

# DISCUSSION OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

## OUTLINE

### I. Background

#### A. Who was Jonah?

1. Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet who lived either shortly before or during the early part of the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel's northern kingdom from 786-746 B.C. Jonah has prophesied that the northern kingdom would regain its original borders, which it had gradually lost, especially during the domination of Assyria in the ninth century B.C. This restoration occurred during Jeroboam II's reign despite his sinfulness.
2. Jonah was from Gath-hepher, a small town near Nazareth, at the eastern edge of the tribe of Zebulun.

#### B. What was the significance of Nineveh?

1. Nineveh, located in the northeast Mesopotamia, was an old city, dating from the time before Abraham. Genesis lists it as one of the cities of the kingdom of Nimrod. Gen. 10:14-15. It became the capital of the Assyrian empire, which along with Babylon rose to dominate the Near East starting in 1300 B.C.
2. During the ninth century B.C. Assyria rose to a high point, dominating Babylon and much of the Near East. It subjected the southern kingdom to vassalage and threatened the northern kingdom. However, starting around 824 B.C., it suffered a series of setbacks and, at the time of Jonah, was in gradual decline.
3. However, Assyria rose again to dominance again under Tiglath-Pileasar III, who reigned from 745-727 B.C. In 732 B.C., he conquered the northern kingdom and placed a puppet king Hoshea on the throne of that kingdom. Hoshea tried to rebel in 722 B.C., at which time Shalmaneser IV invaded. His successor Sargon re-conquered the northern kingdom and deported its people. 2 Kings 17. The next Assyrian king Sennacherib tried to conquer the southern kingdom in 701 B.C., but failed, after the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 members of his army outside the wall of Jerusalem.

4. After this failure Assyria began declining again, as Babylon reasserted itself. Eventually, the enemies of Assyria overthrew the empire. Nineveh itself was destroyed in 612 B.C.

5. Assyrians could be ruthless and domineering. See Isaiah 10:5-11; Nahum 3:1-2. They frequently exiled conquered people's and scattered them, keeping them from mounting a revolt. Isaiah, who prophesied from about 742-700, describes Assyria as both God's instrument of punishment, and also as an unjust nation. See, e.g., Isaiah

7:18-19; 10:5-23; 14:24-27

C. Is the book a description of actual events?

1. Some argue that the largely humorous, satirical tone of this book indicates it is simply like an extended parable meant to teach a lesson about nationalism and prophesy. They point out that there was no clear record of a massive repentance in Nineveh.

2. However, Jesus said that the men of Nineveh will rise in testimony against the people of His generation because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, while the society of Jesus' time did not. See Matt. 12:41. It would be odd for a fictitious people to rise in judgement, or to use their fictitious repentance to put the current society to shame.

3. In addition, the Jewish people historically have divided their Scriptures into three parts: (1) the Pentateuch (Torah), (2) the prophets, which includes history (Nevi'im); and (3) the writings, i.e., wisdom literature (Ketubim). They list Jonah (unlike Job) with the history and prophets, which indicates that they considered it to describe real events.

4. A broad repentance by Nineveh in the early eighth century B.C. may well have been the reason God spared the city and the Assyrian Empire for a time, and in fact allowed it to be the force that would put an end to Israel's northern kingdom. However, its repentance did not last and it became ruthless again, leading to its demise.

5. It is likely that the book does describe real history, but in a more informal fashion than usual accounts of history would be recorded. It leaves out a great deal of information, especially about other factors that may have caused Assyria's

repentance

## D. Overall Themes

1. At one level, the book is a critique of the view that all other nations are simply cut off from God, and a desire to see them punished even if they do repent. Isaiah, who would prophesy a few decades after Jonah, described the punishment of foreign nations (as well as of Israel), but also God's call to all peoples. E.g., Isaiah 56:6-8; 60:5-14.
2. In a larger sense, Jonah reflects God's desire to reconcile all people to Himself, and a warning to His spokesmen to be open to such reconciliation.
3. Jonah is also a semi-humorous commentary on prophesy and preaching, poking fun at both the reluctance to preach the word of God and an eagerness to condemn people.
4. Jonah is the only prophet that Jesus expressly compares Himself to in the Gospels. See Matthew 12:39-40, 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:29-30. This comparison is perhaps a bit surprising, for Jonah was not one of the more impressive figures of the Old Testament.

## II. The Call of Jonah and Jonah's Flight (Ch. 1-2)

### A. The Call of Jonah and His Attempt to Avoid it.

1. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah. This receipt of the word of God is the classic way that one receives the call to prophesy. See, e.g., Isaiah 6:1- 7:3, 49:1-3; Jeremiah 2:4-10. One cannot be a prophet by one's own power. See 2 Peter 1:20.
2. Jonah is very reluctant to be a prophet, possibly because of the potential for persecution, or possibly because he does not want Assyria to repent and be saved. That nation had caused so much damage that many were likely looking forward to its destruction. It was common for true prophets and others called by God to be reluctant. See., e.g., Exodus 3:4ff.; Judges 6:11-24; Jer. 1:6.

