

Jonah: An In-Depth Analysis

My First Study

I have been a Christian for a long time, but I was not a growing or mature Christian until my late twenties. It wasn't until then that I took my beliefs seriously and I actually had a desire to learn and grow. So, I set out to read the entire bible all the way through. Maybe not in order, but at least read the whole thing. I decided to start with the book of Jonah. One, it was a good Veggie Tales movie and two, I had heard that story throughout all my childhood in Sunday School. Plus, I had never actually *read* the book of Jonah before even though I was familiar with it.

I gathered a notebook and a pen and opened my bible prepared to dig deep into the Word of God. It was a whopping four chapters. Four. And not even long chapters. I was done reading in less than ten minutes. I was a little disappointed at first. But I started looking at it. Again, and again. Was this real? Did this actually happen? So, I started researching outside of the bible...the feasibility, the historical timeline, archeology, even marine biology and causes of hypothermia to an extent. The more I asked questions, the more I was astounded at the answers. And this book spoke to me. There was so much there in those four little chapters that I could apply to myself. I quickly fell in love with this book. It is still one of my favorite pieces in the bible. It impacts me to this day.

The Empire

Jonah is not long-winded like many of his fellow biblical book writers. He is brief and concise. Hence, four chapters. So, it's no surprise that to fully understand the book of Jonah there might need to be more research and historical context. And to truly comprehend what Jonah felt, a short study of Nineveh is necessary. Why did Jonah fear to go there? What would drive a man of God to turn away from a holy command?

The events in Jonah take place sometime between 800-740 B.C. At that time, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria in modern-day Iraq. Nineveh was a formidable city. It was known for its ferocity in battle and had little issue with reaping the spoils of war. Assyria was the leading world empire of its time. They were powerful and ruthless. It is said that the roads leading into Nineveh were lined with pikes adorned with the heads of their fallen foes. Not the kind of place one would enter lightly.

One of the reasons Nineveh was able to flourish was its proximity to the Tigris River. This gave the Ninevites quick transportation throughout much of the region and even to the Persian Gulf. Even though they weren't near a large body of water, they had access to sea-faring visitors. Archaeological studies of ancient Nineveh lead us to believe that they developed an admiration of and religion based on the sea and the creatures that were in it. This desert-sitting, war-hungry city was fascinated by sea monsters. Which in turn makes the plight of Jonah all the more necessary.

The Prophet

Jonah lived in Galilee and was a Jewish prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, during the reign of Jeroboam II. He was the son of Amittai from Gath-hepher. This was a relatively stable time for the Jewish nation though not without conflict. The real threat to Israel came from the North. The Assyrian Empire.

Not much is known about Jonah, but it is believed that he had it relatively easy as far as most Jewish prophets are concerned. Then God called on him to do the impossible. Go to Nineveh and tell them to repent. God might as well have asked Jonah to march into 1940 Germany and preach to the Nazis.

There is a reason that God chose this time and this prophet. God needed someone to say 'no'. If there was another willing missionary among the Jews, that person was not called upon. It would take a miracle for that person to have been successful. It was Jonah's refusal to go that ultimately allowed him safe passage through Nineveh. But God still had a few miracles in mind.

The Sailors

Jonah had no desire to go to Nineveh. Instead of obeying the command, Jonah ran from God. He bought a ticket and boarded a ship to far-off Tarshish. He never made it there. During the voyage, a powerful storm occurred and threatened to destroy the ship. The sailors did everything they could, securing the ship, lightening the load, even going so far as to pray to their own gods. It finally boiled down to the equivalent of a game of craps. Everyone on board participated to find out whom the storm was here for. And Jonah lost that game. The sailors asked Jonah what he had done to deserve this. Jonah replied to them, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord...Pick me up and throw me into the sea." The sailors were terrified. They did not want to take anyone's life. They continued in vain to save their ship, but it was no use. Jonah must be thrown overboard.

