



Introduction

Background

- Name:** The book is named after the primary character, Jonah.
- Author:** Traditionally it has been held that Jonah is the author of the book. However, some bible scholars believe the book to have been written by some anonymous author.
- Date:** Jonah prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). This would put the events of the book in the middle of the 8th century BC. This makes Jonah a contemporary of the prophet Amos and Hosea. Some scholars believe the book was written shortly after the events, while others believe the book was written as late as the 6th century BC by a Judean author¹.
- Audience:** Most likely the people of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II. Under Jeroboam, Israel achieved its most prosperous time since Solomon, regaining territory lost to the Arameans under King Jehu and regaining economic prosperity as well.

Structure

The book of Jonah is unique among the prophets in that it consists of three chapters of narrative and one chapter of poetry. There is no record of the actual prophecies of Jonah. Nonetheless, the historical narrative serves as a prophetic warning to Israel about God's impending judgment and his lovingkindness.

The structure of the book is straight forward, with the outline of the book following the chapter breaks.

Jonah Flees from God's Call	Jonah's Prayer of Thanksgiving	Jonah Prophecies in Nineveh	Jonah's Response to God's Mercy
1	2	3	4

Historicity

Many modern biblical scholars assume that the book of Jonah is an allegory or parable and does not have any basis in historical fact. The events of the book, from the swallowing of a man by a fish to the miraculous repentance of a heathen city seem too fantastic to be true. However, Jesus referred to Jonah and treated the story as a true historical event (Matthew 12:39-41). To doubt the historicity of Jonah is to doubt the words of Christ.

¹ H. L. Ellison. "Jonah." *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998).

Purpose

The book of Jonah is written to demonstrate to Israel that the compassionate God of Israel is the God of the entire world, and that his salvific work is intended not just for Israel, but for the entire world.

Secondly, the book of Jonah will serve eventually as a type of Christ's death, burial and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). Just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster for three days before being raised up by God, so also Christ was buried for three days before being raised by God.

Finally, the book serves as a rebuke to Israel for not responding in repentance to the word of the Lord. Israel was ignoring the prophets of God at a time when heathen sailors and pagan cities repent of their sins when confronted with the awesome power of God (Matthew 12:41).

Theme

Yahweh is the all-powerful and sovereign God who can therefore bestow his grace upon whomever he desires.

...You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. (Jonah 4:2b)

Jonah Runs (Chapter 1)

Why Jonah Runs

Jonah's Call (1:1-3)

Part of the prophetic model is God's call. Most of the prophets share with us how God called them to their ministry. In the case of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, this call was a vision of God himself setting them apart for ministry. Amos and Hosea also relate that God gave them a message and told them for whom that message was intended.

Jonah records his call in 1:1-2. But unlike the other prophets, Jonah breaks with the traditional prophetic model by rejecting God's call. Whereas the response of Isaiah was "Here am I! Send me" (Isaiah 6:8), Jonah's response in 1:3 is to flee.

Historical Background

Jonah fled because he did not like the message God had given him to share:

"Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." (Jonah 1:2)

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Hosea's prophecies regarding Assyria's conquest of Israel came about the same time as Jonah (Hosea 9:3). Furthermore, any astute political and military observer understood the threat that this great power to the north has on Israel's security. Furthermore, at this time Israel's military strength was on the rise and Assyria's dominance was waning. Under King Jehu, Israel had been forced to pay tribute to Assyria, and now under Jeroboam II they had been able to throw off this oppressive tribute.

Jonah is to proclaim to Nineveh that their wickedness had become known to God and that they faced His judgment if they did not repent. But to go to Nineveh to share God's message would be like walking into the middle of the enemy's camp. It would be like going to Moscow during the height of the Cold War and proclaiming that God would destroy the Soviet Union.

Jonah knew that God did not issue a prophecy of judgment for no purpose. God's purpose for Jonah's message was so to give the Assyrians an opportunity to repent. Without repentance, Jonah

knew that God would destroy his nation's biggest threat. Jonah wanted to see Nineveh burn (Jonah 4:2, 5).

Israel was to be the nation through which all the world would come to know that Yahweh is the one true God (Genesis 12:3, 1 Kings 8:60). But this idea was offensive to Jonah. He did not want to be a light to the nations. He wanted to see Nineveh destroyed.

Can You Run From God?

