoration and salvation from the distress of the sea, “But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay.” This implies a future for Jonah. Jonah promises that once he gets out of the whale he will do for the Lord just as he promised he would do. It is a reaffirmation of his ministry for the Lord.
- The chapter closes with yet another sign of God’s omnipotence as he speaks to the fish who promptly spits Jonah out onto dry land.

⇒ Chapter 3

- Spit upon the same shores he left from, Jonah receives a word from the Lord “a second time” instructing the prophet to go eastward to Ninevah and proclaim the Lord’s message to the people. Doing as he was instructing, Jonah goes to the great city of Ninevah and presents the only prophetic oracle written in this book, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”
- Simply put, the biblical record writes that the Ninevites believed God. Such was their belief that it led them to an intentional fast and purposeful mourning. Such fasting and mourning is described from the greatest to least in Ninevah. Similarly, when the governor of Ninevah hears this news, he makes a proclamation of a citywide fast and period of mourning. Included in this fast and mourning were the animals as well. The point being, there was a citywide repentance at play.

- The people of Ninevah were to turn from their evil ways with the hope that God would see the repentance of Ninevah and turn from his anger. God then relents and does not overthrow Ninevah as he said he would through Jonah's oracle.
- The Ninevites (a pagan/Gentile city) are put in stark contrast with Jonah and Israel. At this point in Israel's history they were enthralled with other gods and had become a wayward/disobedient/unrepentant nation. In contrast, the Gentile city known for their ruthlessness had now repented and "believed god." While the story revolves around the actions of the Ninevites, they must be put in contrast with the faithlessness and unrepentant nature of God's covenanted people.

⇒ Chapter 4

- Moving to chapter four, we might be thinking how great it is that a foreign nation repented of their evil ways...well not Jonah. Our English translation lightens the emphasis of verse 1, as it could be translated, "it was a great evil to Jonah." The anger of God toward the evil ways of Ninevah, has been morphed into an anger of Jonah at the evil of a foreign nation repenting and being spared.
- Praying to God, Jonah tells God that this was why he initially fled from Joppa to Tarshish. Jonah knew God was gracious, merciful and loving, and he knew that there was a possibility of the murderous Ninevites repenting and being spared their judgment. For Jonah, he would rather die than see the Ninevites repent and be spared. Jonah's response may be taken from Joel 2:13, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." In a simple reply God chides and corrects Jonah's pitiful attitude, "What do you have to be so angry about?"
- Jonah then moves to the east of the city and sets up camp, "waiting till he should see what would become of the city." Apparently, Jonah was still hoping that the city would be destroyed. It almost seems as if Jonah is taking pleasure in the possibility of the city being destroyed and lives being lost.
- Teaching Jonah a lesson, just as God appointed a great storm and appointed a great whale, he now appoints a plant to "save" the prophet from his "discomfort." Verse six tells us that when the plant gave him shade, Jonah was "exceedingly glad." Compare this 4:1, where Jonah was "exceedingly displeased" that God would spare the Ninevites from destruction.
- The next day God "appointed a worm" to eat the plant so that it would wither. God then appoints a "scorching wind" to beat down on Jonah. Feeling the

beating heat and no longer having shade, Jonah pleads for God to take his life once again, to which God asks the same question, “What do you have to be so angry about?”

- To end the book, God rebukes Jonah for being more pity for a plant that dies in one day than entire nation that God had created and loved. We are not left with Jonah’s response, only with God’s ending question.

Message:

- ⇒ Leon Wood presents three purposes for the message of Jonah
 - God desires for all people to repent and turn to Him, including the Gentile Assyrians (i.e. God has a heart for the nations.)
 - God rebukes the selfish/parochialism of the Israelite nation
 - God foreshadows Christ through his prophet Jonah.