

An Introduction to Jonah

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An introduction and overview of the book of Jonah and its focus on repentance
2. aim – To cause us to understand the relevance of this book, individually, corporately, and nationally
3. passage – Jonah 4:9-11

b. outline

1. The Context of Jonah
2. The Content of Jonah
3. The Contention of Jonah

c. opening

1. the **reasons** for choosing this book as our next sermon series
 - a. **#1**: yes, another (**final?**) book that starts with “J” (**i.e.** James, Jude, Joshua, 1-3 John, Job)
 - b. **#2**: a book I’ve never preached through (although I have taught it amongst the Minor Prophets)
 - c. **#3**: a book *very similar in nature* to **Job** (**i.e.** a natural *follow-up* to that work; **see below**)
 - d. **#4**: a book *deeply rich theologically* and highly *relevant* for such a day as ours
 1. **i.e.** it is often considered a “children’s story” – however, the book is a *literary masterpiece*
 2. it is highly *sophisticated*, with *humor*, *hyperbole*, *irony*, *double-entendre*, etc.
 3. it is also highly **satirical** – Jonah’s bigotry and rebellion makes him (in the end) a *laughable* figure (**e.g.** caught by a fish in running from God, pouting under a short-lived plant)
2. the **purpose** of an introduction sermon (**by way of repetition**)
 - a. to establish *details* – to understand the simple details of the book (who, when, to whom, etc.)
 - b. to establish *context* – to understand *why* the book was written, and what the *author* intended
 1. **i.e.** the **grammatical-historical** approach to the *interpretation* of Scripture
 - c. to establish *interest* – to give us an initial desire to enter into it *and be willing to be changed by it*
 - d. to establish *purpose* – to reveal the *purpose* of the work and how it affects *us here and now*
 1. **i.e.** what **message** must the church bring to the world in which *we* live, **and why???**
 - e. **i.e.** the **context** of the book, the **content** of the book, and the **contention** of the book ...
 1. **note: I cannot say everything that needs to be said here ...**

I. The Context of Jonah

Content

a. the canonical nature of the book

1. Jonah is a *minor prophet* – one of the twelve (12) final books of the OT
 - a. not because he is “minor” in value, but simply because his work is *shorter and more specific*
 - b. there are *many* who assert that Jonah is the *first* minor prophet *chronologically*, although the dating of Joel is greatly disputed (Jonah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah to the N kingdom; **see below**)

b. the genre of the book

1. genre = the category of **artistic composition** contained in the book
 - a. **e.g.** *historical*; *poetic*; *prophetic*; *biographical*; *epistolary* (or *didactic*); and *apocalyptic*
 - b. with many books containing *more than one* of these subtypes (**e.g.** **Job** = historical and poetic)
2. **question**: what genre does **Jonah** fit into?
 - a. many have asserted that Jonah is purely *allegorical fiction* – that it is *ahistorical* as either an *allegory* (about Israel failing to teach the nations) or a *parable* (about us not becoming like Jonah)
 1. **but #1**: **2 Kings 14:25** mentions Job as an *actual prophet* during the reign of Jeroboam II in N Israel (**see below**), strongly suggesting that he *actually experienced* these events
 2. **but #2**: commentators have noticed such a *strong parallel* between the stories of Jonah and Elijah/Elisha that it would have been reasonable to “insert” Jonah’s story in **2 Kings 14**
 - a. **e.g.** the parallel of ravens bringing bread and meat to Elijah (**1 Kings 17:6** cf. **Jonah 4:6**)
 3. **but #3**: Jesus uses Jonah in the fish as a pointer to the *historical reality* of his own death, burial, and resurrection (**i.e.** treating Jonah’s time there as *real*; **Matthew 12:40**)
 4. **but #4**: Jesus connects the *repentance* of Nineveh (as *actual historical reality*) to the judgment of the people of *his day* (**i.e.** noting their repentance as *real*; **Matthew 12:41**)

