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Introduction to Jonah



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In our weekly worship during September 2023 Church of the Savior will be reading and reflecting on the book of Jonah. Although Jonah is one of the best-loved books in the Bible, its message can be surprisingly hard to discern and follow. In this introduction, we'll attempt to unpack some of the more frequently raised interpretive issues so that in our worship we can be more free to consider what God is saying to his Church, and specifically to Church of the Savior, through this little, but profound, book.

The Genre

The first place to begin our exploration of Jonah is to consider what kind of writing it is. In the initial instance, it would seem the answer is obvious. Both Jews and Christians have always recognized this book as part of canonical Scripture, and both have always included it among the twelve Minor Prophets (so called not because their message is of lesser importance than Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, but simply because they are shorter in length).

While Jonah is grouped with them, there are qualities of the book that differ from the other prophetic writings. The only prophetic word Jonah speaks is in one half verse, when he finally gets to Nineveh: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4b). Ironically, unlike other Biblical prophecies, that word is never fulfilled, and that circumstance becomes the major point of contention between Jonah and God in the climactic fourth chapter.

The opinion of scholars has been divided as to how otherwise to classify Jonah. The two chief candidates have been as an historical writing, or as a sort of historical fiction/novella/short story.

Most scholars through most of Church history have accepted Jonah as literally reporting history. The main character, Jonah son of Amittai, is known to have been an actual prophet, who accurately prophesied the extension of the northern Kingdom of Israel to the closest approximation of its original borders during the reign of Jeroboam II, in the first half of the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 14:25) (Jeroboam's dates are reported differently by different sources; for our purposes we can locate his reign between the mid-780s and mid-740s BC.)

For modern readers, accustomed to a worldview that downplays or outright denies any supernatural interventions in human events, there are several obvious difficulties with the view of Jonah as literal history. The most obvious is the great fish. The

sudden appearance, and then disappearance of the plant is less obvious but perhaps no less troubling to the modern mind. But perhaps most troubling of all is the description of the entire, and extreme, repentance manifested by the Ninevites in response to what can at most be described as a half-hearted attempt by Jonah to obey God's command.

For several reasons the perspective of this introduction is that the Hebrew author believed that the events he recounted reflected literal history, and wrote about them accordingly. The reasons underlying that perspective are set out more completely in the next section.

The Special Effects: The fish, the plant, the worm and the wind

The fish is the primary focal point of those who object to any historic basis for the story of Jonah. In modern history there has been a documented incident of a whaler being swallowed alive by a whale but then recovered, although unconscious. However, the veracity of that report was contested (Alexander 1988, 110-11). The best argument for the historicity of this event is not supposed subsequent analogies, but a textural feature that actually involves all four elements of God's sovereign provision described in Jonah.

Throughout the book of Jonah, from the first to the last verse, the principal speaker and actor is the LORD. Whenever Jonah is recorded as saying or doing anything, it is either in response to or (typically) in reaction against God's word or activity. Four times the writer of Jonah uses a relatively obscure Hebrew word (the verb *mnh*) to describe the LORD's activity at a particular point in the story. Ordinarily, this verb translates: "to divide in parts, count or commit." There is one particular grammatical form, however, in which the translation becomes more specifically "to allot, apportion, supply, or appoint."

That form is used in the four verses in which the ESV translation speaks of the LORD as appointing a feature or circumstance:

- "The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (1:17)
- "The LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah" (4:6)
- "God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered." (4:7)
- "God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah." (4:8)

In each of these references, not only is God the actor, but his action is described in terms of his intervention into the natural order. Significantly, the description of God as "the LORD God," in 4:6 echoes the second account of the Creation, beginning at

Genesis 2:4, in which God is likewise named as “the LORD God,” suggesting that in describing these divine interventions the author of Jonah may have meant to remind his readers of the sovereign role of God in Creation.

The particular form of the Hebrew word used in these four verses appears only five other places in the Old Testament. Significantly, it is always used to indicate a special circumstance appointed, either by God himself, or by a human authority. Thus, Job (7:3) accuses God: “nights of misery are apportioned to me.” The Psalmist (16:5) expresses gratitude that “the LORD is my chosen [or, appointed] portion and my cup.” The same word is used three times in Daniel to indicate the king’s assignment of the food to be eaten by Daniel and his three companions (1:5,10) and of the eunuch who is in charge over them (1:11).

