

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Jonah

"Jargon, not argument, is your best ally," said Screwtape to his diabolical apprentice, Wormwood. Screwtape has long been busy convincing humans to dismiss the Book of Jonah as nothing more than an amusing story about Jonah and the "whale." It is easy to assume that a story about a man who though swallowed by a fish lives to tell the tale can safely be ignored. But Screwtape's jargon must not be permitted to win the day.

Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 543.

I. Introduction

The book of Jonah has several unique features which set it apart from other biblical books. For one, its fantastical elements have made it into one of the most familiar children's Bible stories of all time. Ask a child what the book of Jonah is about, and he or she will invariably recount the saga of Jonah's harrowing experience inside the belly of the "great fish." In addition to this, Jonah is also unique in that it is the only book of the prophets that is written almost exclusively in narrative form.¹

So compelling is its literary style and theological message that the book continues to inspire new books and articles uncovering new insights into its form and meaning. In fact, Baldwin notes that at the writing of her commentary (1992), there were over 330 books and articles written about Jonah. How many more have been added since then? Thus, she writes, "There must be more to Jonah than a good story for the book to be inspiring such literature well over two millenniums [*sic*] after the original was written."²

¹ Remember that although Daniel contains numerous narrative sections, it is not considered part of the "Prophets" in the Hebrew canon.

² Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 544.

A. *Date & Authorship*

Interestingly, the text provides no insight into the author of the book. Although the book narrates the story of a man named Jonah, who was "the son of Amittai" (1:1), it never indicates that Jonah was also the individual responsible for the book's composition. Any indications of authorship and date must be based on evidence provided in the book—evidence which can be interpreted differently depending on one's presuppositions.

Thus it's not surprising that the majority viewpoint is that the book is postexilic, specifically during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Proponents of this view point to the language and style of the book, which they feel reflects a style of Biblical Hebrew common among postexilic authors, including "Aramaisms" that reflect Babylonian influence on the language.

The majority view, however, has its challenges and more recent studies have begun to uncover the flaws on their arguments. Aramaic influences could also be explained by Phoenician or Canaanite influences in the region, particularly in Galilee where Jonah was from. Additionally, since Jonah was one of the few prophets from northern Israel, there is the distinct possibility that the language of the book reflects a unique northern Israelite dialect.

With all these evidences in place, there is no need to *prefer* a pre- or postexilic date. Both adequately explain the style and contents of the book. But why does it matter, then? In the instance of Jonah, the date of the book's writing could play an significant role in its purpose—the reason for why the author wrote it, what theological message he was communicating, and to whom it was communicating it. Was is a book originally penned for the instruction of northern Israel (i.e., pre-exilic), or was the book penned by a postexilic Israelite with a message to postexilic Judah? The two recipients would have different historical circumstances that could influence how they read and understood the thrust of the book.

B. *Historical Background*

Regardless of the author and date, the historical background of the book is not difficult to trace. It concerns "Jonah the son of Amittai" (1:1), who is referenced as well in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet who was from Gath-hepher, an area traditionally located in Galilee, around three miles northeast of Nazareth. His location in the northern outskirts of Israel could explain the stylistic differences in the book from other writers, including the Aramaisms.

This information places the events of the book within the reign of Jeroboam II, who ruled northern Israel from 782-753 B.C. Under his leadership, Israel enjoyed a reprieve from a series of ruthless attacks perpetrated by Damascus during the time of Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:5; Amos 1:3). His father Jehoash had managed to regain the Israelite cities that had been captured by the Arameans (2 Kgs 13:25), and when Jeroboam II ascended the throne, it was Jonah the prophet who predicted that Jeroboam would return Israel's borders to their limits during the time of David, a prediction that was eventually fulfilled (2 Kgs 14:25-27). Peace and prosperity followed, as did moral decline and social injustice, which was met with fierce prophetic indignation (Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1). Yet in this pro-

phetic book, God's prophet is sent not to Israel or her king, nor to Damascus, the most recent of Israel's foes, but to Nineveh.

