

JONAH

Prophet of God's Universal Mercy

Introduction. If we browse through some of the many scholarly works that give an introduction to each book of the Bible, we will quickly see that two issues confront us when we study the book of Jonah. Are the accounts historical or are they just parables created to teach a lesson? Second, why is Jonah placed amongst the prophetic books of the Bible when his actions were more consistent with those of an anti-prophet, running away from God and getting angry when the people of Nineveh repented?

History or parable? Until the twentieth century, Jews and Christians for the most part believed Jonah to be an historical event that really happened. Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians continue to believe that the book is historical. They point out that a prophet named Jonah makes a brief appearance in the eighth century during the reign of King Jeroboam (2Kings 14:25). Also, Jesus mentioned Jonah's presence in the belly of the whale as a sign of his Resurrection (Matt 12:39-42), coupling his reference to Jonah with that of the historical Queen of Sheba. And if one objects to the extraordinary miracles in Jonah, what about the Gospel miracles which required the same divine intervention?

All mainline Protestant churches and nearly all Catholic biblical scholars today interpret Jonah as a parable or "didactic fiction" – a story told to teach a lesson. Despite the reasons given above for the historicity of Jonah, they did not convince St. Jerome nor deter St. Gregory Nazianzen (both Early Church Fathers) from explicitly interpreting the story as a parable. Today, scholars point out that the conversion of Nineveh is unknown in history and is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible except as a villain (see the prophet Nahum). Significantly, the pagans are the heroes of the book and Jonah is the villain. There is no explanation of how Jonah made himself understood in preaching to people of a different language. Never in Israelite history had a prophet been handed a mission like Jonah. Never in all history has a great city like Nineveh been converted by one short mission given by one missionary who spoke for a foreign God in a foreign language, and who did not want to convert his hearers anyway.

A prophetic book. Though placed in the Bible as one of the Twelve Minor Prophets, Jonah is totally unlike other prophetic books. It contains no oracles or prophetic words except the report of Jonah's words to Nineveh in 3:5. The book is about a prophet who, we are told right from the beginning, should be taken with a grain of salt. In fact, Jonah is something of an anti-prophet for when God calls him to go and preach, he runs the other way and is not at all happy when the people of Nineveh repent.

Historical context. While scholars cannot say with certainty when the book was written, most believe it was written in the late post-exilic period. The Jews who returned from exile in Babylon were persecuted by the foreign nations around them. They responded with hatred and isolationism. Marriages with non-Jews were prohibited. Samaritans were shunned. Many Jews had a strong intolerant nationalism which limited God's mercy to the chosen people of Israel. It was the Old Testament version of "outside the church there is no salvation." Many scholars believe that the book was written to protest the image of God's partiality for Israel to the exclusion of other nations. God's mercy is available to Jew and Gentile alike. Our desire to see justice done to the wicked does not conform to God's mercy. A Gentile reader of the Old Testament would have rejoiced at this message.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Jonah is regarded as perhaps the funniest book of the Bible. Imagine a runaway prophet spending three days in the belly of a whale and then spit out on shore! When Jonah preaches, even the animals repent. In the final chapter, God has to deal with a sulky prophet.

Division of chapters. The book can be looked upon as a mini-play with four scenes or parts:

Part 1: Jonah's flight from God (Chapter 1)

Part 2: Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving (Chapter 2)

Part 3: Nineveh's repentance (Chapter 3)

Part 4: Jonah's struggles with God's mercy (Chapter 4)

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: The runaway prophet

“The word of the Lord comes to Jonah: ‘Set out for the great city of Nineveh and preach against it....’ But Jonah made ready to flee to Tarshish....” (vv1-3)

Like other great call stories in the Bible (e.g. Moses and Jeremiah), God calls the prophet to carry out a specific task...the prophet objects...the prophet tries to avoid God’s call. Even though Moses and Jeremiah tried to wiggle their way out of the call, neither of them ran away in order to escape God.

What’s unique with Jonah is that it expresses God’s concern not only for a Gentile nation, but also for Judah’s greatest enemy. The Assyrians, whose capital is Nineveh, have destroyed the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and taken its people into exile. Peter Ellis comments: *As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the use of Israel’s hated enemy in the role of hero enhances the effect of the teaching. Of all the nations God could be expected to love, or who could be expected to do penance immediately upon the word of a Hebrew prophet, the last one the Jews would expect would be hated Assyria*(The Men and Message of the Old Testament, p.483).

So right at the very beginning of his story, the author gets the attention of his audience by speaking about the prophet who runs away from God’s call and revealing that the object of God’s concern is the archenemy of Judah.

