

IV. Jonah

A. The name and the writer

The book derives its name from Jonah the son of Amittai (1:1). In 2 Kings 14:25 a prophet of this same name is said to come from Gath-hepher, a place N. of Nazareth in the N. Kingdom. According to this reference he must have lived either during or before the time of Jeroboam II. If it was during the time of Jeroboam, then he was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea (ca 782-753, sole reign of Jeroboam; co-reg. with Jehoash, 793-753). He prophesied that Jeroboam would regain the ancient boundaries from Hamath in the North to the Sea of the Arabah in the South. (ha^a-raba is the name applied generally to the rift valley running from the Sea of Tiberias to the Gulf of Aqabah. The Dead Sea is thus called the Sea of the Arabah in several places in the Old Testament.)

Other than this we know nothing of Jonah apart from what is told in the book.

The author of the book is not specified, but there are no compelling reasons to assume that Jonah was not the author. It should be added, however, that if the book was written by someone other than Jonah that in no way affects its authenticity since the writer is not specified. (Some want to date the book late, cf. Freeman, for reasons [e.g., the presence of Aramaisms and its universalistic emphasis that is said to be post-exilic] and rebuttal.)

B. The nature of the book - historical or non-historical

The book distinguishes itself from the rest of the minor prophets in that its content is not just a record of Jonah's prophecies, but it is a narrative in which the prophet is the central figure. In this respect it bears more resemblance to the narratives connected with Elijah and Elisha in the book of Kings than it does to the other prophetic books.

There is a wide diversity of viewpoint with respect to the character of this narrative. While its religious value is recognized by almost everyone, its historical value is often considered to be little or nothing. Since this book is one of the first to be cited by those who challenge the historical reliability of the Bible we should consider this question in some detail.

It is often said that the author had a didactic purpose in mind when he wrote the story. That is, he told the story in order to teach certain things. From this premise it is then concluded that the purpose of the story is not to give historical information, but rather to teach certain lessons, and that the author used a story form to accomplish this purpose. (Here it is usually not recognized that there could be such a thing as "didactic history" just as well as "didactic fiction" - see T. D. Alexander, "Jonah and Genre," cf., Bibliography p. 17). Uriel Simon (Jonah,

JPS Bible Commentary, 1999) prefers the classification "theological prophetic story" over "parable."

Among the advocates of the non-historical approach there are differences of viewpoint concerning the origin and nature of the story form. The most common are 1) fiction, 2) legend, 3) allegory, 4) parable (cf., pp. 36-37, Alexander).

1) Fiction.

Some are of the opinion that the author invented the story, and that it is simply a piece of prose fiction.

2) Legend

Others are of the opinion that the author made use of a prophetic legend that was in circulation among the people. In this view it is accepted that there may be a real historical kernel behind the story. Perhaps someone named Jonah did indeed go to Nineveh, perhaps with a royal message, or even with a message with religious overtones, but around this original kernel of historical fact all sorts of legendary expansions and accretions were added such as the story of the fish, the gourd, and the conversion of the Ninevites.

In the expansions, particularly in the story of the fish, some find points of agreement with non-Israelite legends of deliverances from sea monsters. The author is said to have used this legendary motif for his own purposes, including the teaching of such things as the mercy of God toward the heathen, and the rebellion and sin of Jonah in refusing to do God's will.

That things of this sort are intended to be taught is not denied by those who see the story as truly historical - the question is on what basis can one say that the book is not historical, and what are the implications of such a view.

3) Allegory

A third approach among those who deny the historicity of the events of the book is an allegorical view. The most usual form of this view sees Jonah as the people of Israel, and Nineveh as the heathen world to whom Israel has the task of proclaiming the message of repentance. Jonah's unfaithfulness is thus Israel's unfaithfulness to her task of being a light to the Gentiles. Jonah swallowed up by the fish is Israel in captivity. Jonah cast up on land is Israel returned from captivity. Returned Israel is to make religious truth known to the heathen, and when they become recipients of God's grace by conversion, Israel is to be rejected because of her dissatisfaction with the LORD's mercy to the Gentiles.