5. **but #5**: the sovereign actions of God (connected to his mercy) make much more sense if they *actually occurred*, rather than just being “fables” (**i.e.** reality speaks *hard truths* here)
 - b. **Jonah** is clearly *prophetic narrative* – it begins with “*the word of the Lord came to Jonah*” (1:1)
 1. its intention is to speak *to the people of Israel*, in their time, about the nature of God (**see below**)
 2. but, such prophetic utterances are *also* deeply *didactic* – they teach *future generations* about the nature of God and to make *key lessons* relevant to our lives
 - c. **the author of the book**
 1. the book is entirely *anonymous* – there is no signature within it – but ... both Jewish and church tradition have held to it being written by Jonah himself (**i.e.** given him *carefully* named at the outset)
 2. and (unlike **Job**), there is *ample evidence* to suggest that Jonah himself wrote the book
 - a. **i.e.** most of the events are *with Jonah alone* (**e.g.** his prayer in the fish) – thus, because the details are known only to him, it seems reasonable that *he* would have written them down
 - d. **the date of the book**
 1. if the assertion is true that *Jonah himself* wrote the book, then it stands to reason that the *book* was written shortly after the *events* within it occurred (**i.e.** both are dated *together*)
 2. and ... to figure that out, we need to consider the *history of Israel* and where Jonah lands in it:
 - a. the *Theocracy* – Exodus: 1446BC → entry into Canaan: 1406BC → Saul: 1050BC
 1. a period of about **396** years, where Israel was ruled *directly* by God through local leadership
 - b. the *United Monarchy* – Saul: 1050BC → David: 1010BC → Solomon: 970BC → Rehoboam: 930BC
 1. a period of about **120** years, where Israel expanded into an empire
 - c. the *S Divided Kingdom* – Rehoboam: 930BC → the fall of Judah: 586BC (**344** years)
 - d. the *N Divided Kingdom* – Jeroboam I: 930BC → Jeroboam II: 794BC → the fall of Israel: 722BC
 1. a period of about **208** years, where the N abandons the true worship of God centered at the Temple in favor of pagan idol worship at false worship centers
 2. a succession of **19** *evil* kings (Jeroboam I, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, Ahab, Ahaziah, Joram, Jehu, Jehoash, Jehoahaz, Jeroboam II, Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekahiah, Pekah, Hoshea)
 3. **Assyria** = an ancient Mesopotamian Civilization (from 21st C BC), situated at the N Tigris River
 - a. it became the dominant political power in the Near E c. 880BC, but became stagnant and decadent until about c. 745BC (**i.e.** the timeframe that Jonah appears; **see below**)
 - b. although the true capital of the empire lie at Assur, the city of Nineveh was considered a great city, and the king would often reside there – in **Jonah** is Ashurbanipal (747-626BC)
 - c. the empire would rise to its greatest power *after* the sacking of Israel in 722BC, but would fall to the Babylonians in 609BC (Nineveh fell in 612BC)
 4. Jonah preaches in Israel/Nineveh **c. 760BC** (Amos: 755BC; Isaiah: 740BC)
 - a. he prophesies to Jeroboam II a message of *great territorial expansion* during the days when Assyria is busy worrying about internal struggles (**2 Kings 14:23-27**)
 - b. this helps explain **Jonah**: during a time of *great mercy* upon an *apostate* kingdom, Jonah *may have* (wrongly!) concluded that God was going to *save* Israel from exile
 5. God would grant Nineveh a *brief time* of repentance, gone by 722BC (just **~38** years later)
 - a. Tiglath-pileser (745-727BC) would reestablish Assyrian dominance, his son Shalmaneser V would topple the kingdom centered at Samaria and exile its people (**2 Kings 17:9**)
 - b. the reason for the *permanent* downfall of the N kingdom is given in **2 Kings 17:7-23**

“When he had torn Israel from the house of David, they made Jeroboam [I] the son of Nebat king. And Jeroboam drove Israel from following the LORD and made them commit great sin. The people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. They did not depart from them, until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day.” (vv. 21-23)
 3. thus ... Jonah probably experienced the events (he records shortly thereafter) **c. 760BC**
- e. **the audience of the book**
 1. prophetically ... the book would have been designed to be a message *to an apostate* N kingdom
 - a. **i.e.** turn from your wicked ways and God *may* grant you mercy (**read Jonah 4:9**)
 2. however ... the audience would *also* include the generations *in the S kingdom* (and all future generations of *humanity*) re: the need for holiness as the *key* to remaining in God’s favor

II. The Content of Jonah

Content

a. the outline of the book

1. the outline of Jonah is based on a *parallelism* twice-over repeated, followed by a *conclusion*
2. **A¹**: Jonah’s Commissioning and Flight (1:1-3)
B¹: Jonah and the Sailors (1:4-17)

