

Jonah - Historical and Literary Tidbits



Click this link for a fantastic short summary of the book:

<http://www.usccb.org/bible/jonah/0>

Authorship:

The text gives no direct indication of authorship. The focal point of the book is the response of Jonah son of Amittai, who receives "...the word of the Lord", to God. There is no reason in my opinion to believe that this is any other than the same Jonah of 2 Kings 14.23-27. According to the Kings passage, Jonah was a prophet and servant of the Lord, the God of Israel. He hailed from Gath-Hepher, northeast of Nazareth in Israel. According to Jonah 1.1 & 3.1, Jonah receives the, "word of the Lord" indicative of a prophet. (Maybe Jonah wrote it)

Date of authorship:

Besides the existence of the city of Nineveh, the text gives no other evidence indicating the date of the book's authorship with the exception of the prophet Jonah's name. 2 Kings 14.23-27 places Jonah in the time of Jeroboam II king of the northern kingdom of Israel (793-753 B.C.).

Recipient of Jonah:

Most modern commentators place the dating of the book as post-exilic, thus making the original audience the returning exiles of primarily the tribe of Judah. Evidence supporting this is focused on the literary style of the book, which uses the language typical of late Hebrew, with Aramaic influence. Recent studies

have shown however that Jonah reflects a Northern Israelite dialect, which contained such Aramaic influences which entered through Phoenician or Canaanite influence, thus not necessitating a post exilic dating. The other option is that the book was written during the time of Jeroboam II (786-746). Thus, the original reader would be the nation of Israel during this time.

HISTORICAL CLIMATE

Israel during the time of Jeroboam II: Jeroboam II was the 13th king to reign in the northern part of the divided kingdom of Israel. We know that the northern kingdom had been founded on rebellion and idolatry by his predecessor, Jeroboam, who had initiated the idolatrous worship of two golden calves (1 Kings 12.20; 25-33). From that time on we can follow the decline of a nation which had no rulers considered godly by the scriptures and it may be assumed, God Himself. Jeroboam II was the third successive descendant of Jehu to occupy the throne, and according to L. Wood, "was one of Israel's most capable rulers". During his reign, Israel rose to a remarkable position of influence. If we look at 2 Kings 14.25, we can see that the bible records the success of Jeroboam, "...he restored the border of Israel from Lebohamath as far as the sea of Arabah, according to the word of the Lord spoken by His servant Jonah....For the Lord saw the distress of Israel was very bitter; there was no one left bound or free, and no one to help Israel." These boundaries were roughly the same that existed in the days of the Davidic empire (1 Kings 8.65). Also, 2 Kings 14.28 shows that he recovered Damascus and Hamath, which had belonged to Judah. According to Wood, "with these boundaries restored, Israel was the largest and most influential country along the eastern Mediterranean." The Macmillan Bible Atlas states, "during the time of Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah these nations continued to rule over the important trade routes, and Samaria and Jerusalem for a time became political centers of prime importance in the western portion of the fertile crescent. This period was one more zenith of political and military power and in economic prosperity." (Refer to: "Amos Background Lecture") During his reign, three prophets spoke to the nation in the area of repentance; Amos, Jonah and possibly Hosea. According to Wood, "The almost unprecedented prosperity of Jeroboam's rule led to luxury, idleness, and other sin, all of which were condemned by these prophets." The feeling of peace and tranquility was shattered by the harsh words of the prophet Amos (765-760) in 6.1-4; 12-14. The momentary prosperity did not blind Amos to the facts that historical processes and political and economic stability were related to keeping to the moral standards of the Lord and the covenant. So, we can see that at the time of Jeroboam, the nation of Israel had been blessed, and this was simply the mercy of God, and not any merit of their own. However, there had been no apparent change of heart in the people of the nation towards the Lord and His covenant to which they were accountable. It is because of and into this climate in Israel that I believe the book of Jonah was written.

Assyria around the time of Jeroboam II:

The Assyrian history is checked with up and down growth beginning with its first political importance under Sargon of Agade (c. 2350 BC). From that time the Assyrians experienced times of rise and fall and varying influence. Prior to the time of Jeroboam II, during the reign of Adad-nirari II (911-891) Assyria had launched a period of economic and military expansion, which continued for 60 some odd years, ending a down time in the Assyrian history. This expansion continued from this warlike nation up until a short time before Jeroboam II's rule. Following the destruction of the Syrian capital at Damascus (802) by Adad-nirari III, Assyria experienced a time of weakness and decline, while at the same time Israel was on the rise partly at there expense. The Assyrians posed no threat to the nation of Israel during the next 50 years until the reign of Tiglath-pileser III in 745. According to L. Wood, "Not only was Assyria weak politically and militarily; it had also been ravaged by a series of epidemics that had swept through the land, bringing death to large numbers. Besides, a total eclipse of the sun, June 15, 763 BC added to a widespread atmosphere of dread." There was also an earthquake about the time of Jonah.