4) Parable

Others would not make the allegorical element so prominent but rather see the story as a parable intended to teach some lessons. Such a view would not

necessarily deny the divine inspiration of the story but would be willing to deny its historicity.

Allen 178,179. (CC 42, 2).

Some general comments on non-historical views

It seems to me that there is insufficient basis for validation of these views and some strong reasons for rejecting them.

1. The book itself gives no good reason for taking it as other than historical (unless the presence of the miraculous is considered as evidence that it is non-historical), and the reference to the leading personality in the narrative in 2 Kgs 14:25 provides a solid basis for the historicity of a prophet named Jonah.
2. Jesus' references to incidents in the book of Jonah (Matt 12:39-41) are indicative that he understood it to be historical (cf., also, Matt 16:4; Lk 11:29-32). Jesus places Jonah's historicity on the same plane as that of the Queen of Sheba and the response of the Ninevites on the same plane as that of the people of his own time.
Allen, 180 (CC 43, 4)
Aalders 29,30 (CC 41, 3)

Charles Harris (see bibliography, p. 15) - "It is true that a preacher may cite as illustrations fictitious or allegorical personages, but he must not cite them as analogical evidence. Let him try this before an audience of unbelievers and he will find them muttering, 'That proves nothing, the thing never happened.'" Cf., Dillard and Longman, 392, 393.

3. The inclusion of the book of Jonah in the canon of Scripture and the most ancient references to it in Jewish literature suggest that it was always understood as historical.

Ellison, 55,56 (cf., CC 43) - "Those who deny the book's factual truth must bear the onus of explaining how a book so very different from the other prophetic books ever came to be included in the prophetic canon, and how it was forgotten that it was symbolic or didactic fiction. . . The apocryphal books Tobit and 3 Maccabees as well as Josephus refer to Jonah in a way that indicate they viewed it as a historical narrative."

Aalders, Problem, 28 (cf. CC 41, 2) - Tobit 14:4; 3 Maccabees 6:8; Josephus, Antiquities, IX. 10. 2.

More specific comments on the non-historical views

1. Those who hold non- historical views generally do so for two reasons:

- a. The events described in the book are viewed as either improbable or impossible. In other words the historicity of the book is denied on the basis of the miraculous elements contained in it. Some are of the opinion that miracles do not happen, so any story that reports them cannot be historical. Others are willing to accept the miraculous in general, but feel that the multiplication of miraculous elements in the book of Jonah is so great that it is best not to consider it historical.

Allen , 176 (CC 42, 1); Stek 23, 42,43 (CC 44, 45).

2 Kgs 4-7- Elisha:

- multiplies oil in jars - 4:1-7
- promises the Shunamite widow a son - later raises him from the dead - 4:8-37
- purifies and multiplies food for sons of the prophets - 4:38-44
- heals Naaman from leprosy - 2 Kgs 5
- causes an axe head to float - 6:1-7
- brings an end to raids of Syrians on Israel when Syrians were struck by blindness - 6:8-23
- prophecies deliverance of Samaria during siege - 6:24-7:20

The question is not what someone thinks is possible or probable, rather it is whether or not the writer has intended to describe reality as he knows it. Inclusion of the miraculous events, even if these events are reported in quick succession, is not a valid criterion for denial of historicity (cf., the events associated with Israel's exodus from Egypt).

As C. S. Lewis said (Miracles, 121-24), "Now of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely 'uniform experience' against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately, we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle."

This question then involves ones whole world view and whether or not one will admit to the possibility of divine interventions in the course of nature and history.

- b. The "fish story" is viewed as derived from myths or legends of other ancient people.

When one examines the evidence for derivation one finds that there is not a great deal of correspondence between the Jonah story and other stories. Most of the parallels are found in the idea of someone being saved from the belly of a sea monster.

In Greek literature Hesione, daughter of a Trojan king was given to a sea monster to appease the gods, but was saved by Hercules who killed the monster. When his reward was not given him Hercules and his companions sacked Troy (not the great sacking of Troy which was later by the Greeks - the Trojan war was ca 1200, in Greek mythology a war between the Greeks and the people of Troy - Homer, Iliad gives the description of the war.)