The four instances of this particular form of the verb (out of only nine in the entire Old Testament) indicate an intention on the part of the author to identify specific instances of the sovereign action of God, on his Creation, with particular reference to the impact of that action on Jonah.

In the mechanistic worldview of modernity, which allows for no sovereign interventions of God into the created order, these four instances of God’s sovereign provision would have to be fictional creations of the human writer’s imagination. It is plain that the human author of Jonah did not view them in that way. Invented stories of the miraculous typically employ numerous special effects and other embellishments designed to impress the reader. Here, neither fish, plant, worm nor scirocco are in any way given exaggerated details. The writer simply says that God appointed them, without more.

Moreover, in the context of other elements of Biblical narrative that we accept – starting with sovereign Creation, running through sovereign deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea, and culminating in the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit raising Christ from the dead – the divine interventions described in Jonah appear relatively mundane by comparison. If God can raise his own Son from death, he is surely capable of providing the features described in Jonah, whether by special creation or otherwise.

Finally, the comparison with the resurrection of Christ is not happenstance. Jesus himself believed that Jonah was literally “in the belly of the great fish” (Matthew 1:40); and referred to that incident specifically as a type of his own resurrection to come.

Who was Jonah?

Second Kings 14:25 describes the prophetic work of Jonah as the chief highlight of the lengthy reign of Jeroboam II, King of Israel (the northern kingdom). The details of the writer's description of Jonah are noteworthy.

First, he is described as a prophet. He is also described as the Lord's servant – typically an expression indicating approval of the person and his work. What he spoke was, in fact, “the word of the LORD,” and in fulfillment of that word Jeroboam “restored the border of Israel from Lebohamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah,” that is the Dead Sea.

The impact of Jonah's prophetic ministry is described as the LORD's response to the bitter affliction and helplessness of Israel, so that he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam (2 Kings 14:26-27). Yet Jeroboam's overall reign is described as “evil” (2 Kings 14:24); and the territorial gains he achieved proved short-lived. Jeroboam flourished from the 770s to the 750s BC; within a generation of his death, the northern Kingdom was conquered in 721 B.C., and its leaders deported by the Assyrians.

There are numerous ironies in the identity of Jonah the preacher that have significance for Jonah the book. First, he was a court prophet; and court prophets typically did not meet with the LORD's favor. Second, his work did not last. Not only were the territorial gains that Jonah prophesied short-lived; but within not much more than a generation the northern kingdom of Israel, of which Jonah was such a partisan, had utterly ceased to exist. Third, it is Jonah – an ultra-nationalist prophet – and not a prophet like Amos or Hosea, both of whom were strongly critical of the northern Kingdom and its priestly and royal leadership, who is actually sent to prophesy to Israel's most hated and feared enemies. And, lastly, it is not to Israel, not even merely to Gentiles, but to Israel's most hated and feared enemies, that God, who through Jonah prophesied the expansion of Israel's hegemony over its neighbors, would send “his servant Jonah the prophet.”

The Role of Nineveh

This brings us to the role of Nineveh in the story of Jonah. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which flourished, with ebbs and flows, as the dominant power in the Ancient Near East between about 900 and 600 BC.

In chapter 3 Nineveh is described as “an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth;” in chapter 4 it is said to have been the home of “more than 120,000

persons who do not know their right hand from their left,” which could mean as many as 120,000 children under the age of accountability, in addition to their parents and elder siblings. What we know today as the Nineveh proper of that time was much too small to hold that many people or take that long to traverse. It is likely, however, that the writer means to refer to a wider district, named after Nineveh as the chief city, but containing other nearby cities as well (Alexander 1988, 56-59).

The Assyrians were widely known and greatly feared as a military power whose strength and prowess was exceeded, if at all, only by the refinements with which they practiced their cruelty. The tortures they inflicted on defeated enemies were “gory and bloodcurdling,” almost defying comprehension (Keller 2018, 10-11). It is said that entire cities would commit mass suicide at reports that the Assyrian army was approaching, in order to avoid the torments they could expect to endure if they survived.

