

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

An Exegetical study of the Book of Jonah

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Old Testament Orientation II

by

Joseph Peters

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## Introduction to the Book of Jonah

### 1. Historical Background

In the book of Jonah, there are several historical details that will enrich the readers understanding of the book. These historical details include the time period, locations, and traditions. Unlike several of the other prophetic books, the book does not explicitly state its time period. Fortunately, a passage from a different Old Testament book, II Kings 14:15, mentions Jonah during the reign of Jeroboam II (approximately 793-753 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> So, he was a prophet to Israel during the pre-exilic period.

There are various locations that are mentioned within the first chapter of Jonah, which include: Nineveh, Tarshish, Joppa, and the Mediterranean Sea being implied. Nineveh is described as a large and wicked city (Jonah 1:2, 3:2-3). It was an Assyrian city that was located on the east side of the Tigris river, and was eventually destroyed around 612 B.C..<sup>2</sup> The location of Tarshish (1:3) is uncertain. However, it seems obvious that it was somewhere on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, possibly within Asia Minor.<sup>3</sup> Joppa (1:3) was a port city that is in present day Tel Aviv, Israel. So, even though the exact location of where Jonah was called from is not mentioned, it is reasonable to assume that he was near the city of Joppa.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Hindson & Gary Yates, *The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group. 2012). 397.

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Glaze, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Hosea-Malachi*. Edited by Allen, Clifton J. Vol. 2. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970). 160.

<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*. Ppbk Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2009). 410.

One tradition that the reader might not be familiar with is the casting of lots (1:7). The appearance of lots are unknown and, other than casting, it is not known how they were read. However, they were believed to show the will of God and were commonly practiced in those days.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Prevailing Conditions

From the very beginning of the story, it becomes clear that the prevailing condition is that Nineveh, a wicked city, needed to be preached against by Jonah, a prophet (1:1,2). However, even though it is implied, it is not until later that the book specifies Jonah was to preach about God's coming judgement (3:1-4).

## 3. Main Characters

There are several people mentioned, such as Amattai, the father of Jonah (1:1), the shipmaster and crew (1:5,6), the Ninevites (3:5), and the king of Nineveh (3:6). However, there are two primary characters, God and Jonah.

## 4. Purpose

The purpose of the book was to show Israel that their God's love and redemption can be shown universally, not just to the Jewish nation.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Key Verse

“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not”

- Jonah 3:10 (KJV)

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<sup>4</sup> Sloan, Robert B. Jr. “Lots” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Edited by Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Pub., 2003). Lots.

<sup>5</sup> Glaze, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*: 157.

## 6. Major Themes

God calls Jonah to preach to Nineveh

Jonah doesn't want to warn Nineveh

Jonah cannot run from God

The Ninevites repent

God's mercy extends to Gentiles

Jonah wants God's mercy to have a double standard

### Interpretation and Exposition

#### 1. Jonah flees from God's calling, but is intercepted by God's providence 1:1-17

##### 1.1 Jonah is called by God to preach to Nineveh 1:1-2

The book of Jonah introduces its readers that Nineveh, a large city, was wicked and, therefore, God wanted Jonah to preach against it (1:1-2). Besides giving the name of Jonah and his father, Amattai (1:1), there is no real information about Jonah listed when introducing him to the reader. However, in the New Testament, Jesus does clarify that he was a prophet (Matthew 16:4,12:39).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, II Kings does mention that he was a successful prophet (II Kings 14:25)<sup>7</sup>

##### 1.2 Jonah runs from God 1:3

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<sup>6</sup> Louis A. Barbieri, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. edited by J.F. Walvoord, and R.B. Zuck. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1985). 47.

<sup>7</sup> Glaze, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*: 161.

Jonah responds to God's call by immediately fleeing from it (1:3). Even though it is strange that one of God's prophets would forsake his duty of pronouncing condemnation on a wicked city,<sup>8</sup> Jonah's reasons for doing this are not explained until the last chapter (4:2). His plan was to go to Tarshish, but first goes to Joppa and pays for ship transportation to Tarshish (1:3).

### 1.3 God intervenes 1:4-10

Even though Jonah was fleeing from the presence of God (1:3), God sent a dangerous weather to encounter the ship that he was sailing on, which could have potentially led to the destruction of the boat (1:4). The men of the ship took action to lighten the load of the ship and to pray to their gods, likely praying for deliverance, in which they also awoke Jonah, telling him to do the same (1:5-6).

Attempting to understand who caused the misfortune to come on them, they cast lots, which pointed to Jonah being the cause, leading the men to enquire what he had done (1:8-9). Though it does not list Jonah's exact answer, the text does reveal that he had explained his situation to them, leading them to question him further (1:10).

### 1.4 The storm is calmed after Jonah is taken by a whale 1:11-17

After enquiring of Jonah how they might appease God, Jonah explained that he would need to be removed from the ship (1:11-12). The men, though reluctant at first, eventually relented, throwing Jonah off the ship (1:13-15).

Immediately, the sea was calmed, leading the men on the ship to fear God and

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<sup>8</sup> John D. Hannah, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. edited by J.F. Walvoord, and R.B. Zuck. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1985). 1465.

makes sacrifices and vows towards Him (1:15-16). By divine providence, a large sea creature was sent by God to swallow Jonah, who remained in the creature for three days (1:17). Per Jesus, the three days inside the creature had typological significance to the three days He would spend in the earth (Matthew 12:40).

It is difficult not to see other Parallels between Jesus and Jonah. Like Jesus, Jonah was asleep during a dangerously strong storm that threatened the lives of those on the boat (Jonah 1:5-6, Matthew 8:23-25). Jonah and Jesus both knew what to do to calm the storm (Jonah 1:12, Matthew 8:26). Jonah was sacrificed to appease God's judgement on the ship, just as Jesus would be sacrificed to appease God's judgement on mankind (Jonah 1:14-15, I Peter 2:24). However, even though there seem to be parallels, Scripture does not necessarily point out each of these and, therefore, one should refrain from building theological significance from them.

## **2. God hears Jonah's prayers and delivers him 2:1-10**

### **2.1. Jonah prays to God 2:1-6**

Jonah, while in the belly of the creature, cried out to God (2:1-2). Jonah claims "out of the belly of hell cried I, *and* thou heardest my voice" (2:2b KJV). The term, hell, is שְׁאוֹל, transliterated sheol, which is simply the grave or place of the dead.<sup>9</sup> Since Jonah uses this term to describe his situation, some have speculated that Jonah had drowned and been brought back from the dead.<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. (Nashville: Crusade Bible Publisher. 1890). Strong Number 7585.

<sup>10</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*: 412.

some ancient eastern cultures, the place of the dead was believed to be a three-day journey.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Jonah's description of what happened could certainly be interpreted as him drowning (2:3-6). If this is true, then it would be understandable why Jesus compared it to His coming resurrection (Matthew 28:40).

However, the three days are more likely just the time it took for the creature to bring him to his destination.<sup>12</sup> As for his description of the events that took place after he was thrown into the water, this could be interpreted as Jonah describing his struggle swimming before he was delivered by God through the creature.<sup>13</sup> So, it is likely that he did not die but, instead, compared his experience to death as a way to emphasize the horror that he went through.

## 2.2 Jonah thanks God 2:7-9

Jonah claims that, in his time of desperation, he remembered God, and gave thanks to him for saving him (2:7-9). In the previous chapter, Jonah was told by the shipmaster to pray to God for the ship's salvation (1:6). However, it is not recorded that he ever did. Instead of praying and repenting, he decided he would rather be thrown to his death (1:12). However, that seems to have changed now that he has gone through what is likely a near death experience (2:1-6). Per Robert Chisolm, "despite his earlier decision to choose assisted suicide over repentance,

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<sup>11</sup> Chisolm, *Handbook on the Prophets*: 412.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> David S. Dockery, ed. *Concise Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group. 2010). 362.

he was quite happy to be alive. Having come face-to-face with the horror of death, he greatly appreciated God's merciful deliverance".<sup>14</sup> It seems strange that this chapter's prayer does not record any repentance from Jonah. Instead, per Chisolm, instead of admitting his wrongdoings, he boasts about his superiority to the pagans.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.3 Jonah is delivered 2:10

As the previous chapter ended with God preparing a sea creature to swallow Jonah (1:17), likely delivering him from drowning (2:1-6), at the end of this second chapter, God delivers him from the belly of the creature and places him on dry land (2:10). Potentially, God has delivered him from death twice by this point.

## 3. After hearing Jonah, the people repent, and God is appeased 3:1-10

### 3.1. God reiterates his call to Jonah 3:1-3

In the first chapter of Jonah, God calls him to go to Nineveh and preach against it, emphasizing that it is a large and wicked city (1:1-2). Instead of following God's call, Jonah had chosen to oppose it and flee from God's presence (1:3). However, it seems that Jonah had grown through his recent experiences. It does not say exactly why Jonah changed, was it through true repentance and regret, or was it through the logic of knowing that he couldn't defy God, even if he wanted to? All that this passage reveals is that God reiterates his call to go to

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<sup>14</sup> Chisolm, *Handbook on the Prophets*: 412.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

the wicked city, and Jonah did as God had commanded, embarking on a journey to Nineveh. Where he was coming from is not explained, but some speculate that God brought him back to Joppa, the same place he started his journey away from God.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2. Jonah preaches of Nineveh's destruction 3:4

The two times that God called Jonah to preach to Nineveh, the text does not reveal what exactly he was meant to preach but, instead, only reveals that he was to preach against it (1:2, 3:2). However, shortly after the author reveals that God specifically told him to preach His message (3:2), Jonah went deep within the city (about a day's journey) and preached to the Ninevites that they would be destroyed in 40 days (3:4). So, it seems that was likely the message that God told him to preach. The author never indicates that Jonah left anything out or added to the message. Even though the text does not mention Jonah's message to be about repentance, the 40 days were likely meant to function as a grace period for people to repent (3:4).<sup>17</sup>

Since the text revealed that Jonah spent a days' worth of traveling inside the city, God's description of it being a large city seems understandable.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the inner-city walls were 50 feet

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<sup>16</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*: 412.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: 1468.

wide and 100 feet high.<sup>18</sup> So, one would assume that the inhabitants would feel safe from a foreign invasion.

### 3.3. The Ninevites repent 3:5-9

Even though the city is emphasized as being great (1:2, 3:2,3), the people of the city seemed to take the warning of the Hebrew God very seriously (3:5-9). All the people, including the king, fasted, turned from their wickedness, changed into humble apparel, and pleaded with God (3:5-8). As stated earlier, Jonah's message did not clearly give a call to repentance (3:4). So, there was no guaranteed that the people would be spared, even if they did repent (3:9). Regardless of this, the people decided to repent.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.4. God spares them 3:10

After God saw all that the people of Nineveh had done, how they repented and turned from their wicked ways, He decided to no longer perform His judgement on that city (3:10). However, their repentance was likely not a nation converting to the worship of the Hebrew God but, more likely, a temporary repentance that stopped God's judgment.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the Ninevites change of heart did not last long considering that, a century later, Nahum, another prophet of God, is preaching of another judgement coming to

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<sup>18</sup> Hannah, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: 1468.

<sup>19</sup> Dockery, *Concise Bible Commentary*: 362.

<sup>20</sup> Hindson & Yates, *The Essence of the...: 397.*

them for their wickedness.<sup>21</sup> As stated earlier, Nineveh was eventually destroyed around 612 B.C..<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. Jonah is angered by God's mercy 4:1-11**

##### 4.1. Jonah is angry with God 4:1-4

Without knowing the background, one might assume that Jonah should have been ecstatic that his message was taken seriously, causing his audience to repent and be spared from God's wrath. However, Jonah becomes angry (4:1). The Assyrians had been one of Israel's worst enemies.<sup>23</sup> Since God usually destroyed enemies like Assyria, to Jonah, God showing mercy to one of its major cities seems wrong.<sup>24</sup>

It is at this point that Jonah explains his reason for initially running away from God's commission to preach against Nineveh. He claims that he knew God was a merciful God that would be willing to turn from his wrath and spare the Ninevites (4:2).<sup>25</sup> Jonah apparently hated the wicked city and did not want to help give it a chance to repent.<sup>26</sup> Jonah is so angry, he would rather die than live in a world where the Ninevites are spared (4:3). God does not answer his request

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<sup>21</sup> Hindson & Yates, *The Essence of the...: 397.*