Also in Greek literature Perseus rescued Andromeda from a sea monster and then married her. Cf., Gaebelien, 134.

Herodotus (5th cent. Greek historian) tells the saga of Arion who out of fear for some sailors jumped in the sea and was saved by a dolphin (he rode on his back) and brought to Taemaros.

Aalders p. 13 (CC 41, 1).

Even A. Kuenen has rightly said, that the story of the fish miracle is entirely in agreement with the religious standpoint of the author and that therefore we have no right to ascribe some alien origin particularly derivation from myths or legends in which only a few points of agreement can be shown.

2. The allegorical approach

The allegorical approach encounters difficulty when pressed to details. For example, Jonah's own urging for the crew to cast him into the sea (1:12) is hardly applicable to Israel being led into captivity. In the story the fish is a divinely ordained means of rescuing Jonah from drowning and death, which also is hardly applicable to the captivity.

This is not to deny that in certain respects Jonah can be considered as typical or representative of Israel, but this is entirely different than maintaining that the narrative was designed as an allegorical portrayal of Israel. A representative or typical significance for Jonah would assume certain analogies between Jonah and

Israel, while with allegory one would expect a detailed correspondence of the story with Israel's history.

This becomes clearer when we compare the book of Jonah with other examples of O.T. allegories.

Ezekiel 17:2-10 - the two eagles
Ezekiel 19:2-9 - the lion and her whelps

In comparison with the book of Jonah these allegories are much shorter and have an unmistakable indication of their allegorical character.

Ezekiel 17:2 - "put forth a riddle and speak a parable."

cf. Kittel TDNT, 5, 645ff

מִשְׁלָּה, n.m. parable, similitude, proverb.

Used for all expressions that contain a comparison. The term has considerable range from short proverbs to allegories.

Interpretation in vss. 11-21.

Ezekiel 19:1 - clear indication of allegorical intent.

Such indications of allegorical character are not to be found in the book of Jonah, and thus we are justified in the conclusion that we are not to take the book in an allegorical sense.

3. Parable

Comparison of Jonah with examples of Old Testament parables also highlights the contrast with the book of Jonah. A parable may be defined as a short fictitious narrative from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn.

In a parable there is essentially one point of comparison.

Judges 9:8-15 - parable of Jotham

The idea is the bramble is good for nothing but has become the king of the trees even though it cannot afford them shelter and is more likely to catch fire and involve them in its ruin. Trees which perform some useful service have no time to be king. (NBC Rev. Ed. 266)

2 Sam 12:1-4 - parable of prophet Nathan

2 Sam 14:6,7 - parable of the wise woman of Tekoa
She tells the story to get David to permit Absalom to return to Jerusalem.

When we look at these examples of OT parables two things stand out.

- a. They are all very short, simple and pointed. The meaning is clear.
In each case there is one basic point which is being made:
Judges 9:8-15 - the foolishness of making of Abimelech king by the inhabitants of Shechem.
2 Sam 12:1-4 - David is guilty in the matter of Bathsheba.
2 Sam 14:12,13 David should allow Absalom to return to Jerusalem.
- b. There is a direct indication of their intent attached.

The book of Jonah is characterized neither by making a single point nor by any indication of application. In addition there is no explanation of why a real person is the primary personality in the story.

See Wiseman, p. 32 (CC 45).
Response of Allen, p.179 (CC 43, 3).

The character of the book thus gives us no basis for taking it as other than historical.

Conclusion: All things considered it seems clear that the author of the book has intended to give a record of real historical events. This was certainly the way the ancient Jews themselves understood the book and Jesus clearly did as well.

C. Content

1. Historical background

a. External

At about the time that Omri began to rule in the N. Kingdom (ca 880) Assyria began to awake from about two centuries of weakness.

Ashur-nasir-pal II (883-859) made Assyria the ruthless fighting machine whose calculated frightfulness was the terror of its enemies. He and his successors gradually extended the Assyrian empire amid some of the worst cruelty recorded in human history.

See Finegan p. 202.

Israel had had a series of encounters with the Assyrians.