This was the people to whom God called Jonah – the ultra-nationalist prophet of Israel. Such a call could be nothing other to Jonah than utterly abhorrent. Needless to say, it would also be exceedingly dangerous – something akin to a Jewish prophet standing on the streets of Berlin in 1941 and calling on Nazi Germany to repent (Keler 2018, 14).

God’s unbounding love for even those who are his most implacable enemies will present Jonah – and thus us, as the readers – with a profound moral dilemma, which will provide one of the central themes of the book. At the same time, the reported repentance of Nineveh – described in exaggerated terms with the people of Nineveh indicating a deeper responsiveness to God than the Israelites ever displayed, and even the animals participating in fasts – has naturally raised additional questions concerning the historicity of the work.

There is little evidence in history – and plenty to the contrary simply from the records the Assyrians left concerning themselves – that whatever level of repentance may have occurred in response to Jonah’s preaching had any particular lasting effect. There are two plausible explanations for this circumstance, one historical, the other psychological and spiritual.

The historical explanation is outlined by Alexander (1988, 77-80, 125). Jonah’s ministry likely took place somewhere in the second quarter of the eighth century BC. This was a time when Assyrian military power was at a relatively low ebb; a time concerning which, moreover, we have very few records. Thus the silence of Assyrian records regarding the repentance described in chapter 3 proves little, if anything. Moreover, the text of Jonah itself does not record that the Ninevites were actually

converted to the worship of Yahweh, Israel's God. This is significant because the events of Jonah 3 are otherwise described in significant parallel with the events of chapter 1, in which the pagan sailors on the ship to Tarshish do, in fact, expressly offer sacrifice to Yahweh.

The psychological and spiritual explanation of the Ninevites' astonishingly intense yet evidently even more shallow repentance lends further credibility to the author's account. The Ninevites' spiritual background included devotion to a goddess associated with a fish. If in fact Jonah had been swallowed by a great fish, his appearance – and likely his odor – would have been changed significantly, and for some time, thereafter, lending credence to his testimony of deliverance. That testimony would have been impressive to pagan worshipers of the great fish, who would have seen in Jonah's God a power greater than the power of that which they worshiped.

Such "power encounters" are not unknown in Scripture. Many scholars believe that the foundational stories of Creation and of the Exodus are written precisely to proclaim the victory of Israel's God over the gods worshiped by the Egyptians. The victory of Elijah over the Baal prophets (1 Kings 18:20-40) is another example. Similarly, the Acts of the Apostles also document instances in which the power of the Name of Jesus prevails over the powers worshiped by surrounding pagan peoples (*e.g.*, Acts 8:9-24; Acts 13:4-12; Acts 14:8-18). Church history likewise records numerous advances of the Gospel through acts of divine power, like the story of the evangelistic sermon the eighth century missionary Boniface preached on the trunk of the Oak of Thor after he had cut it down (Willibald, *Life of St. Boniface*).

At the same time, it would not be surprising if the Ninevites' repentance was short-lived. As noted above, there is no evidence in the text that they became worshipers of Yahweh. Jonah obviously would have been of no help to them even had they genuinely desired conversion. While deep human emotion can be and usually is in some way an element of true conversion, there are many instances in which an emotional response to a true display of God's power is exactly that – an emotional response, unaccompanied by any lasting transformation of life. And lastly, if the Ninevites' repentance was short-lived, they were no different in that respect from Israel itself – whose own non-repentance would lead a generation or two later to the Ninevites' conquest and destruction of the northern Kingdom.

