

May 31, 2011

# **The Prophet Jonah**

## **“Salvation belongs to YHWH”**

### **Introductory Details**

**Author:** Neither the book nor the rest of Scripture ascribe authorship, possible or likely that it's Jonah

**Subject:** The Prophet Jonah of Gath-hepher in the Land of Zebulun, Israel

**Date:** c790 B.C.

**Mission Field:** Ninevah in Assyria

**Current Kings:** Jeroboam II (793-753) in Israel, Amaziah (796-767) and Uzziah (792-740) in Judah, Adad\_nirari III (810-782) or Ashurdan II (771-754) in Assyria, both of whom have notable religious reforms in their reigns (Hummel). 2 Kings 14:25

**Contemporaries:** Amos (Israel) and perhaps Joel (Judah)

### **Difficulties**

#### **1- History or Parable?**

Almost all critical scholars, and even some Christian scholars, will claim that Jonah is mythological. The single detail of the great fish is what causes this great “write-off.” And yet, several factors should give us confidence in the historicity of this event. First, Jesus himself speaks of it, not as parable, but as history (Matthew 12:39-42). Second, surrounding this great fish incident are chapters of valid historical setting: people, places, geography, climate, etc. Third, the critics' own denial of the great fish event stems from faulty presuppositions about 1) God, 2) miracles- anti-supernatural bias, 3) observable events

#### **2- An Abrupt Ending**

The ending of this story is a certifiable Cliff Hanger. The text does not say whether Jonah returns to the City of Ninevah or Israel. It does not say whether he repents or not. In many ways this is like a lot of writings in the Bible. Matthew, Mark, and John's accounts of the Gospel all end rather abruptly. Even within the Gospels themselves, certain parables like The Prodigal Son end without complete closure. The Acts of the Apostles also leaves an open ending.

**Structure of the Book:** Jonah is organized like a play with seven scenes

Scene 1: Jonah's Call and Reaction (1:1-3)

Scene 2: Onboard the Ship (1:4-17)

Scene 3: Inside the Great Fish: Jonah's Psalm (ch 2)

Scene 4: YHWH Calls Jonah the Second Time (3:1-3)

Scene 5: Jonah Delivers the Message in Nineveh (3:4-10)

Scene 6: Jonah's Prayer (4:1-3)

Scene 7: Jonah Mopes outside the City of Nineveh (4:4-11)

**LISTEN AND READ THE BOOK OF JONAH** (6:12 min)

#### **SCENE 1 (1:1-3)**

According to 2 Kings 14:25 Jonah is from the land of Zebulun (map) and now goes down to Joppa to flee to Tarshish which may be Tarsus of Asia Minor or Tartessus, a mining colony in southern Spain  
In this scene we learn 1) who Jonah is, 2) what YHWH has called him to do, 3) how Jonah responds.

*What is particularly noteworthy about YHWH sending a prophet to Nineveh?*

*Why might Jonah flee this calling?*

*Describe the foolishness of Jonah's course of action.*

## SCENE 2 (1:4-17)

Similarly to Jesus sleeping in the boat during a storm, Jonah too sleeps as God tracks him down. The Phoenician sailors call on their gods and then cast lots which God uses to mark Jonah as the perpetrator. 1:9- "I am a Hebrew, and I fear YHWH the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

To fear YHWH is a Semitic expression for religious devotion

1:13- even after Jonah asks to be thrown overboard, the crew tries other means first

1:16- the heathen sailors revered YHWH after this powerful display of His control over nature

1:17- "and YHWH ordained a great fish to swallow up Jonah"- NOT a *whale*!

"three days and three nights"- Sound familiar? Read Matthew 12:38-45 and Luke 11:27-32.

*Why does Jesus use the people of Nineveh to make his point about those who rejected him?*

## SCENE 3 (chapter 2)

This is often called the Psalm of Jonah. The language switches from third person to first person. Much of the language is similar to the Psalms.

Significant is Jonah's faith that he will see the Holy Temple again and that God brings him up from the grave. Verse 9 "Salvation belongs to YHWH" is the theme of the book.

## SCENE 4 (3:1-3)

YHWH again sends Jonah with His message. Here "Nineveh" also includes the greater area around the city which would take 3 days to walk from East to West.

## SCENE 5 (3:4-10)

These verses display the key content in most Biblical prophecy: Calls to Repentance and God's Mercy to the faithful. Here, the Ninevites hear the call and they repent, all 120,000 of them! What results! Not even Jonah's homeland of Israel responds like this when confronted by God's prophets.

## SCENE 6 (4:1-3)

4:1- literally translates, "it became evil to Jonah as a great evil"

It is remarkable how Jonah speaks to God as a surly child might speak to his Father, without fear.

And the prayer reveals a lot about Jonah's character, but even more about God's mercy and love.

*How could Jonah be so sure of YHWH's mercy and steadfast love?*

*What factors in Israel's history might contribute to Jonah's (and the readers') disapproval of God's mercy being shown towards Nineveh?*

## SCENE 7 (4:4-11)

4:6- the surly, contemptuous Jonah receives a plant, gracious shade and protection from YHWH

4:9- God repeats the rhetorical question from 4:4 but with reference to the plant

4:10-11, God makes his point very clear. Jonah has more pity on the plant than on the great city. God who is Lord over both has mercy on the many people (and cattle) whom He has created and live in that land.

Luke 5:32 - Jesus says, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Sinners as great as Nineveh?

The Book of Jonah can help us understand many of the struggles in the Book of Acts over Gentile inclusion in the Church.