In verse 3, Jonah books passage on a ship to Tarshish in order to "flee... from the presence of the LORD." From the best scholars can tell, Tarshish was a Phoenician colony on the coast of Spain². It represents the most distant place known to Israel at that time³.

Jonah fled to Tarshish to get away from the presence of God. How can this be possible? We know that God is omnipresent. Psalm 139, written by King David 200 years earlier proclaims this clearly:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? (Psalms 139:7)

David's implied answer is simple. Nowhere. You can not flee from the presence of God. Surely Jonah knew this. We know that Jonah has a good understanding of Yahweh's nature, and very likely knew that you can not escape from God. So why did he try to flee?

While it is true that God is everywhere, there is, nonetheless, a sense in which God is *more present* in some locations. Without diminishing God's omnipresent nature, Yahweh has chosen to reveal himself more fully in certain times and in certain places. One example of that is the temple in Jerusalem. At the dedication of the temple by Solomon, the King himself declares "heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built" (1 Kings 8:27). Yet at the completion of this temple God's glory filled it. He revealed himself more fully at that time and at that place (1 Kings 8:10-11).

While Jonah could not ever escape from the Lord's presence, he could avoid those places where God's glory was revealed more fully. We don't know the exact nature of God's communication with Jonah, but very likely wherever this communication took place would have been considered by Jonah to have more of the God's presence. The temple and the nation Israel itself had more of the Lord's presence than would Tarshish.

While Jonah's flight may seem foolish to modern theological thinkers, I think that today we often try to flee from God's presence ourselves. I know that when I am in rebellion from God, the last thing I want to do is meet with other believers for Bible study or prayer. Going to church is too convicting if I am actively quenching the Holy Spirit. So if I am trying to flee God's presence I may avoid church, bible study, or meeting with other believers who may try to hold me accountable.

In this present age we know that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and God's presence is more fully revealed in the temple. When I forsake the assembly of the saints (Hebrews 10:24-25), I am like Jonah, trying to flee from the presence of God.

The Sovereignty of God

As Jonah flees from God, God causes a series of events to bring Jonah back to his calling. The protagonist of this narrative is not Jonah, but God⁴. God is in control of the situation and God is the one who controls the events of the story. When Jonah flees, God causes the storm. When Jonah is thrown overboard, God appoints a great fish to swallow him. When Jonah repents, God commands the fish to expel him. In chapter 4 God appoints a plant to grow and God appoints a worm to eat the plant. God is clearly in control of the circumstances of this story as he drives Jonah to the conclusion

² Charles Feinberg. *The Minor Prophets*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 135.

³ "Jonah." *The Nelson Study Bible*. Radmacher, Earl D., ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1997).

⁴ Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002), 232.

of the book. Jonah may try to flee, but God is the one setting the agenda. He has a message for Nineveh, and Jonah's actions will not get in the way of God's purposes for Nineveh.

This is a demonstration of God's sovereignty and love. No one, even through stubborn disobedience, can thwart God's plan. God's purposes will be accomplished, either through us or in spite of us. In Jonah's case, it was in spite of Him.

This can be a source of encouragement and/or disappointment for us. On the one hand we must be thankful that our sinfulness will not prevent the kingdom of God from advancing. Yet on the other hand, we should be disappointed at all the times we miss out on the blessing of God due to our failure to join Him in his purposes.

The Sailors Reaction

Jonah is asleep in the boar when God raises the storm. The sailors become afraid for their lives. They throw cargo overboard to lighten the load. Each sailor begins to pray to his own god, and they awaken Jonah to ask him to pray to his god. Under polytheism, it would be difficult for the sailors to know which god had displeased them and therefore had to be appeased⁵.

But Jonah knew which God is was. It was Yahweh, the God of heaven and the creator of the sea and the dry land. This was not just some local god that Jonah had offended, but the universal creator⁶. The sailor grew very afraid at hearing this.

Because Jonah knew of God's character, he knew that God would not make the sailors pay for his sin⁷, and so by being thrown overboard, he knew God would spare the sailors. Jonah gave his life to save others.

As soon as Jonah is thrown overboard, the storm ceases and the sea becomes calm. The sailors immediately recognize that Yahweh is the master of the sky and the sea. They proceed to offer sacrifices and vows to the Lord. So Jonah, in his death has proclaimed to these pagans that Yahweh is the one true God.