When they tossed Jonah over the side, the storm weakened, the seas began to calm, and the ship was at peace. These sailors saw the power of the Hebrew God at work and when their ship was saved, they became believers. And even though the book of Jonah doesn't record this, it would be a safe guess that these sailors spread the news of what they had seen.

Sailors have a reputation for many things in this world. They are known as great tellers of tall tales. They are often superstitious to the point of paranoia. And, especially during this time period, they are the great communicators. Ships were responsible not just for the transportation of goods and people, but also the transportation of information. Sea ports were the first to receive word of what was happening on distant shores. Mail, news, laws, and military orders were all transported via sea. And often the sailors on board those ships were the sources of the news throughout the city. And they did just that with the story of Jonah.

The Fish

Unlike the cartoon version of the whale where Jonah took refuge inside the belly of a ridiculously oversized sea creature, built a fire on the deck of a ship swallowed long ago, and sat peacefully in earnest, repentant prayer, the actual event was probably much harsher. In fact, it had to be for this story to take place.

Jonah 1:17 says, "Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." Jonah spends all of one sentence to record what is one of the biggest story lines in the bible and leaves much to the imagination. But, somewhat surprisingly, the modern-day evidence to support such an event is not that farfetched.

There are video recordings of whales surfacing on the ocean, coming within mere feet of swallowing a near-by diver. And there are numerous accounts of whales beaching themselves. Further investigation

reveals that this sea creature must certainly have been a whale because whales are mammals that require oxygen gained from the air, not gills pulling oxygen from water. All of this, no matter how unlikely, is still quite possible. But it doesn't mean it was comfortable. The book of Jonah does not record how long Jonah was in the water before the whale swallowed him whole...minutes, hours or even days if the water was warm, but it was probably long enough for Jonah to ponder his own death. Jonah also fails to mention which was worse, being lost at sea or eaten alive.

Imagine being trapped inside of a thick, plastic tarp that's just big enough to contain you, but it wraps you completely. Imagine that tarp holding ocean temperature salt water at least waist high, if not higher. Add a whale-sized amount of bile. Throw in some dead, partially digested fish. Now take away all light, being surrounded by complete and utter darkness. And then throw that tarp with contents enclosed into a deep swimming pool with a very thin line for air. The smell would be overwhelming. The taste, no matter how hard you try not to allow any of this in your mouth, would be repugnant. There is no sense of direction as the motion of the tarp and the movement of the water would keep you off your feet. Only the water line of the liquid, fish-infested gastric juices would provide any sign of what was up or down. You would probably vomit inside this tarp meaning you are floating in not only the digestive acid of the whale and whatever it had eaten, but your own vomit, urine, and feces. This is what Jonah went through. And what does Jonah do? He prays.

Jonah not only prays, but he records his prayer. He writes it down later and saves it. He spends one of his four precious chapters reciting this prayer. He *prays*. And God answers.

The Mission

The prayer ends with God having the fish vomit Jonah up on dry land. Even though this is not specifically recorded, it appears as though the whale beached itself, opened its mouth wide and expunged its belly-full of cargo on the shore. And out came what must have been quite an unusual sight. Here was a man who had spent three days inside the belly of a whale. He wasn't groomed or clean or probably even dressed. What was left of his outer layer of skin was bleached white. Some areas of his body would be red from the top layers of epidermis being removed and the lower layers being prematurely exposed to acid, no less, like being flayed alive. His hair was gone from head to toe. He had little to no clothes. And he stank. People could smell him before they saw him. He was in pain from his raw skin which was now exposed to open air and a sandy beach. Here was the man that the sailors had thrown overboard and proclaimed that God had saved them for doing so. Here was the man who supposedly died at sea. It didn't take long for people to learn what had happened. Jonah also leaves out which beach he was spewed out onto. But it is of little matter. Jonah would find his way home. And people along the way would recognize him because news like this made its way around.