Nineveh was one of three principle cities of the Assyrian empire, a nation infamous for its ruthless hoards of soldiers, its savage treatment of enemies, and its physical, economical, and psychological means of warfare. Without question, Assyria is given the most "press" as an enemy of Israel than any other nation. By the mid-9th century B.C., the kingdom under Shalmaneser III had forced the coastal cities into paying it tribute, and after the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C., Israel too under King Jehu was made a vassal state of Assyria and forced to pay tribute. Assyria's power in the region continued to escalate until the reign of Aššur-dān III, when the nation experienced a series of calamitous events that stalled the nations growth and created provided the much needed political reprieve enjoyed by Israel under Jeroboam II.

At this time, several events were happening in Assyria. For one, they were engaged in a fierce war with the mountain tribes of Urartu, Mannai, and Madai, who managed to extend their front lines to within less than 100 miles of Nineveh.³ At the same time, a series of natural events also occurred. From 765-759 B.C., the empire experienced a famine (or series of famines). In 763 B.C., a solar eclipse occurred that provided ominous signs for the failing ruler. And a major earthquake rocked the region during the time of Jeroboam II (Amos 1:1; Zech 14:5). These events gave rise to rebellions the major cities that lasted until 758 B.C. Additionally, there appears to be evidence of the political weakness of this Assyrian "king," in that there may have been provincial rulers who acted almost as virtual kings, leaving Aššur-dān III as "king" in name only, "his power restricted to little more than the city where he resided."⁴ Thus, "the decree of the king and his nobles" (Jon 3:7) was a required acknowledgement of the "power and influence of such nobles." All this speaks to the increasingly weakened condition of the Assyrian state, who would not begin to regain ascendancy until Tiglath-pileser III seized the throne in 745 B.C.

Thus, Nineveh could not have been more prepared for the arrival of God's message with a message of impending destruction for the city. The historical setting clearly accounts for the Ninevites' ready acceptance of Jonah's message.

II. Major Themes

A. *The Sovereignty of God*

The book of Jonah is teeming with the sovereignty of God. At every turn in the book, God is demonstrating his control over every situation:

- He commands Jonah to preach to Nineveh (1:2)
- He causes a violent storm (1:4)
- He causes the storm to cease (1:15)
- He determined the outcome of the sailors' lots (1:7)
- He commanded a sea creature to swallow Jonah (1:17)

³ H. L. Ellison, "Jonah," in *EBC*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:361.

⁴ Baldwin, "Jonah," 545.

He commanded a sea creature to vomit Jonah onto land (2:10)

He caused a plant to grow (4:6)

He made a worm kill the plant (4:7)

He summoned a hot desert wind (4:8)

On top of that, God also showed himself sovereign over the great city of Nineveh, so that even its king was subject to his decree (1:2; 3:1-10; 4:11). And here we see the object of God's sovereign power: "the reclamation of sinful men."⁵ And here, the satirical absurdity of the narrator surfaces. Jonah has a correct theology of Yahweh. He knows that Yahweh is "the sovereign Yahweh of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9). And he knows that Yahweh manifests his sovereignty in grace toward sinners (4:2).

Yet his "orthodoxy" does not translate into "orthopraxy." He knows truth, but it doesn't produce obedience. Instead, he runs from a sovereign God in the hopes that he can somehow escape his sovereignty.

B. *The Compassion of God*

The other facet of divine character on display in the book of Jonah is God's compassion, particularly for Gentiles. Interestingly, key concepts such as repentance, God relenting of calamity, etc., never appear in the initial call for Jonah to preach to Nineveh. His flight to Tarshish appears out of nowhere. It's not until the city repents that Jonah reveals the reason for his disobedience—he knew this would happen.

Jonah's theology of divine compassion is based solidly in Israelite history. His confession in 4:2 didn't originate with him, but was first revealed by Yahweh himself when Moses pleaded for divine grace in the midst of the golden calf fiasco. As Yahweh's glory passed by Moses, hid in the cleft of the rocks, Yahweh revealed himself as a sovereignly compassionate God. The creed appears again in Numbers 14:18 when Moses pleads for divine forgiveness after Israel refuses to enter Canaan. The appearance of this confession from the lips of Jonah himself signals to the reader that Jonah was well aware of God's historical expressions of compassion toward Israel.