<sup>22</sup> Glaze, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: 160.*

<sup>23</sup> William MacDonald, *Believers Bible Commentary.* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1995). 1,129.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets: 414.*

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

to kill him but, instead, simply asks if Jonah feels justified to be so angry (4:4). Likely a rhetorical question that implied a negative response since Jonah does not seem to answer it.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.2. Jonah is angered by lack of comfort 4:5-8

For some unknown reason, Jonah still seemed to believe that God would do something to the city. So, he found a strategic spot outside of the city, built a booth, and watched to see what would happen (4:5). Some have speculated that Jonah might have thought God had changed His mind because of Jonah's complaints.<sup>28</sup> While he was waiting, God provided a plant that grew to provide additional shelter for Jonah (4:6). Apparently, the plant grew at miraculously rapid rate (4:10). It seems that God is continuing to show mercy to Jonah, a man who believed God was wrong to show mercy to the Ninevites. Jonah reacted with happiness (4:6), perhaps believing that it was a sign that God was going to destroy the city and wanted Jonah to be comfortable while watching.

Unfortunately for Jonah, God provided a worm that destroyed the plant, causing it to wither away (4:7). Additionally, he provided terrible weather conditions that made it too hot for Jonah's body to take (4:8). This story continues to show God's control and power over things like weather (1:4,15, 4:8), the sea creature (1:17, 2:10), the plant (4:6), and the worm (4:7). The only one in this story that seems to disobey God is Jonah.

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<sup>27</sup> Glaze, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*: 1,471.

<sup>28</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*: 415.

If Jonah really did believe that the plant was a sign from God that he wanted Jonah to watch Him destroy the city, then the destroying of the plant would have been an obvious sign that it was not His intention to destroy the city. There is a sense of irony within this section of the story. Jonah expected God to destroy the city, yet, God destroyed his shelter, leaving him with only two options. He could either stay there and die from the heat of the sun, or he could take shelter in the city that he wanted God to destroy. However, instead of going to the city for shelter from the sun, Jonah claimed that he wanted to die (4:8).

#### 4.3. God confronts Jonah 4:9-11

Just like before, God asks Jonah if he feels justified to be so angry, specifically about the current condition of the plant (4:9). This was likely God's way of showing Jonah that he was being ridiculous for wanting a city destroyed when he was angry over something as insignificant as the destruction of a plant. Jonah expected a double standard for God's mercy. He believed himself to deserve God's mercy and provision, even if he never repented, but believed that the Ninevites only deserved God's wrath and annihilation, even if they did repent.

After God asked his question, Jonah responds by claiming that he was justified in his anger and was even justified in wanting death (4:9). But God confronts Jonah for his insensitivity and double standard, claiming that he was angry about the plant being destroyed but, yet, he wanted an entire city to be destroyed (4:10-11). The book ends with a rhetorical question from God that

implies a positive answer. Should God show compassion to the Ninevites (4:11)?

The context implies, yes.

### **Application**

It is difficult not to see parallels between the story of Jonah and the prodigal son. The Assyrians, like the prodigal son, were wicked people and did evil in the sight of God (Jonah 1:2, Luke 15:18). However, like the prodigal son, they humbled themselves, repented (Jonah 3:5-9, Luke 15:17-21) and were forgiven (Jonah 3:10, Luke 15:20-24). Jonah, like the older brother, disagreed with God's forgiving treatment of them (Jonah 4:1-2, Luke 15:28-30). Both God and the father explain their perspectives, but both stories end abruptly, not knowing if Jonah or the older brother ever understood (Jonah 4:4,9-11). So, similar applications can be made.

First, just like God's treatment to the Assyrians, (as well as the father's treatment to the prodigal son), God is willing to forgive those who humbly come before Him in repentance. Second, God's mercy extends to all, not just the Jewish nation. Jonah seemed to understand these things about God, and even claimed that was why he was reluctant to warn the Ninevites (4:1-3). Third, unlike Jonah and the older brother, Christians should rejoice when sinners repent and are forgiven, especially considering God forgave them too. Fourth, God is in control of the circumstances of His peoples lives. When Jonah tried to flee, God used His control over the weather and creatures to put him back on track. Finally, God's people should never run from God's calling or second guess His decisions. These are universal and timeless principles. Therefore, they apply to Christians today.

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