3. Jonah tries to flee to Tarshish, which was apparently a Phoenician colony in Spain. The idea was to get as far away as possible. Isaiah will later prophesy that people as far away as Tarshish will bring wealth to Israel. Isaiah 60:9.

## B. The Near Shipwreck and the Sailors' Response

1. Jonah failed to realize God's determination to make him a prophet. The mariners at first sensibly try to lighten the weight of the ship. They then turn to what prayer they know, i.e. to various gods, hoping that one of them will help.

2. Jonah's sleep is surprising, but is an analogy to all those who are in danger of destruction because of their vices, but ignore that fact. Even on a natural level, people often try to avoid troubles by distractions or sloth.

3. The sailors then figure out that someone aboard has offended someone in the heavens. Either the Lord responds to their primitive attempt to figure out who it is, or perhaps the captain knew it was Jonah and rigged the casting of lots. When it is important, God can use seemingly random means to show forth His will. See, e.g., Joshua 7:14-24; 1 Sam. 10:20; Acts 1:26; Prov 16:33.

4. Jonah at last takes some responsibility and tells them that they must cast him into the sea. The sailors' reluctance indicates a certain respect for life, even among pagans. Nevertheless, they eventually realize that they must do as Jonah says.

5. Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, which in principle could occur naturally. But the timing indicates a miracle. Jesus identifies it as a whale, but the term could simply mean any very large marine animal. Matt 12:20.

## C. Jonah's Canticle

1. Jonah's canticle contains many phrases from the Psalms. It especially reflects Psalm 18, which describes David's successful escape from Saul, who was trying to kill him. There is an irony here, because here Jonah is the guilty one, but God spares him all the same, indicating that God's call is more powerful than human weakness.

2. That Psalm and others use storms at sea as an analogy for dangers in life. See also Psalms 69:2-3; 124:4. In Jonah's case, the analogy comes to life.

3. The canticle emphasizes the importance of the Temple, for Jonah's desire for life above all is based upon his desire to worship God and sacrifice in the Temple. See verses 5, 11. And the deliverance occurred when Jonah's prayers reached the Temple. See verse 8. Thus, even though the book describes God's concern for all peoples, it also focuses on the importance of the Temple. This focus is especially important, given the fact that Jonah was from the northern kingdom, which did not respect the Temple.

#### IV. Jonah's Second Call (Ch. 3:1-4)

- A. God saves Jonah and again calls for him to prophesy. But God says that He will reveal the message later.
- B. The message is very short and to the point: Nineveh is about to be destroyed because of its sins.

#### V. The Repentance of Nineveh, the Anger of Jonah, and God's Response (Ch. 3:5-4:11)

- A. Nineveh repents as no nation has ever before or since. They use the classic means of fasting (here meaning a complete rejection of food and drink), wearing sackcloth, and sitting in ashes. Even the animals join in.
- B. They do not know whether they will be forgiven, but simply hope in the dark. There seems to be some underlying faith in God, albeit with only the vaguest concept of who He may be. They are in this sense somewhat similar to the magi. God's forbearance is an indication of the fact that prophecies of total destruction are generally reversible.
- C. Jonah, apparently unaware of any connection to God's mercy towards him, is angry that God has shown mercy towards this city that formerly oppressed the nations. He seems to think that God's mercy should be limited to His Chosen People. Compare with Exodus 2:1-14; Numbers 10-25; Psalm 86. Jonah makes this clemency an excuse for his initial reluctance to prophesy. If this excuse describes Jonah's real motivation, he is apparently unaware that the greatest accomplishment of a prophet is to convert the people. See Matt. 18:15; James 5:19-20.
- D. God then tries to use a natural symbol, a gourd tree, to bring Jonah to understand His love for all people. One implication of this analogy between the gourd tree and the people of Nineveh is that all people are not only loved by God, but also useful to all

of the faithful.

## VII. What Did Jesus Mean by the Sign of Jonah?

A. Jesus said in several places that His generation will receive no sign, except the sign of Jonah. See Matthew 12:39-40, 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:29-30.

B. One meaning is that His resurrection would be an even greater sign that Jonah being saved from the seas and the whale. In fact Jonah's canticle and psalms of deliverance, such as Psalm 18, can be applied more appropriately to Jesus than to their own authors.

C. Another meaning is that the presence of Jesus is more powerful than that of Jonah, for it can not only bring about great repentance, but also full forgiveness of sins and restoration to adopted sonship with God. Jonah's preaching led to a repentance that delayed the destruction of Nineveh, but the city never really came to know God, and eventually fell back to its old ways, resulting in its destruction.

D. In addition, as the power of God showed forth in Jonah's ability to bring Nineveh to repentance, the power of the grace won by Christ is manifested by the ability of His disciples to bring individuals and nations into the faith. See, e.g., Acts 2:1-41.