- 1) In the time of Ahab (853) Shalmaneser III (successor of Ashurnasir-pal II) was such a threat to the lands to the west that Ahab joined an alliance to meet the Assyrian forces in a great battle at Qarqar (853 BC) on the Orontes River. Assyrian inscriptions mention that Ahab the Israelite was part of the coalition along with Hadadezer of Damascus. The Bible does not mention this incident. Ahab is described in Assyrian sources as commanding 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers. The Assyrian advance Westward was checked at this time and the opposing alliance was dissolved.
- 2) But by 841 under Shalmaneser III Assyria returned, Syria was spoiled and tribute was extracted from Jehu the new ruler in Israel (cf. Black Obelisk - Jehu pictured kneeling before the Assyrian king, 841 B.C).
- 3) Again in 803 Jehoahaz paid tribute to a succeeding Assyrian king Adad-nirari III. (see Bright, 3rd ed., 255,256). During this time Damascus and the Arameans lost their power against Israel, as they were threatened by Assyria. The unnamed saviour of 2 Kings 13:5 is probably the Assyrian king. It is possible that the victories of Jehoash (2 Kgs 13:25) and Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:25,28) were won with the understanding and permission of Assyria.

During this time Assyria was involved in a struggle with Urartu (Armenia) to the north. The Urartians pushed S. to within 100 miles of Nineveh. Some feel that Assyria's very existence was threatened by these mountain warriors. Others deny the seriousness of this threat. It is hard to know exactly when Jonah went to Nineveh but perhaps it is to be placed in this period of decline, probably after the death of Adad-nirari III in 782/3. Perhaps this is the explanation for the readiness of the citizens to listen to his message. The statement "40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed" ceases to be a vague menace. It could have been a swift and decisive attack by the Northerners.

Wiseman, eclipse (June 15th 763, p. 45,46), famine (765), and earthquake (Amos 1:1 - in time of Jeroboam) may be behind the story placing it ca.765-758 B.C.

Payne, 422, similar view.

Nothing would have been better for Israel than the defeat of Assyria. Although Jeroboam probably had not as yet captured Damascus, Syria had ceased to be a threat. Many Israelites probably hoped for Assyria's downfall feeling that Urartu would not venture as far to the West as had Assyria.

Jonah's mission left no mark on extant Assyrian records. But a survey of this historical context helps us to understand both Jonah's reluctance to go to this city and the openness of the people there to listen to his message announcing destruction.

Ellison: p.60.

"One would have to be a Frenchman, who three times or a Russian who twice in a lifetime has felt the might of Germany tearing at his country's vitals fully to grasp how a man like Jonah must have regarded Assyria. Three times at least the threat had drawn near . . . men were hoping and praying that the scourge might be vanquished. But God was holding out his hand of mercy to the threatened city. Jonah must have known that this could mean only one thing, that God was preparing Assyria to finish the work of judgment foretold to Elijah at Horeb [at hand of Syrians, 1 Kgs 19:17] some seventy years earlier. Sick at heart and with the usual foreshortening of the future we repeatedly meet among the prophets, when they foretell the coming judgments of God, he wished to escape, not beyond the power of Jehovah, but beyond the stage on which He was working out His purposes and judgments."

b. Internal

See: J. Stek , "The Message of the Book of Jonah," CTJ 4 (1969)23-50.

Both Israel and Judah were in a period of political and economic resurgence - recalling the golden age of David and Solomon - in sharp contrast to the low periods during the reigns of Jehu and Jehoahaz.

The prophets of this time, however, were speaking of judgments to come because of the persistent spiritual adultery and immorality of Israel (Amos and Hosea, ca. 760). The current prosperity, then, is not God's reward for a repentant and now faithful people, but rather it is Yahweh's gracious relief of a nation he had recently chastised with great severity because of its waywardness (cf. 2 Kgs 14:26ff). Here was a new opportunity to repent and turn to the LORD, cf. 2 Kgs 13:23, 10:32.

Still known to the people were the dealings of God with Israel in the days of Elijah and Elisha (from the time of Ahab to Jehoash) - in which there was not only judgment by foreign nations on Israel, the words of rebuke by the prophets, but also indications of God's blessing on neighboring Gentiles.