The religious climate in Assyria:

The nation was a pagan and idolatrous one. The Assyrian king acted as regent on earth for the national god Ashur. Warlike as they were as a people, the military campaigns were conceived at least in part as a holy war against those who failed to avow Ashur's sovereignty or breached the borders of his land, according to D. J. Wiseman. Nabu, the god of wisdom and the sciences had temples at Nineveh and Calah. According to Wiseman,, Adad-nirari III(811-784) brought about religious reforms. He established a trend towards monotheism and focused cult worship on one god - Nabu. Sin the moon god was also worshipped as well as a plethora of minor deities in the nation. In the libraries found in Nineveh and Calah, religious literature was found containing omens derived from the inspection of the liver or entrails of sacrificial animals, as well as the movements and features of animals and planets. Many tablets gave the instructions for rituals to insure the kings welfare and that of his country. Considering the historical and religious climate of Assyria, it is easy to see how a people would so readily repent and turn from there evil ways as the book says.

Type of Literature

The nature of the literature of Jonah is subject to much debate and casts doubt on the historical authenticity of the work. Is Jonah an historical account? Many consider the book of Jonah to be a historical narrative concerning the events it portrays, and thus that it was written for that reason. Support for this view sights Jesus' own words in Matt 12.39-41; Luke 11.29-30, where he speaks of Jonah and the

repentance of the Ninevites as historical figures who will "...rise up at the judgement...". This speaks loudly in favor also of a genuine repentance of the people. Opponents to this view sight that if the book was meant to be historical, why is Jonah the only named person, and the text lacks indication of a historical date.

What about inaccuracies in the text? Nineveh: According to the text in 3.3, "...Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three-days walk across." Opponents to its historicity sight that at the height of Nineveh's prosperity the city simply would not accommodate a three-days walk across. However, many believe that the great city referred to in Jonah would have accounted for the suburban areas, much like our cities today in America. The term Nineveh was often used to refer to a complex of four large primeval cities including Nineveh proper and Calah, according to Kiel & Delitzsch. Thus "great city" could mean "greater Nineveh". In this case the city would be great indeed and easily accommodate a three-days walk. D.J. Wiseman puts forth another idea, that of oriental hospitality as an explanation for the "3 days". The first day could refer to a day to travel to the towns center. The second day, for visit or business. The third day for return trip home. This, if true, would have been understood by the reader. What about the "king of Nineveh"?

Many opponents sight the use of this phrase in 3.6 as inaccuracy, and doubt the decree issued in 3.7. A potential solution related to the weakness of the empire and likely the Assyrian Monarch during this time. It is likely that provincial governors at the time acted as virtual monarchs and wielded great power at the time. Adad-nirari is known to have built at Nineveh (as did many Assyrian kings - ultimately the city became the capitol of the empire). It is possible he issued the decree, and the nobles mentioned in 3.7 were these powerful provincial leaders. What about the fish? Many have sited the "fish incident" of 1.17 and 2.10 to be simply unbelievable. However, according to Keil and Delitzsch, "The squalus carcharias, (shark) reaches the length of 25 feet...(and greater)...and is common in the Mediterranean, where it generally remains in deep water, and is very voracious, devouring everything that comes in its way....in the year 1758 a sailor fell overboard from a frig- ate, in very stormy weather....and was immediately taken in the jaws of a sea dog (Carcharias), and disappeared. The captain ordered a gun to be discharged at the shark....so that it vomited up again the sailor....alive...." Thus the account of Jonah has some historical evidence of this possibility.

Is Jonah an allegory?

Many reject the historicity vying for an allegorical interpretation. In this interpretation Jonah, whose name means "dove", is a symbol; for Israel. Jonah's flight is then seen as Israel's avoidance of its national mission and purpose under the Deuteronomical covenant. The sea would symbolize the world politics and such that became the focus of the nation, and the storm God's chastening hand. Delivered from its

chastening, symbolized by the whale, the nation then has the task of proclaiming its faith and God to its pagan neighbors, symbolized by the obedience of Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh. This view sounds good and favors a post-exilic date, but in my opinion it simply stretches the scripture too much, and discounts the words of Christ in the gospels.

Is Jonah a Parable?

Some believe that Jonah is a parable with allegorical qualities. It is seen as a parody or satire in which there is tension between the word of God, listeners who heed, and the unpopular figure of the prophet. The purpose would be to show the narrow-minded nationalism of Judah and their uncharitable attitude postexile. Here again, it denies the words of Christ as historically relevant.

Is the book of Jonah a prophecy?

No one can deny that Jonah is a book unlike Any other prophetic book in the Canon. Most prophecies center around the preaching of the prophet. Jonah, on the other hand, is a prose narrative. The prophet's preaching is reluctant and contained in a single verse (3.4), which does not even mention God's name. While unique and at times perplexing, Jonah contains a theological message that is relevant for today, and may have served as a prophetically relevant to the nation of Israel in Jonah's day. On a national level, I believe the book shows the heart of pre-exilic Israel towards their call as a nation under covenant with the most-high God, as well as speaking into their pride in the midst of prosperity granted by the Grace of God. Secondly it reveals the prideful heart of a prophet and servant of God, a member of the community, and sends a prophetic message to change your heart on an individual level to the nation. During a time when Israel historically was on the way out, about to be overrun and exiled into the heathen Gentile world, the Lord continues to appeal to the heart and call of a nation He had chosen for a divine purpose.