Authorship and Date

We don't know much about the author of the book of Jonah, mostly because the work is anonymous, but also partly because there is divided opinion about exactly

when the book was actually written. The two leading candidates are late in the eighth century BC, and sometime either during or after the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon, which took place beginning in 587 BC. A number of considerations argue for a later date of composition (Alexander 1988, 55-61):

- Circumstances described in the book suggest that it may have been written at a distance from the original events, after the fall of Nineveh, when the original circumstances of the city had become clouded in legend
- The King of Assyria is never described as “the King of Nineveh” (3:6) in any other historical record
- Issuing a decree in the name of the king and his nobles and clothing animals in sackcloth (3:7-8) as a sign of repentance are features more characteristic of the Persian Empire of the second half of the first millennium BC than of the Assyrian Empire half a millennium before

Some scholars also argue for a later date of composition based on linguistic features supposedly not part of Hebrew expression until after the time of the exile, but these arguments are generally not conclusive. Alexander (1988, 52-55, 62-63) moreover asserts that the evidence about custom and practice are conjectural at best; indeed, the linguistic details may actually tentatively point to composition before the sixth century BC, and perhaps even as early as the late eighth century.

The date of composition of Jonah is not greatly significant for us. We know that it was already written by the end of the period of exile; more to the point, that it has always been considered part of canonical scripture by Jews and Christians alike.

The Structure

Many scholars have noted that Jonah seems to be divided into two similar parts, with chapters 1 and 2 paralleled by chapters 3 and 4. While details vary from commentator to commentator, Keller (2018, 3) offers a workable basic overview in the chart which appears on the following page.

The evident similarities and differences between the two sections (chapters 1 and 2, and chapters 3 and 4) will play a major role in our interpretation of Jonah.

SCENE 1

Jonah, the pagans, and the sea

SCENE 2

Jonah, the pagans, and the city

JONAH AND GOD'S WORD

1:1	God's Word comes to Jonah	3:1	God's Word comes to Jonah
1:2	The message to be conveyed	3:2	The message to be conveyed
1:3	Jonah's response	3:3	Jonah's response

JONAH AND GOD'S WORLD

1:4	The word of warning	3:4	The word of warning
1:5	The response of the pagans	3:5	The response of the pagans
1:6	The response of the pagan leader	3:6	The response of the pagan leader
1:7ff.	How the pagans' response was ultimately better than Jonah's	3:7ff.	How the pagans' response was ultimately better than Jonah's

JONAH AND GOD'S GRACE

2:1-10	How God taught grace to Jonah through the fish	4:1-10	How God taught grace to Jonah through the plant
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Why Was Jonah Written?

A final consideration in this overview of the book of Jonah will be the purpose for which the book was written. Classic Christian interpretations, from as early as Augustine in the fifth century and continuing through Martin Luther in the 16th century reformation, have focused on Jonah as a pro-missions treatise. Israel is called to take the good news of God's grace and mercy in salvation to the nations; Jonah is a type of unfaithful Israel – initially refusing to go and then going only reluctantly and refusing to proclaim the full truth to wretched Nineveh. Then in contrast Jesus comes, offering the sign of Jonah not only in his resurrection (Matthew 12:40) but in his preaching (Luke 11:29-32), in person to the Jews and later through the ministry of his apostles and the apostolic church to the Gentiles (Alexander 1988, 85).

While it has some merit, this perspective nonetheless fails to take full account of the very different attitude of Jonah toward the pagan sailors in chapter 1 from his attitude toward the pagan Ninevites in the parallel chapter 3. The problem for Jonah seems to be not so much his attitude towards pagans in general as his attitude towards particular pagans – the Ninevites. And the reason is not difficult to locate. The sailors are not enemies to Israel; indeed, they put themselves at considerable risk in their attempts to save Jonah from drowning, as they see it. The Ninevites, by contrast, and as we have seen, had a well-documented track record not only of hostility toward Israel specifically, but of merciless and inhuman treatment of all their enemies.

Thus it would be more accurate to characterize God’s love for his enemies, and his call to his people to demonstrate that love, as vital themes of Jonah. A necessary companion theme would then become that of theodicy – that is, vindication of God’s divine attributes, and in particular reconciling his justice with his mercy. In that view, the final question with which the book closes, puts the ball back in Jonah’s court – and therefore in Israel’s and ours as well. If God is willing to show mercy to his enemies, including to the most extreme and brutal of the enemies of his chosen people, what implications does that perspective carry for God’s people – not only in Jonah’s day but in our own as well?

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