- C¹: Jonah's Grateful Prayer (2:1-10)
- 3. A²: Jonah's Recommissioning and Compliance (3:1-3)
 - B²: Jonah and the Ninevites (3:4-10)
 - C²: Jonah's Angry Prayer (4:1-3)
- 4. D: God's Lesson for Jonah (4:4-11)

III. The Contention of Jonah

Content

a. the theme of the relation of Israel to the nations

1. one *possible* key to the book is to consider it from an *redemptive-historical* perspective:
 - a. namely, that Jonah (as an Israelite ambassador to Nineveh, a *pagan* [Gentile] nation) serves as an "image" of Christ rising from the dead (*i.e.* as from the great fish; **Matthew 12:40**) to bring the gospel to all the nations of the world, calling them to repentance and faith
 - b. *i.e.* continuing the theme expressed *often* in the OT of the *global* (national) sense of the Messiah
 - c. *i.e.* the repentance of the Ninevites representing the repentance of the nations (**Luke 24:45-47**)

"Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'"
2. certainly this theme is present, given that even *Jesus himself* proffered it as a part of his work to bring *all* nations under his authority and judgment (**Matthew 28:18-20**)
 - a. however ... the repentance of the Ninevites was *short-lived*, and this theme "loses" some of its luster against that reality – namely, the accomplishment of Christ is for his *permanent* Lordship

b. the theme of the compassion of God

1. a *second possible* key is to notice the *obvious sense* of God's compassion throughout:
 - a. Jonah is *clearly* given compassion by God, even in the face of his disobedience
 1. *e.g.* the great fish saves him from drowning, vomiting him up on dry land, the plant shades him
 - b. the pagan sailors and the citizens of Nineveh *clearly* receive compassion from God
 1. *e.g.* the sea calms and the Lord *relents* of bringing his wrath against Nineveh
 - c. the book *closes* with God having *pity* on a city with a very large population in it, as compared to the *lack of pity* shown *in the face of Jonah's attitude re: the plant*
 - d. **IOW**: God demonstrates that he is a God of compassion, not just for "us", but also for "them"
2. certainly this theme is present, given its *ubiquity* in the narrative
 - a. however ... the mercy of God towards Nineveh stands in *stark contrast* to his wrath coming against *his own people by these same Assyrians* – why does God *go out of his way* to "contest" Jonah's own hope that he would be merciful *to Israel*, rather than to "pagan" nations?
 - b. **remember**: read this book *within the chronology* of the OT (**not standalone!**)

c. the theme of the sovereignty of God

1. a *third* key to the book is to consider it from a *reformed* perspective
 - a. **IMO**: this is where **Job** and **Jonah** are similar in nature and purpose ...
2. specifically, the issue of compassion as a part of the *sovereign plan* of God
 - a. **question**: how can a holy God be merciful (in any way) to people who are unholy? how can God extend *any sort of compassion* to a people that he *fully intends* to use *even* against his own elect?
 1. and ... why would God grant such a *temporary* repentance (of no *lasting* value)?
 - b. the **answer** is **Job 42:2** (**BTW**: which Jonah never gets around to recognizing) = that God is *free* to do as he wills *with both men [Jonah] and nations [Assyria and Israel]*, and *no one* can thwart his purposes or question his motives or judge his reasons (*e.g.* re: election in **Romans 9:14ff**)

"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy ... So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

 1. **IOW**: it's only by the *sovereignty of God* that God can be compassionate – his sovereign decree is what determines the *ability* of God to *not* follow a "wooden" response to men
 - c. **God demonstrates through Jonah and the Ninevites that he is utterly free to do as he pleases – his kindness is a demonstration of his sovereignty over all things**
 1. the final statement of God (**4:9-11**) is a *masterpiece of understatement*: you (Jonah) "*pity*" the plant (which you had nothing to do with), yet you *question* that I (God) should have "*pity*" on a city filled with *my image bearers*, even though they are pagan and wicked
 - a. **remember**: Jonah preached *in Israel* during a time of *prosperity* and *decadence* ...
 2. **Jonah is a reminder that God works in "mysterious ways", but he always accomplishes what he intends (both in compassion and in wrath)**