Here, once again, the narrator's satirical audacity explodes. Jonah has been commissioned to be an agent of compassion—bringing a message that is intended to bring about penitence on the part of a Gentile nation. Yet God's messenger refuses to relay the message. He does not share his God's compassion.

Yet the entire narrative recounts God's compassion specifically toward Jonah, and the first taste of this compassion comes from none other than *pagan* sailors who at first refused to cast Jonah into the sea to save their own lives. These men ended up showing more compassion on Jonah than he would ever show on Nineveh. As the story continues, God once again compassionately rescues Jonah, preserving him in the belly of a fish. Yet even then. Eventually he is restored and re-commissioned to take God's message to Nineveh. As he watches from a distance to see what might befall the city, God graciously provides a plant to shade him from the harsh desert heat.

⁵ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 432.

Here, God's sovereignty and compassion intertwine. The book ends with God speaking the last words, and he offers a question which offers no resolution to the tension of the book. God can show compassion on Jonah by rescuing him from the sea, and providing a plant to protect him from the heat, why can't he show the same compassion to the Ninevites?

C. *The Disobedience of Jonah*

The message is unmistakable. Jonah—and Israel with him—had been recipients of divine grace and compassion. Yet they stubbornly refused to show similar compassion on the Gentiles around them. Though their very existence and the basis for their covenant with God was for the blessing of "all the families of the earth" (Gen 12:3), they had become isolationists, tasters of divine care and mercy without the least bit of transformation of the heart. Jonah's failed mission reflects Israel's failed mission. As Chisholm writes,

Though Jonah, like Israel, had been a recipient of God's mercy, the prophet denied the same mercy to the pagan world. Ironically these pagans, whom Jonah loathed for their idolatry (Jonah 2:8), displayed greater spiritual sensitivity than the prophet. Jonah claimed to "worship [lit. "fear"] the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (1:9). His actions, however, contradicted his creed. Whereas Jonah tried to escape from the Creator of the sea via the sea, the pagans genuinely expressed their fear of the Lord through sacrifice and prayer (v. 16). In contrast to Jonah, who disobeyed God's revealed word and presumed on His mercy, the Ninevites responded immediately and positively to God's word and humbly threw themselves at the feet of the sovereign God (3:4-9).⁶

Even what seems like obedience on Jonah's part turns out to be outward only. By chapter 3, Jonah follows God's command and prophecies to Nineveh, yet chapter 4 reveals that his attitude has not changed. His obedience is simply the result of the sovereign hand of God, who has put him in a place where he *must* obey.

His prayer in chapter 2 has the audacity to interpret his current predicament—swallowed for three days by a fish—as divine deliverance! In reality, his *preservation* was based on God's compassion, but his presence in the fish was really reflecting God's sovereign hand that refused to let him go, even when he attempted to escape God's clutches by exiting the ship. Not once in his prayer to God does he express repentance over his disobedience. He is thankful to be alive, but he is still not happy about being God's messenger to Nineveh.

In fact, his final words are this: "I have good reason to be angry, even to death." Thus, Jonah is a stiff-necked, disobedient individual from beginning to end. His disposition and his heart remains the same from the start of the book to its conclusion. Likewise, he represents a nation of stiff-necked, disobedient individuals who do not share God's heart, refuse to respond to the word of God, and express their religion only outwardly.

III. Purpose

The purpose of the book of Jonah turns out to be its biggest interpretive issue. This is because the book's purpose is wrapped up in its genre, and the genre has been debated for over a century.

⁶ Ibid., 433.

A. *Jonah as an Allegory*

Around the Middle Ages, Jewish interpreters began to develop an allegorical approach to the book of Jonah. Jonah's name means "dove," a bird linked in the OT to the nation Israel (Ps 74:19; Hos 7:11; 11:11). These interpreters began to see within the details of Jonah a broad allegory for the nation as a whole. Jonah's flight to Tarshish represented Israel's avoidance of her missions and her disobedience before the exile. His experience in the belly of the whale pictured Israel's entrance into Babylonian captivity. They now have the task of proclaiming their faith to the nations.

B. *Jonah as a Parable*

Like the allegorical approach, viewing Jonah as a parable has the advantage of skimming over the fantastical elements of the story—the fish narrative—in favor of the moral of the story as a whole. Yet while the allegorical approach was concerned with the details of the text, the parable approach takes a macro view of the story as a whole.

Yet if this is a parable, it is unlike any other parable in the Bible. Scripture always provides interpretations of its parables, but here the meaning of the story is left without explanation. Parables in Scripture always apply to a specific situation and contain one appropriate point to that situation. But the book of Jonah is far more complex, with numerous themes and numerous points. And parables in Scripture never identify their "characters" as historical individuals. Yet Jonah is specifically identified in a way that singles him out as the prophet of 2 Kings 14:25.

C. *Jonah as Historical Narrative*

The approach favored here, and the one reflected by the majority of interpreters up to the 19th century, is that the book of Jonah is actually an historical account about a disobedient prophet. In fact, the hinge pin issue that caused scholars to doubt its historical credibility was the unbelievable nature of the fish narrative. Yet it is clear that Jesus considered the story as an historical account, for he referenced it in connection with his own resurrection (Matt 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-30, 32).

With the genre discussed, the purpose of the book becomes the issue. Is it a book focusing on the need for repentance? Is it a theodicy attempting to deal with the tension between divine justice and divine mercy? These, of course, are themes which present themselves. But neither seem to capture the whole. Instead, the book is about Israel as much as it is about Jonah. As a prophet, Jonah represents what Israel was to be—God's servant. Yet just like Jonah, Israel had failed to obey God. They knew him and spoke of him, yet their hearts were far from him. Jonah does not want the Gentiles to have the same compassion from Yahweh as Israel has received.

The book is instructive to Israel not only concerning their isolationist/nationalistic attitudes towards Gentiles, but also that their attitude cannot keep God from bringing repentance to the nations. Jonah's failure as a prophet serves as an object lesson to Israel. God will accomplish his sovereign purposes—even compassion on pagans—and he will continue to work through his stubborn people.

Thus, the purpose statement of the book is this:

While Israel was in ineffective servant, the sovereign Yahweh brought salvation to repentant Gentiles.

IV. Literary Structure

There is a very distinct two-part structure to the book. Each part parallels each other, but each part offers nuances of irony and satire to the story. While there is a commission in both sections, the first is rejected while the second is accepted. In part one, the sailors end up being the exact opposite of Jonah, while in part two, the Ninevites are the exact opposite of Jonah. Each responds appropriately to the word of God in repentance, but Jonah refuses to do so throughout the whole book. Twice, God uses a creature (fish/plant) in Jonah's life, but while Jonah responds with thankfulness to the fish, he responds in complaints.

Notice also that there is nothing corresponding to the final element of part 1. The book ends with no indication of how Jonah responded to God's lesson. The tension remains:

JONAH

	Jonah's First Commission		Jonah's Second Commission
A	Yahweh commissions Jonah (1:1-2)	A'	Yahweh commissions Jonah (3:1-2)
B	Jonah rejects his commission (1:3)	B'	Jonah accepts his commission (3:3)
C	The sovereign Yahweh reveals his power (1:4)	C'	The sovereign Yahweh reveals his plan (3:4)
D	The sailors submit to Yahweh and avert disaster (1:5-16)	D'	The Ninevites submit to Yahweh and avert disaster (3:5-10)
E	Yahweh uses a fish to retrieve Jonah (1:17)	F'	Jonah prays, complaining that Yahweh has saved Nineveh (4:1-4)
F	Jonah prays, thanking Yahweh for saving his life (2:1-9)	F'	Yahweh uses a plant and worm to teach Jonah a lesson (4:4-11)
G	The fish disgorges Jonah (2:10)		