

JONAH – SHORT VERSION

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)