For example:

Although there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, it was to the widow of Zarephath that Elijah was sent in the time of famine to be sustained (Jesus refers to this in Lk 4:25f; cf. 1 Kgs 17:7-24).

There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha - but only Naaman the Syrian officer was healed (Lk 4:27; cf. 2 Kgs 5). This mercy was shown to him, although in those days it was his nation in particular that was seriously troubling the N. kingdom.

In fact in this general time (Ahab-Jehoahaz) Syria had been shown particular favor by God.

- it enjoyed prosperity
- Elijah had been commissioned to anoint Hazael king of Damascus (1 Kgs 19:15)
- Elisha later prophesied to Hazael that he would be king and do much evil to Israel (2 Kgs 8:8-15)
- Elisha prevented slaughter of a large Syrian force miraculously delivered into the power of the king of Israel in Samaria (time of Joram; 2 Kgs 6:8-22).

The principle at work here seems to be that stated in the "Song of Witness" taught by Moses to the Israelites on the Plains of Moab, Deut 32:21.

They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities; and I will move them to jealousy with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

Kline, TGK, 142. "The covenant curses threatened Israel with extinction if she played the harlot with the no-gods of Canaan (cf. Dt 32:16ff) . . . Applying the *lex talionis* principle God would incite jealousy in Israel by means of a no-people (vs. 21; cf. Eph 2:12). He would reject the chosen people which had rejected him (vs 19) remove his covenantal protection from them (vs. 20a) and grant to a people that had not known his covenant favor to triumph over his children in whom is not faithfulness (vs. 20b, ASV)."

Now, however, Syria was in decline due to defeat by Assyria - the word of the LORD spoken by Jonah concerning Jeroboam's reign was being fulfilled. At the expense of Syria Israel was expanding as far northeast as Damascus and as far north as Hamath.

Yet all was not well in Israel. Amos was denouncing (or was about to denounce) the sin in Israel and the impending judgment (cf. 2:6; 2:13ff; 4:2; 5:2; 5:27; 6:14).

Israel was to be brought low - the instrument of this judgment would be a nation from the Mesopotamian region.

Hosea was preaching the same message. 4:1; 10:6; 11:5.

Israel was characterized by a spirit of pride and complacency, by her persistence in religious apostasy and moral corruption she had forfeited the position of privilege which was hers. In fact Israel viewed her election as election to privilege and was blind to the fact that she was set apart not only to privilege but also to service. And now God sends a prophet to the capital of Assyria. A heathen nation is presented with the obligations and privileges of the covenant which the Jews rejected. This principle of replacement is referred to by Jesus (LK 4:25,26). The implication is that what happened in Elijah's time will happen again if God's people reject his message - then the heathen will be called to the obligations and privileges of the covenant which the Jews rejected. (cf. also Matt 12:38ff - God accepted the repentance of the people of Nineveh).

God's people must always be conscious of this principle. He that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. We do not own God's word. If we are not faithful and obedient, God may choose to work elsewhere than in our midst and place us under his curse and judgment.

The significance of Jonah's mission to Nineveh then is not restricted to the Ninevites. It also had relevance to the Israelites and their own relationship to Yahweh. Was not God pressing His claims on his own wayward people by means of this prophetic mission to the feared Assyrians after the similar pattern of Elijah and Elisha?

2. Purposes of the book

- a. The ministry of Jonah serves to highlight, by means of contrast, the rebellious character of the Israelites. Many prophets had arisen, and Israel had not repented, but when Nineveh heard the words of one prophet, it repented in sackcloth and ashes (cf. Matt 12:41). (wording adapted from Young).

Stek, 42, (CC 46,V).

- b. The mission of Jonah served to impress upon Israel the fact that she did not have exclusive rights to the LORD's salvation. Any idea of religious exclusivism based on national pride and a wrong concept of election is here rebuked. Israel's election was of God's grace and mercy and this can be extended wherever God wills to extend it. It was not Israel's prerogative to claim it exclusively for herself and then wish judgment and destruction on all other people

and even become offended when God's mercy was extended to others (Rom 9:14,15).

- c. It seems likely that Jonah is intended by the writer to play a representative role of some sort, and that the book would be perceived in this way by those who read it.

Most agree that Jonah does play some sort of representative role, but there is not agreement on what he is representative of (see Stek, 38ff.):

- 1) Representative of man
The narrative says something of the ways of God with man and man with God.

- 2) Representative of those to whom God has committed a prophetic ministry.
Jonah is an object lesson to those who might turn away from their calling.

- 3) Representative of Israel, the people of God.
"There is no reason to doubt that in Jonah's attitude toward the Assyrians all Israel would identify itself with him and would know itself to be rebuked in him. And there is equally no reason to doubt that this is exactly what the writer intended" (Stek, 39).

Beyond this Jonah may also typify something of Israel's future history.

Jonah an Israelite was cast into the sea and then delivered in order that he might fulfil his mission. So the nation of Israel would pass through the affliction of exile because of her disobedience until a remnant might return to accomplish her mission in the world. To this extent the symbolic school may be right. Jonah may well represent Israel. But at the same time Jonah is a real historical figure. The message for Israel is that no matter how much Israel rebels and fails - God will reach His purposes in and through Israel.

As Stek, (40,41) says: ". . .the present unfaithfulness of Israel will not thwart these historical purposes of Yahweh. Although this had been made evident before at various

critical periods in Israel's history, it is here demonstrated in a highly dramatic fashion. Jonah, embodying in one person the office of prophet - one of the primary charismatic gifts of God to Israel - and the perverted narrowness of spirit of the 'elect' people, is constrained by God, contrary to his will, to fulfill a mission of mercy to Nineveh. The sin of the Israelite prophet cannot thwart the gracious purpose of God for the Assyrian city. God is even able to use that sin to further His will. When Jonah finally goes to Nineveh, he goes not merely as a prophet from Israel, but he goes also, according to our LORD (Lk 11:30), as a striking, God-wrought sign to the Ninevites which would have profound impact on them. The imperfection, weakness, and brokenness of His people's response to Him does not hinder the sovereign Lord of history in carrying out His saving purposes. 'Salvation is of Yahweh.' Yahweh will do His saving work in Israel in spite of her, not because of her."

This perspective highlights what is the most dominant theme in the book, namely, the sovereignty of God who accomplishes his purposes in spite of human rebellion and sin. (Stek, p. 36). It is God who has the first word and the last (1:1,2; 4:10,11). In the body of the narrative He is always forcing the issues. "His judgment threatens Nineveh; He commissions the prophet: He sends the storm at sea; He 'appoints' the fish; He spares the repentant city; He provides the gourd; He 'appoints' the destructive worm; He 'appoints' the oppressive east wind; He rebukes the prophet" (Stek, p. 36). Even Jonah's prayer testifies to this - salvation is of the LORD (2:9). The narrative is really a narrative of the acts of Yahweh.

Stek goes on to say (p. 36): "Any exposition, therefore, which by explicit affirmation, or by implicit suggestion, places Jonah at the center can only be judged to be a misreading of this prophetic writing."

- d. Often it is said that the purpose of the book is to point forward to the death and resurrection of the One who is "greater than Jonah" E. J. Young says, "The fundamental purpose of the book of Jonah is not found in its missionary or universalistic teaching. It is rather to show that Jonah being cast into the depths of Sheol and yet brought up alive is an illustration of the death of the Messiah for sins not His own and of the Messiah's resurrection." Cf. Matt 12:40,41; Matt 16:1-4; Lk 11:29-32.

It seems that Young here overstates his point when he says that this is the fundamental purpose of the book.

Compare this with the statement of J.B. Payne (EBP, 423): "The Lord Jesus later utilized the period of Jonah's sojourn in the fish to illustrate His own three days in the grave (Mt 12:40); but he thereby neither constitutes the prophet as a type of Himself nor suggests that this had been God's original intent in decreeing Jonah's miraculous experience."

Stek (37, n.29) comments: "Some have handled the entire book of Jonah as though its primary purpose was simply to provide a prophetic type of Christ. But if that is all that can be said, then it must be acknowledged that the type would have remained a complete enigma until the appearance of the anti-type, and the Israel to which the book was initially addressed could not but have misunderstood it. Its true meaning would necessarily have remained a closed mystery to them."