

So, Why Study Jonah?

In many ways, Jonah is probably one of the most familiar stories of the Old Testament. Kids are taught about the great fish that swallowed him whole and about the hand of God delivering the prophet from the fish's belly. Adults are taught about the nature of repentance and how one of the marks of repentance is that people's lives change. Finally, Jonah reminds pastors (and all Christians) of the danger of running from the call of God. Yet, there is more.

Jonah's experience in the storm is duplicated by Jesus in the Gospel accounts. The one distinct difference is that in Jonah it is God himself who calms the sea — in the Gospel account, it is Jesus. It is a clear statement as to who Jesus is. Further, Jesus parallels the three days of Jonah's bondage in the great fish to the three days he will spend in the tomb prior to his resurrection. In a real sense, Jonah, too, is delivered from death. Jonah was sent to a wicked and idolatrous people...and Jesus came to us. Why study Jonah? We have a lot to learn from this prophet and his experience.

Was it a Fish or a Whale?

This is the question that everyone likes to ask. Technically, the text reads that it was a "great fish," but don't get too dogmatic about the nature of this creature. The Jews did not much like the open ocean and thus, their taxonomy of ocean creatures is not overly extensive. If it was in the water and swam, it was a fish. So, whether a whale or a large fish of some other sort, the point is that God sent this beast to deliver his prophet. Whether it was a swimming mammal or not, we just don't know.

What we do know is that this is presented as a miracle. Many people have spent a great deal of effort trying to prove that it is possible for a man to have survived in the belly of a large fish. The point is that it doesn't really matter. God could have sent a sea serpent, a fish, or any other critter to do his bidding.

Oh, and one more thing...Jonah is a reminder that God is not a provincial God. He is God over all of creation. And thus, as David writes in Psalm 139:7ff, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?..."

Ninevah

In the heart 745 B.C., King Tiglath-pileser established the New Assyrian Empire. He conquered region after region and dominated surrounding lands, one of which was Israel. This is roughly the time of Jonah's trip to Nineveh (actually, based on some scholarship, it can be argued that Jonah traveled to Nineveh shortly before the rise of Tiglath-pileser, which helps explain why he could so easily come and go).

As an ancient city, Nineveh was located at the plain where the Tigris and the Khosr Rivers cross and its ruins describe the outer walls as being 7.5 miles in circumference. That makes the city about 3 miles across, covering about 1,900 acres of real estate. It was also a trade city, located about half-way between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. It's origins as a place of civilization date back to shortly after the flood (Genesis 10:11)...Babel was not the only great city people sought to build. Excavations of the area began as early as 1842.

Nineveh was part of the Old Assyrian Empire, dating back prior to the Exodus event — the Assyrians and the Egyptians were often at war. At that time, it was the center of Ishtar worship (Ishtar was the Mesopotamian goddess of beauty). During Jonah’s day, though, the city had become the center of worship for the fish goddess, “Nina.” Hence, the name of the city roughly translates to, “The House of the Fish.” In God’s economy, there is nothing left to chance — while ironic, God is commanding the thing that the Ninevites worship to rescue Jonah and spit him out onto dry land. Our God acknowledges no other gods and often demonstrates his power over that which they worship.

2 Kings 14:25

Here we find the only reference to Jonah in the historical books. Jonah is described as being from Gath-hepher (near Nazareth) and was the son of Amittai. He was the one who prophesied that the ancient borders would be established...something that was completed during the reign of Jeroboam II. It is at this time that Israel’s borders extended furthest out, placing it in regular interaction with the Assyrians. One question that is often asked is: “do the events of Jonah take place before or after the mention in 2 Kings 14:25. Frankly, we do not know. Personally, I prefer to see these events in Jonah as early in his ministry — events that would prepare him to guide the country as its borders expanded.

Nevertheless, this was a time of great idolatry and syncretism in ancient Israel. They had wealth and comfort, but when it came to religion, they largely just “went through the motions.” Is it not ironic that it is the pagans in this story who repent, not the Israelites? Is it also not ironic that the Ninevites (Assyrians) whom would repent here with Jonah’s preaching would be the same ones who would come in and crush the northern Kingdom in less than a generation? Oh, God would get vengeance as the prophet Nahum pronounces their doom about 100 years after Jonah.

Outline:

- I. Introducing Jonah the Prophet — Jonah 1:1-2
- II. Jonah’s Flight Toward Tarshish — Jonah 1:3
- III. The Great Storm — Jonah 1:4-16
- IV. The Great Fish and Repentance — Jonah 1:17-2:10
- V. The Renewed Commission — Jonah 3:1-2
- VI. The Great City — Jonah 3:3-10
- VII. The Great Fit — Jonah 4:1-11