It doesn't say how much time had passed between being washed up on the beach and his preparing for a journey, but Jonah went to Nineveh. He walked in. Probably without much hassle or even questioning. Although this is also not recorded, it is likely that the Ninevites had heard of Jonah. The news of a Jew being thrown overboard to appease the storm of a Hebrew God and then the arrival of that same Jew on a beach from the belly of a whale would have been news that piqued the interest of the Ninevites. This sort of story would have been spread very quickly. The Ninevites were probably in awe of this news and were not only curious, but anxious to see this 'Jonah From the Belly of a Whale.' It is likely they *welcomed* him in. And they wanted him to speak.

Jonah didn't set up shop at the city gate or stand on the first street corner he came to with a sign that read, "Repent! The end is near!" No, Jonah walked to the center of the city without saying a word. He walked a full day before opening his mouth. By this time, Jonah had most likely drawn attention to himself. He was being followed out of wonder and curiosity. A crowd had gathered and had followed him wherever he went. When Jonah finally stopped to deliver his message, he had the attention of the entire city of Nineveh. And what did Jonah have to say? "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown!" End of message. Jonah kept walking.

The brevity of the message probably worked in Jonah's favor. Had Jonah been willing to spend more time trying to convert the inhabitants of the city to Judaism, they likely would have lost interest, chased him out, or even killed him. But someone who had been inside the belly of their god preached destruction using a single sentence. What Jonah had to say surprised and shocked them. They were terrified. This man who had been close, closer than anyone, to the Ninevites' god told them to repent. They had done wrong. They were going to be destroyed. And they did what no one could have anticipated: they listened.

It is highly likely that the Ninevites not only knew who Jonah was and where he was from, but also what God he served. What they didn't know was why he was in their city. So, when he spoke his one-line message, the impact spread far and wide. Even the king of Nineveh heard the message. And he was just as afraid as his people. Instead of preparing for war or evacuating the city, they prayed. They prayed to the God of Jonah, the Hebrew God of the Storm to hold back His anger and forgive them. And, in turn, God listened.

God spared the city of Nineveh. The Ninevites did survive past the forty days despite the prophesy of Jonah. Jonah, who patiently waited those forty days like a child waits the month of December for Christmas, was disappointed.

The book of Jonah omits most of the events that happened between Jonah delivering his brief message of doom and the fortieth day when God was supposed to rain down fire on the Ninevites, but Jonah was there, waiting to see if God would follow through with his destruction or have mercy and compassion. Jonah was hoping for fireworks.

The Worm

Everyone knows the story of Jonah and the Whale. People who have never stepped foot inside of a church know this story. But does anyone know the story of Jonah and the Worm? The true miracle of the book of Jonah is the growing of a plant and the worm food it became. The storm blowing away can be chalked up to coincidence if you choose to ignore the timing of God. The swallowing of Jonah whole can be given scientific explanation and written off as a weird anomaly, no matter how great the odds of that happening. But a large, leafy plant sprung up overnight in the desert and provided Jonah some shade. How many gardeners are there who can say they've seen that? Jonah sat gleefully in the provided shade and anxiously awaited the destruction of Nineveh. The next day a worm ate the plant which made Jonah furious. This is how God teaches Jonah a lesson. Not with a storm, not with a whale, but with a worm. As far as the four chapters of the book of Jonah go, this last chapter dedicated to a plant and a worm are the most important.

There are so many references to the 'Old Testament God' with wrath like fire and brimstone, the angry, jealous, even murderous God who wiped out cities and armies on a whim. But we find out instead that the reason Jonah ran isn't because he was afraid of Nineveh. He was afraid that God would show them mercy. In Jonah 4:3, it says, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." Jonah wanted the Ninevites to die! The irony here is that if Jonah obeyed God in the first place, the destruction of Nineveh probably would have happened. The Ninevites wouldn't have known or even cared who Jonah was. Once he started preaching to them about death and destruction, assuming he made it that far, they would have shown him death. And God would then follow through with His plan. But God didn't want to destroy Nineveh, so He chose the prophet who He knew would refuse His command to save them!

