



An Introduction to the Book of Jonah

Author and Title

The title of the book is the name of the main character, Jonah. The book is anonymous, and there are no indicators elsewhere in Scripture to identify the author. The foundational source for the book was likely Jonah's own telling of the story after his return from Nineveh.

Date

Since Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (782-753BC), as documented in 2 Kings 14:23-28, and since Sirach 49:10 from the 2nd Century BC refers to the 'twelve prophets', namely the 12 Minor Prophets of which Jonah is the fifth, the Book of Jonah was written sometime between the middle of the 8th and the end of the 3rd Centuries. No compelling evidence leads to a more precise date.

Theme

The Lord is a God of boundless compassion not just for 'us', i.e. Jonah and the Israelites, but also for 'them', that is, the pagan sailors and Ninevites.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the Book of Jonah is to engage readers in theological reflection on the compassionate character of God, and in self-reflection on the degree to which their own character reflects this compassion, to the end that they become vehicles of this compassion in the world that God has made and so deeply cares about.

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23-28), who ruled in the Northern Kingdom of Israel from 782BC to 753BC. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814BC to 798BC. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Aramæans (2 Kings 13:3). However, because

of the Lord's great compassion (2 Kings 13:4 and 13:23), Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression. This deliverance came through a 'saviour' (2 Kings 13:5), who may have been Adad-nirari III (810-783BC), king of Assyria.

Jeroboam's father, Jehoash (798-782BC), capitalised on this freedom from Aramæan oppression and began to expand Israel's boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:25). Although Jeroboam <<***did what was evil in the sight of the Lord***>> (2 Kings 14:24), he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25); this was: <<***according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher***>> (2 Kings 14:25). Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people.

In God's providence, the expansion by Jeroboam was made easier because of Assyrian weakness. The Assyrians were engaged in conflicts with the Aramæans and the Urartians. There was also widespread famine, and numerous revolts within the Assyrian Empire, where regional governors ruled with a fair degree of autonomy. Then there was an auspicious eclipse of the sun during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771-754BC). This convergence of events supports the plausibility of the Ninevites being so responsive to Jonah's call to repent.

It was not until some years later that Tiglath-pileser (745-727BC) would gain control and re-establish Assyrian dominance in the area, and his son Shalmaneser V (727-722BC) was the king responsible for the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 722BC. Thus Jonah prophesied in an era when Assyria was not an immediate threat to Israel and when Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because of the compassion of God.

Genre

The genre of Jonah is debated. The book has been read as an allegory, using fictional figures to symbolise some other reality. According to this interpretation, Jonah is a symbol of Israel in its refusal to carry out God's mission to the nations. The primary argument against this view is that Jonah is clearly presented as an historical and not a fictional figure. Another proposal is that the book is a parable to teach believers not to be like Jonah. Like allegories, parables are also based on fictional and not historical characters. Parables, however, are typically simple tales that make a single point, whereas the Book of Jonah is quite complex and teaches a multiplicity of themes.

The Book of Jonah has all the marks of a prophetic narrative, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 and 2 Kings, which set out to report actual historical

events. The phrase that opens the book <<***the word of the Lord came to***>> is also at the beginning of the first two stories told about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2 and 2:8), and is used in other prophetic narratives as well, e.g. 1 Samuel 15:10 and 2 Samuel 7:4. Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the Book of Jonah, as when the fish provides transportation for the prophet. In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah's prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the Book of Jonah. It is difficult to say that the story teaches God's sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact 'appoint' the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the east wind (4:8) to do his will. Jesus, moreover, treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events, refer to Matthew 12:40-41. This is especially clear when Jesus declared that: <<***The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah***>> (Matthew 12:41a).

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history's sake. The book is clearly didactic, as the allegorical and parabolic interpretations rightly affirm; that is, the story is told to teach the reader key lessons. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of 14 being addressed to Jonah, and the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to the story.

Key Themes

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to 'us' but also available for 'them'. This is clear from the flow of the story and its conclusion:

1. Jonah is the object of God's compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion.
2. The story ends with the question: <<***should I not be concerned about Nineveh?***>> (4:11). Tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question, Do readers of the story have hearts that are like the heart of God? While Jonah was concerned about a plant that perished (4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (1:14), their captain (1:6), and the king of Nineveh (3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not perish.

Several other major themes in the book include:

1. God's sovereign control over events on the earth.
2. God's determination to get his message to the nations.
3. The need for repentance from sin in general.
4. The need for repentance from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular.
5. The full assurance that God will relent when people repent.

History of Salvation Summary

Jonah's rescue from death provides an analogy for the resurrection of Christ (Matthew 12:39-40). The repentance of the Ninevites anticipates the wide-scale repentance of Gentiles in the messianic era, refer to Matthew 28:18-20 and Luke 24:47.

Literary Features

The Book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible. The author employs structure, humour, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism, i.e. the combination of two contrasting words to refer to an entirety, to communicate his message with great rhetorical power. The first example of this sophistication is seen in the outline of the book.

The main category for the book is satire: the exposure of human vice or folly. The four elements of satire take the following form in the Book of Jonah:

1. The object of attack is Jonah and what he represents—a bigotry and ethnocentrism that regarded God as the exclusive property of the believing community, in the OT the nation of Israel.
2. The satiric vehicle is narrative or story.
3. The satiric norm or standard by which Jonah's bad attitudes are judged is the character of God, who is portrayed as a God of universal mercy, whose mercy is not limited by national boundaries.
4. The satiric tone is laughing, with Jonah emerging as a laughable figure, someone who runs away from God and is caught by a fish, and as a childish and pouting prophet who prefers death over life without his shade tree.

Three stylistic techniques are especially important:

1. The gigantesque motif, i.e. the motif of the unexpectedly large, e.g. the magnitude of the task assigned to Jonah, of the fish that swallows him, and of the repentance that Jonah's eight-word sermon accomplishes.
2. A pervasive irony, e.g. the ironic discrepancy between Jonah's prophetic vocation and his ignominious behaviour, and the ironic impossibility of fleeing from the presence of God.
3. Humour, as Jonah's behaviour is not only ignominious but also ridiculous.

The Setting of Jonah (circa 760BC)

Jonah prophesied during the politically prosperous time of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23-28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgement upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and travelled overland to Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.



Regional Map

Outline

- I. Jonah Tries to Run Away from God (1:1-17)
 - a. Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1-3)
 - b. Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4-17)
- II. A Psalm of Thanksgiving (2:1-10)
- III. Conversion of Nineveh (3:1-10)
 - a. Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1-3a)
 - b. Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b-10)
- IV. Jonah's Anger (4:1-8)
- V. Jonah Is Reproved (4:9-11)

The story of Jonah unfolds in seven episodes. The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. By this paralleling the author invites the reader to make a number of comparisons and contrasts, which will be drawn out in the notes. The final episode is unparalleled and thus stands out as the climax of the story, ending with the penetrating question: **<<And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?>>**