Verses 4-16—Jonah is thrown overboard. In her commentary on Jonah, Sr. Irene Nowell, O.S.B., says: *“The story of Jonah’s flight is a masterpiece of irony.”* This is shown by the contrast between Jonah and the pagan sailors during a big storm. Jonah sleeps while the pagans pray to their gods, wondering about which person on board might have offended their god. Jonah of course is the culprit, showing himself to be a disobedient servant of his God. But when the sea turns ever more turbulent, the pagans begin to pray to Jonah’s God (v.14). Reluctantly, the sailors throw Jonah overboard, hoping that his God “who made the sea and the dry land” (v.9) will have mercy on them.

Pause: Have you run away from God’s call or wanted to run away? How do you feel when you consider the fact that God loves your greatest enemy (individual, group or nation) just as much as he loves you?

CHAPTER 2: Jonah’s Prayer

“Out of my distress I called the Lord, and he answered me....” (v.3)

If Jonah thinks he’s going to successfully get away from God, he’s mistaken. “The Hound of Heaven,” as Francis Thompson calls God, is after Jonah to make him confront his insecurity and weakness. In this case, God uses a huge fish to catch the runaway prophet. Living in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights gives Jonah some time to think about his relationship with God.

Jonah’s prayer (vv 3-10) is a mixture of thanksgiving and lament. He is grateful to God for sparing his life, but in his present situation the prospects of ever worshipping at God’s holy Temple are slim. There is also a dying and rising theme in the prayer: *“You, Lord, brought my life from the pit”* (v.7).

Verse 11. *“Then the Lord commanded the fish to spew Jonah upon the shore.”* In the Gospel, this part of the story came to be known as “the sign of Jonah.” Just as Jonah would spend three days and nights in the belly of the fish, so too would the Son of Man spend three days and nights in the grave (Matt 12:39-40). Jonah’s experience came to symbolize the death and Resurrection of Christ as well as the baptismal life of the Christian. Jonah’s time in the large fish in the depths of the ocean was a sort of baptism in which he died to his old selfish self and rose to new life.

Pause: Has there been a dying and rising experience for you in your journey?

CHAPTER 3: Calling the people of Nineveh to repentance

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Set out to the great city of Nineveh and announce to it what I will tell you.’”(v.2)

“... ‘Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed’; when the people believed God, they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.” (vv 4-5)

Jonah gets a second chance to hear and respond to God’s command to undertake a mission of mercy to Nineveh. This time the prophet is obedient though

there is no indication that he carried out his mission with joy.

The shock and surprise, so characteristic of this book from its opening verses, continue in this chapter when we read how the Ninevites respond to the prophet's proclamation that destruction is coming to the city.

When the king hears that the people are repenting, he issues a royal decree *"that every man shall turn from his evil ways and from the violence he has in hand"* (v.8). The people's immediate and miraculous response to God's mercy causes God to 'repent' of the devastation he had planned to inflict on the city, that is, he turns from punishment to mercy.

At this stage, we have reached the climax of the story—God bestowing his mercy to an evil Gentile city. God's mercy is without borders.

Pause: How do you think you would feel if a serial killer repented of his evil deeds and turned his life over to God?

CHAPTER 4: Jonah's anger; God's reproof

[Jonah became angry and said:] *"...I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathed to punish."*(v.2)

[God said:] *"Should I not be concerned over the great city of Nineveh...?"*(v.11)

Jonah assumes that Judah's enemy will not repent and will thus be destroyed. But as he witnesses a massive conversion happening in Nineveh, he gets angry and begs God to take his life for he has lost all desire to live. We can say Jonah is angry because his theology is in conflict with the nature and actions of God. He knows that God loves Israel, his chosen people. But he also believes in the depth of his being that this love should not extend to the Gentiles, much less to the wicked ones such as the inhabitants of Nineveh. Jonah has become jealous and angry at God's mercy for the people of Nineveh.

Verses 5-11. Jonah has built himself a little hut outside the city, where he waits presumably for fire and brimstone to come down on the evil city. God in his goodness gives Jonah a plant that provided him shade from the burning sun. Jonah is very happy. The next day, however, God allows a worm to destroy the plant, making Jonah so angry that he once again

wants to die. Despite all that is happening to him, Jonah is not a bit upset over the prospect of God destroying more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons in Nineveh. Should he be upset over the death of a little plant and not be outraged over the destruction of Nineveh? Should God's mercy not extend outside the borders of Judah? Is God, the Creator of heaven and earth, not free to show his mercy to whomever he wills? Or must God act as Jonah thinks, according to the narrow limitations of human justice? These are the questions Jonah poses to an audience who strongly upholds the belief that "there is no salvation for non-Israelites."

Pause: To what extent is there a Jonah within most, if not all of us, who believe that God's salvation is only for those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior?