

The Book of Jonah

General Introduction to the Book:

A. Interpreting Narrative Literature

When interpreting narrative literature one must apply a principle called “*literary analysis*”. This process includes determining not only what sort of literary genre is employed but remembering that in this case where the genre is narrative, it means that the book was written in the form of a story and therefore, it has only one point. The primary way of discovering what the point is in a particular narrative is by careful observation of what the author chooses to include as details (and at times what the author chooses not to include). This is because a well written story (and the Bible is great literature) only includes those details which advance the main idea.

B. To Whom was this book written? When was it written? Why was it written?

This book was written to the people of the northern kingdom. It was written approximately in the 730s B.C., shortly before the fall of the northern kingdom. It was not written as a simple historical account of the events included, nor was it written as a biographical account of the main person in the story, rather it was written to teach a theological lesson with the intent that it might change the Israelites perspective about themselves and the surrounding nations. The events recorded in this book took place about forty years prior to the time of writing.

C. What or who is this book about?

1. Since it is a single story, it must be understood as a literary unit and unlike a New Testament epistle, it cannot be understood as having distinct parts, but the main idea must be reflected in the content of the entire book. Therefore, whatever the main idea is, it will make sense out of everything contained in the book. One popular interpretation is that this is a story about the repentance of the citizens of Nineveh. However, the structure of the book itself makes it clear that this is a mistaken conclusion. For if this conclusion were correct, there would have been no reason to include what is written in chapter four. A second popular interpretation is that this is a story about a spiritual lesson that Jonah learned. However, this cannot be correct either, for if that were truly what the book was about, then it would have had another chapter that included Jonah’s response to what God had said. From the way the book was written we can conclude that this was a story meant to reveal something about God that the Israelites needed to learn.

2. General Observations from the book (supplemented with history):

- a). The prophet Jonah is mentioned in II Kings 14:25, and apparently he was a very faithful prophet who had been consistently obedient to God, conducting his ministry in accordance with God’s instructions. Therefore, an important question is why did this godly prophet choose not to obey God this time?

- b). The prophet's departure from Israel was calculated and intentional. We know this because the process of going all the way to Joppa and booking a ship would take days and therefore his actions were not just a spur of the moment decision (1:2).
- c). On the ship, the pagans were afraid and call out to their gods, meanwhile Jonah was asleep. Therefore, we can conclude that Jonah's conscience wasn't bothering him. In that episode the prophet showed no interest in reaching out to Yahweh (1:4-7).
- d). When Jonah was revealed as the cause of the great storm, all he wanted was for the others on the ship to throw him to his death (meaning he would have rather died than repent). Instead, the sailors chose to dump their valuable cargo rather than throw Jonah overboard (in the story then, the pagans are presented as being more righteous than God's normally obedient prophet) (1:8-13).
- e). After Jonah was finally thrown overboard the storm stopped indicating even to the pagans that it was Yahweh who was its cause. In response the sailors offered a sacrifice to Yahweh. Demonstrating a second time that they were choosing to be more righteous than Jonah (1:16).
- f). The episode in the great fish illustrates two things, one Yahweh's extreme measures to save the prophet (which leads to the question why He went to such lengths?), and two, that Jonah's repentance in the belly of the fish was superficial at best, indicating that Jonah was relenting to the inevitable rather than being genuinely contrite for his sin (2:1-9). The vomiting of Jonah upon the land might even have been a narrative indication that Jonah was still being offensive before Yahweh in some way (2:10).
- g). Jonah preached only a message of judgment, and apparently a simple one, and yet there was a tremendous response by the Ninevites, again contrasting Jonah and the pagans (ch.3).
- h). In the N.T. the preaching of Jonah to Gentile pagans is used as a comparison to express the greater guilt of Jews rejecting the truth of Christ (Matt.12:39-41). This detail gives us Jesus' interpretation of the story.

D. What are the main keys to understanding the book?

They are found in chapter four. This is because it is that chapter which explains the reason for Jonah's anger (which is important because the rest of the book is built around what Jonah did because of his anger). Therefore, understanding the reason for Jonah's anger informs us about Jonah's motives which led him to do the things that were recorded in the previous chapters of this book. Repetition is a key indicator of something important in narrative literature. In chapter four, verses one and nine include such repetition, and together they form what is called a literary bookend, which identifies a key idea that is elaborated upon

in the content between these two verses. In this case, both these verses indicate that Jonah was angry, and between these two verses the author revealed both the source of Jonah's anger, and that it was his anger that motivated him to travel westward, rather than obediently go eastward as God had instructed him to do in the first chapter. It was due to Jonah's frustration that God would be compassionate to a people that Jonah did not feel were worthy of that compassion.

It is important to observe that in 4:6 the name for God, LORD God (Yahweh Elohim) is used (the only time that this name appears in the book). In Hebrew it is very obvious because before this the names used were "*Elohim*" when the pagans were referring in their ignorance to God (Elohim-being like our word "*god*" as a generic reference to Deity), and when Jonah was referring to God, or the pagans were referring to Jonah's God, the name "*Yahweh*" was used (God's personal covenant name). The exception to this is in 4:8-9 where the title "*Elohim*" is used with reference to Jonah. The author wanted us to understand that God was dealing with Jonah as if he were a Ninevite. Returning to 4:6, the use of this dual name in reference to God at this point in the story, pictures Yahweh as the universal God of both Israelites and Gentiles and introduces the object lesson (Jonah's interaction with the vine and the worm) in which there is a reversal. The title "*Elohim*" is used in reference to God's dealings with Jonah which signals that God was putting Jonah in Nineveh's place to help Jonah recognize that his anger was not truly justified. God then did to Jonah precisely what Jonah wanted God to do to Nineveh through what happens with the plant. There is further word play in this portion, the Hebrew word used for Jonah's "*misery*" caused by the heat (4:6), is the same one used for the "*disaster*" that is to befall Nineveh as a result of God's wrath (3:10). The response of both Jonah and Nineveh is exactly the same to the affliction they are faced with; they act to protect themselves from the affliction of the impending calamity. Nineveh acts in repentance, and Jonah builds a hut to protect himself from the heat. Both of which are inadequate to protect them from what threatens them. In both situations God responds with grace. In the case of Nineveh, Yahweh relented from sending judgment, and for Jonah He caused the plant to grow. In the case of Jonah, God next sends a worm to destroy the plant, the object of God's grace. Then Jonah is left to his own pathetic efforts to shade himself, which were useless against the wind and scorching heat that God sent. Jonah gets angry at the destruction of the plant. This represents an important object lesson of God's grace, and what it means to receive it, and what the consequences are if one does not.

Jonah was angry because he believed that Assyria did not deserve God's grace. In response to this, God removed the shade (God's gracious provision that had been given to Jonah) to expose Jonah's hypocrisy. The reality was that Jonah did not deserve the shelter he was receiving (because Jonah did not make the plant). Jonah's hut then was a parallel to Nineveh's response. This object lesson clarified that God also understood that Nineveh's response was ultimately nothing, it was feeble and worthless. The truth was that it was only God's grace that saved them, just as Jonah's hut was worthless to protect him from the heat.

Often much is made of Nineveh's repentance. Many conclude that what is written about in this book was equivalent to a significant evangelistic revival where lost individuals were saved from the guilt of their sins and gained eternal life. However, there is a problem with this conclusion. There is no record of anything like that happening in the historical records of the Assyrians. Why would such a radical change in their religion never get recorded? Another problem is that we have another later revelation that again focuses on the city of Nineveh. The prophecy of Nahum came approximately 135 years after the events recorded in the Book of Jonah (approximately in the year 640 B.C.). In that prophecy, Nahum pronounced judgment upon Nineveh, expressing that their downfall was a certainty. This raises the obvious question, what happened to the grand spiritual awakening in response to Jonah's preaching? It is possible that the turning of the people to Yahweh was significant, but short lived. However, the prophecy of Nahum gives no hint that the Ninevites had ever worshipped Yahweh.

Instead, the text of Jonah gives us clues as to the nature of what happened in Nineveh, and the picture that it paints is different than the popular view that the Ninevites put faith in Yahweh. In 3:5, we find that the Hebrew wording indicates that the Ninevites only "*believed*" God. This is different than it saying that they believed "*in Him*". Some translations have this wrong for two reasons. First, though the prefix that is translated as "*in*" can be used as such a preposition, it can also (as in this case) function as a marker of the direct object. Second, though the idiom "*believe in*" is native to the English language, it is an idiom that simply does not exist in Hebrew. Therefore, the text is simply saying that the Ninevites accepted (or believed) that what was threatened to happen by Jonah would in fact happen. They believed that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites would destroy them.

Their response to the proclamation of Jonah was not what the Scriptures would qualify as authentic repentance. The narrative of Jonah says nothing about the Ninevites forsaking polytheism, nor is there any reference to them actively worshipping Yahweh alone. We do not see them destroying their images, or instituting obedience to the Mosaic Law. Rather it was a typical response to an omen or threat from one of the many gods that these pagans believed existed. As polytheists, the Ninevites believed there were many gods besides their local deities and it would have been perfectly reasonable to them that one of these deities might become angry with them (for whatever reason). And this conclusion would have seemed logical to them particularly since this was a period of relative disarray within the Assyrian Empire (during this period Assyria was fighting usurpers to their throne as well as break away vassals. Also, during this period, Jeroboam II was extending the northern kingdom and yet was not being harassed by the Assyrians precisely because their fortunes had turned for the worse). It is also possible that the Assyrians were aware of the stories of Yahweh's defeat of Egypt centuries before, which would have lent credence to the idea that He could do the same to Assyria (Nineveh being its capital). It is also possible that God orchestrated other events in tandem with Jonah's message that would have been seen as supernatural omens to these people. Finally, Jonah's message is not

described in this book as a proclamation of how to gain eternal salvation. It was simply a statement about the certainty of imminent destruction (1:2; 3:4). The Assyrian's could only hope that showing repentance would convince Yahweh to withhold judgment. For the book does not record that they were told that repentance would result in them being spared. God in His grace did relent, even though this was a very superficial repentance that was based more in ignorance than it was in knowledge.

And it was this specifically that made Jonah so angry. His issue was neither political, nor ethnic. Instead, he knew that the Assyrians were likely to stage a very superficial repentance and also that God most likely would respond graciously to them. This explains why Jonah remained in Assyrian territory after his preaching, he stayed in order to find out if God would end up withholding the judgment that the Ninevites deserved. We know he wasn't out providing further spiritual teachings to the Ninevites, because we read about him being out of the city sitting in shade.

Jonah's objection was theological. He did not believe Nineveh deserved God's grace. And the two times Jonah gets angry illustrates this very point. The narrative also makes it clear that Jonah wanted the very grace that he wanted withheld from the Ninevites.

What this reveals is that God is compassionate and that He responds to even the smallest move that people will make toward Him.

Jonah is at the front of what is called "*classical prophecy*". It is a period where the prophets will cease speaking only to the kings and will begin to address the nation. There will be a series of warnings of impending judgment and repeated calls for repentance. This story served to illustrate that if God will respond so graciously to ignorant and yes profoundly evil pagans outside of His Covenant if they chose to make even the slightest move toward Him, how much more would He respond to the slightest efforts of repentance by His own beloved people.

The extreme measures that God goes through to get Jonah to Nineveh, illustrated that God will move heaven and earth to express His compassion.

Conclusion:

For the modern reader, the application is the same. We are to recognize that we also have been and continue to need God's compassion and grace. We must never delude ourselves into thinking that we have merited God's favor. At times Christians will fear that they have sinned too severely to ever be forgiven by God to forgive. This story reminds us that this will never be the case. However, the story also warns us that we can begin to see ourselves as being far more righteous than we really are. When that happens, we become judgmental toward others rather than reflecting the compassion of God toward them. We must resist allowing this to happen to us.