Jonah Prays (Chapter 2)

While inside the great fish, Jonah repents. His prayer of repentance begins with thanksgiving to the Lord for saving him from drowning in the depths of the sea. This prayer is in the form of a song, and draws phrases and themes directly from the book of Psalms⁸.

Jonah is not praying to be saved from the belly of the fish, but is thanking God for having already saved him⁹. As he was in the sea, he remembered the Lord and prayed to Him. But his prayer was directed toward the place where God's presence is more fully realized: the temple.

"While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, And my prayer came to You, Into Your holy temple. (Jonah 2:7)

In Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple, he instructed Israel that when repenting of sin, they should pray toward the temple (1 Kings 8:30) and God would forgive. Jonah is following Solomon's template and is seeking forgiveness by inclining himself towards God's presence. Jonah is done running.

Jonah then recommits himself to Yahweh by stating that he will "look again toward Your holy temple" (Jonah 2:4).

⁵ Ellison.

⁶ Nelson Study Bible.

⁷ Ellison.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Feinberg, 139.

Nineveh Repents (Chapter 3)

The Greatness of Nineveh

God commands the fish to spit Jonah up on dry land. Then God reiterates his call to Jonah. He still is to go to Nineveh and proclaim his judgment.

Nineveh was one of the largest cities in antiquity. The book of Jonah tells us it had a population of 120,000 persons, and that it took Jonah three days to walk around it. Archeology tells us that the walls of Nineveh were 100 feet tall and thick enough that three chariots could ride abreast on top of the city walls¹⁰. This was truly a great city.

Analyzing Nineveh's Repentance

So Jonah proclaims his message: "in 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown." Amazingly the people believed the message and they fast and pray. The king also prays and commands the whole city to call on God in the hopes that God would relent and withdraw his anger.

While God used Jonah to spark the repentance of Nineveh, God may have been preparing Nineveh for years¹¹. History shows that a few years prior to Jonah's message, the city had been hit with two different plagues which had wiped out a significant portion of the population. Furthermore, the city had experienced a solar eclipse, which would have been seen as an omen by the people. Finally, Assyria was under threat of invasion from its neighbors to the north¹². All of this had been caused by God to prepare the city for Jonah's message.

Jonah did not preach the message that Yahweh is the one and only true God¹³. He only prophesied that the city would be destroyed. The people of Nineveh repented of their evil ways in hopes that God would relent. But this does not mean that they gave up their pantheon of gods and became monotheists. In fact, the memorial name of God, Yahweh, is not found in chapter 3. Instead the more generic term Elohim (translated God) is used.

The Relenting God

While Nineveh may not have embraced Yahweh as the one and only God, God nonetheless decided to withhold his judgment due to their prayers. God did not "change his mind," for his whole purpose in the prophecy of Jonah was to bring the people to this point. God did not have to be convinced to withhold judgment against Nineveh. He was looking for any reason not to judge them.

This is a different picture of God than many see in the prophets. But the message of the prophets is not that God is a judgmental god, but that God is a relenting god. He does not desire that any should perish. He withholds his judgment until he has no other choice. God looks for every opportunity not to punish people.

In 4:2, Jonah says that God is slow to anger. Literally the Hebrew term means, "long of nose." Old Testament Hebrew uses an idiom "the nose burns" as a term referring to anger. It is the picture of some steaming mad with smoke coming out of your nose. To be "long of nose" then means that it takes a long time for that anger to come out and be acted upon¹⁴.

Yes, God does punish sin. But God is "long of nose," and it takes a long time for that anger to be acted upon. He waits until there is no hope of repentance before bringing about judgment.

¹⁰ Feinberg, 145.

¹¹ John D. Hannah. "Jonah." *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck, ed. (Victor Books, 1997), 1462.

¹² Ellison.

¹³ Ellison.

¹⁴ Nelson Study Bible.

God Rebukes (Chapter 4)

Jonah Motives

Jonah's Attitude

Although Jonah responds to the second call by obeying the LORD, the sincerity behind his obedience is unclear. When you look at his anger towards God in chapter 4, Jonah obviously lacked compassion for his audience. He would have rather seen the Ninevites not respond and instead suffer the consequences of sin.

In fact, after proclaiming the message, Jonah camps outside the city and just waits for the fire to come down from heaven. He is hoping against hope that God will not relent and will instead follow through on the judgment.

Yet in spite of Jonah's past record of disobedience and his poor attitude towards the ministry to which he had been called, God used this reluctant prophet. God wanted his message to get through to Nineveh, and He used Jonah in spite of his poor attitude.

Judging the Motives

The effectiveness of this rebellious prophet should also warn us not to judge the motives of people based upon the results of their ministry. Judging Jonah's ministry based on the results would cause you to consider him one of the most worthy of prophets. After all, here one man preached to the most worldly city of the time and brought about a sudden and sincere revival. But his heart was not with God, and he despised the very revival that his prophecy created.

Likewise, if we contrast the attitude and results of Jonah with Jeremiah, we see market contrasts. Whereas Jonah was reluctant, Jeremiah was eager. Whereas the Ninevites were repentant, the Judeans were stubborn.

*But if I say, "I will not remember Him Or speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, And I cannot endure it.
(Jeremiah 20:9)*

Jeremiah was a man consumed with sharing God's word with the people. He could not help but prophecy. His attitude was right. His motives were pure. Yet his audience did not repent. Their response was to mock, persecute, and imprison the messenger. If we were to judge Jeremiah's ministry based on the results, we would consider him the least of the prophets.

We must be careful to not look at the results of one's ministry or endeavors and judge their heart motive based upon the "success" of that endeavor. God is looking for tender and broken hearts, not success stories.

God Rebukes Jonah

When God does not judge Nineveh, Jonah become very angry at the Lord. God answers Jonah's anger first with a question ("do you have good reason to be angry?") and then with an illustration.

While Jonah sits in the hot sun waiting to watch fire come down and destroy Nineveh, God causes a plant to grow, providing shade for Jonah. Then God causes a worm to eat the plant and destroy it.

Jonah becomes unhappy at the death of the plant. God then gives Jonah the morale of the story. Jonah is compassionate towards a plant which provided him shade. But Jonah lacked compassionate for a city of 120,000. Jonah only had compassion for the plant because of what it did for him¹⁵. Jonah's compassion was a selfish compassion. When compassion might cost him something, he was hard and judgmental.

¹⁵ Hannah, 1472.

But God is not that way. God's compassion does not extend only to those who provide some benefit for Him. God's compassion is to those who have rejected him. God demonstrates His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. His compassion is an unselfish compassion.

Conclusion

Jonah resented God's grace and compassion on the people of Nineveh. Nineveh deserved to be destroyed by the Lord. They were an evil and violent people who would think nothing of slaughtering an entire nation of peoples. The Ninevites deserved what was coming to them.

He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. (Jonah 4:2)

When judgment doesn't come, Jonah says he wishes he would die. Jonah has just been rescued from death by the mercy of God and now he would rather die than see others receive that same mercy¹⁶.

Jonah had forgotten that because of his disobedience, he deserved what was coming to him. Jonah had forgotten that because he disobeyed the Lord he faced the wrath of God and deserved to drown in the depths of the sea. But due to the same grace and compassion, which he resented when given to Nineveh, he had been saved from certain death in the sea. What a great irony that Jonah now resented the very same mercy which had saved him.

Too often the church of Christ acts like Jonah. We accept God's grace when extended to us, but we deny it to those who are "less deserving." We look at the world around us and decide that they should "get what they deserve." The extreme example of this came after 9/11 when Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson declared that 9/11 was a punishment from God for the homosexual and hedonistic lifestyle of America. In the 1980s, the church was slow to respond to the AIDS crisis because it was a "homosexual" disease, and they were just getting what they deserved. You act a certain way, and the consequences of that behavior will rightly catch up with you.

While most believers rightly condemned such thinking, we act like this is true, and in so doing act like Jonah. I have often used the "natural consequence of their behavior" rationale for not showing compassion to even my own extended family. They are just getting what they deserve, and if I bail them out, then they will never learn.

But this is Jonah's attitude. I would rather see Nineveh destroyed than see them experience the grace of God. I have forgotten that I'm like Jonah, a man who only lives through the grace of God, the same grace I would deny the world around me. For, if any of us truly received what we deserved, we would all be condemned to an eternity in hell.

When we look at the world around us, may we not be like Jonah, who hopes the world gets what it deserves. God forbid that any of us get what we deserve. Instead, may we remember that God has forgiven us for running from Him, that God has snatched us from death, and that God has rescued us from what we deserve. May we desire that the world around us not get what they deserve, but instead are able to experience the grace, compassion, lovingkindness and relenting nature of our God.

¹⁶ Fee and Stuart, 232.

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