

LESSON 1 ~ JONAH

God's loving concern for the Gentiles is not a truth disclosed only in the New Testament. More than seven centuries before Christ, God commissioned the Hebrew prophet Jonah to proclaim a message of repentance to the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jewish nationalism, however, blinded both the prophet and covenant people to God's worldwide purposes of salvation. The story of Jonah is one of the clearest demonstrations in Scripture of God's love and mercy for all peoples.

Author

The book of Jonah has no stated author, though tradition ascribes it to Jonah, a prophet of the Northern Kingdom during the eighth century B.C. It is reasonable to suppose that Jonah himself would have recorded the unique experiences described in the book. This man, whose name means "dove," was the son of Amittai (1:1) and a native of Gath Hopher (2 Kin. 14:25) in Zebulun, a town about two miles north of Nazareth. Jonah is described in terms that point to his being a real person and his experiences actual and historical.

Date

Jonah was a contemporary of Jeroboam II of Israel (782–753 B.C.) who ministered after the time of Elisha and just before the time of Amos and Hosea. Israel was enjoying a period of resurgence and prosperity, and nationalistic fervor was probably high.

Assyria, a nation which had achieved a near-legendary reputation for cruelty, was in mild decline during these years, but it remained a threat. The repentance of Nineveh probably occurred in the reign of Ashurdan III (773–755 B.C.). Two plagues (765 and 759 B.C.) and a solar eclipse (763 B.C.) may have prepared the people for Jonah's message of judgment.

While some have argued that the book of Jonah was written in the post-exilic period in order to contradict the Jewish particularism of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, the teaching that God's plan includes the Gentiles is by no means unique to Jonah in the Old Testament (Gen. 9:27; 12:3; Lev. 19:33; Is. 2:2; Joel 2:28–32), and other arguments for a postexilic date are not persuasive.

Themes and Literary Structure

The interpretation of the book of Jonah is conditioned by the type of literature it is thought to be. Quite a few scholars, finding the story of Jonah's being swallowed by the great fish incredible, have viewed the book as an example of myth, allegory, or parable. But there is little reason to take the book as other than historical. Apart from the lament in chapter 2, the material is presented in straightforward prose, unlike the legendary poetic stories of the period. Scripture presents the story as historical and the application of Jonah's experience to Christ's resurrection (Matt. 12:39–41) demands that we take the account with utmost seriousness.

From a literary perspective, the book of Jonah displays remarkable structural symmetry and is developed by two parallel cycles that continually call for comparison. In addition, the book is rich in irony: the disobedience of the prophet is contrasted with the surprising faith of the mariners (ch. 1), and Jonah's petty concern for the plant contrasts with God's gracious care and concern for the people of pagan Nineveh (ch. 4).

The book of Jonah may be divided into the first commission of Jonah (chs. 1; 2) and the second commission of Jonah (chs. 3 and 4).

As already noted, the pervading theme in Jonah is God's gracious extension of His mercy to gentile nations, but other important themes are also evident. The sovereignty of God over life, elements, and circumstances is clearly stressed in the descriptions of the storm (1:4), the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), and the worm (4:7).

The book of Jonah also served to challenge the nationalistic pride of Israel and her failure to comprehend the nature of her missionary task and the purpose of God to bestow his loving kindness upon all peoples. The change in Jonah's own attitude is symbolic of the change God required of Israel as a whole.

Jonah's three-day experience in the belly of the fish also serves as a type of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:39–41). Here it should be noted that the Hebrew idiom, "three days and three nights," only requires a portion of the first and third days.

1

Understand The Background

1. The prophet Jonah served God in the northern kingdom while Jerebaom II reigned. Read 2 Kings 14:23-28. We learn that the story in the book of Jonah is not the only prophesying that Jonah did, which is a lesson for us about all the prophets. What is recorded is not necessarily all they said or did.
2. Read about the application of Jonah in the NT. Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32; Matthew 16:4.

Outline of Jonah

I. The First Commission of Jonah 1:1–2:10

- A. The Disobedience to the First Call 1:1–3
- B. The Judgment on Jonah Is Exacted 1:4–17
- C. The Prayer of Jonah 2:1–9
- D. The Deliverance of Jonah 2:10

II. The Second Commission of Jonah 3:1–4:11

- A. The Obedience to the Second Call 3:1–4
- B. The Judgment on Nineveh Averted 3:5–10
- C. The Prayer of Jonah 4:1–3
- D. The Rebuke of Jonah by God 4:4–11

2

¹*Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts : Old and New Testaments.* electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1996.

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Study Questions For Jonah Chapters 1-2

1. Why did Jonah set sail for Tarshish?

2. Why did he think he could escape the presence of Yahweh, whom he said created the sea and land?

3. How was it determined that Jonah was the cause of the storm?

4. Do you find anything noteworthy about Jonah's response to the sailors?

5. Why did Jonah advise the sailors to throw him into the sea? Why didn't they do it at first?

6. Why did God "prepare" a great fish to swallow Jonah? Note: "prepare" means to count, assign or ordain.

7. What is Jonah basically saying to God in his prayer?

8. Thought Question: Is the story of Jonah historical or myth? Why or why not?