Jonah didn't understand. Even after he delivered his message, he didn't get the message himself. Jonah had no vested interest in the plant. He didn't plant it, water it, take care of it...yet he was mad when it was gone. Jonah had something good and it was taken away. The city of Nineveh was around long before Jonah was born. He did not help found it or live in it. He had no relatives or acquaintances that we know of that resided there. But he was mad that it existed. Jonah's homelands had been raided and ravaged by the Assyrians. They conquered many of the neighboring countries, both friend and foe to the Jews. Just as the Allies were mad when Germany invaded France and bombed Britain, just as America was mad when terrorists attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Jonah had a right to be angry. Something bad was going on and Jonah wanted justice. Why would God want to save them?

The worm came to take away the plant, but God allowed Nineveh to continue unharmed. Jonah was in desperate need of a lesson in compassion, mercy and even the Golden Rule of 'love thy neighbor.' God was putting school in session. No matter how bad the transgression, no matter the extent of the misdeeds, no matter how many people are executed in concentration camps, no matter how many people perish from a plane intentionally crashing into a building, we are all God's children and we all have a part in God's plan. There are consequences for every action but love and mercy should always be prevalent.

The Takeaway

Jonah Finds His Way

Jonah finally got it. We know this because the author of the book of Jonah is Jonah himself. This is traditionally accepted and historically regarded as truth. Jonah wrote this to record the events that took place so those that came after him could learn from his mistakes. It took a lot to get to that point, but Jonah finally got the big picture.

God's Plan

Nineveh does not fall in forty days but is allowed to live on. So long as they are in God's favor, that is. Like many people-groups, tribes, cities, and individuals, they eventually go back to their old ways. Around 612 B.C, the Assyrian Empire finds themselves out of God's favor and they are obliterated by the up and rising Babylonian Empire and a young general named Nebuchadnezzar. This sets the stage for the likes of Jeremiah and Daniel among many others. God's plan marches on.

God will use you whether you want to be used or not. As Jonah found out the hard way, God has a plan. You can want to be a part of it or not want to be a part of it, but participation is not optional. Jonah was the reluctant vessel of God's message. God chose an unwilling participant because it was the best way

Nineveh would be saved. And not only did Jonah's reluctance save Nineveh, it saved some sailors on a ship along the way. God can make great things happen from a disobedient member of the human race.

Willingness

There are many out there who are ready and willing to do God's will. And that is a good thing. But it's not always enough. What if Jonah had handed off this task to a young apprentice who was eager to serve God in whatever capacity was needed? No disobedience, no questioning God's authority, just a simple, "Yes, I will, God." Likely, he would have been destroyed and Nineveh soon to follow without some sort of divine intervention. God used the disobedience of Jonah to not just teach Jonah himself a valuable lesson, but to show some sailors the power of God and to save a city from destruction. Being willing to do God's work is a great thing, but willingness does not mean God will pick you for the task. Do not be discouraged if that's the case. You never know if the job you wanted but didn't get would require you to become fish food.

The Right Stuff

Jonah had no desire to obey this one command from God. Other commands, sure, no problem. This one? Not so much. The bible is riddled with examples of reluctant servants. Moses is the most prominent example. Jonah definitely falls into this category. If God calls on you to do something, rest assured He knows He's got the right person for the job.

But what if you're not qualified? What if you're not ready? Jonah wasn't ready to save Nineveh until he went through the belly of a whale. If you're not ready, God will make you ready.

God Is Love

There are lots of examples of the 'Old Testament God' that destroys cities and decimates armies. But this is not the chief characteristic of God. God knows what is best for us and He wants us to live! All of us! Even the Ninevites! Even that annoying co-worker or that abusive parent or that nasty pedophile...even those people on death row who have earned their passage there or that terrorist who has killed bus loads of civilians. God loves everyone. He has no desire to destroy anyone, but there is a time for everything as the bible itself says. Do not mistake a harsh circumstance as an example of an unloving God. God had a person go through three days of cold, dark, putrid discomfort to save a city. And God Himself spent three days in death to save everyone. What greater love is there?