

Jonah: A Chapter-by-Chapter Study

Introduction

The book is named after the main character, Jonah, but there is some debate over whether Jonah is the author or if it came from the authors of 1 and 2 Kings. It's because of this debate that it is also difficult to place a date on the writing of Jonah.

The events of this book take place during a time (800-750 B.C.) when the northern kingdom had restored the borders under King Jeroboam II, ending conflict between Israel and Damascus. Assyria remained a threat to Israel at this time, however. Elisha and Jonah both prophesied about the good fortune of Israel and the restoration of the traditional borders (2 Kings 13 and 14), but Israel would become complacent in this newfound comfort. It would be during this later time that Hosea and Amos would prophesy against Israel, and God would send Jonah to Nineveh.

There is also considerable debate among scholars and historians on whether this is a historical account or a parable. This may simply be left to the reader to decide.

Chapter 1

V1-3

Jonah was a prophet of Israel, the northern kingdom of the Jews. Yet, God called him to go and rebuke Nineveh, a Gentile city and the largest city in the world at the time.

Why does Jonah flee?

The Assyrian empire would just as soon slaughter Israel rather than listen to anything they had to say, let alone a rebuke. Is it any wonder then, that Jonah chose to flee from God's call? But why leave at all? Why not simply ignore God and stay in Israel? This is answered in verse 3. Jonah thought if he could get away from God's chosen people that God would leave him alone. Also, Nineveh was east of Israel. Tarshish was the furthest western point of the Mediterranean Sea in modern day Spain.

V4-6

Escaping God was not an option, as Jonah soon found out. God caused a great storm which in turn, caused the sailors to do everything they could to save their ship, including throwing their cargo overboard. When that didn't work, they each began praying to their own gods.

Somehow, Jonah had managed to sleep through the storm only to be awakened by the captain. Since praying to their own gods didn't seem to be working, the captain insisted that everyone on board pray to their god in hopes that someone was listening.

V7-9

After prayer didn't work, the sailors tried a different way. They gambled to see if they might find out who the source of their turmoil might be. As soon as the casting of lots revealed Jonah to be the reason behind the storm, the sailors pleaded for information. Jonah answered them as simply as he could.

V10-15

Whether the men knew the Hebrew God that Jonah spoke of or whether they were simply superstitious about all gods is unknown, but they believed Jonah enough to know that he was the reason for the trouble they were in. They asked Jonah for a resolution. He gave them one.

What was Jonah's reason for wanting to be thrown overboard into the storm?

The author gives no hints as to what Jonah wanted out of being thrown overboard. Whether it was selfless compassion for the sailors, guilt from running from God, fear of having to go to Nineveh, or something else entirely is purely a guess.

The sailors had no desire to have blood on their hands and made one last effort to save the ship and Jonah. But it was pointless. They begged the Hebrew God for forgiveness and threw Jonah over the side. As soon as they did, the storm ceased.

V16-17

The final two verses of this chapter are profoundly different. In verse 16, the sailors are in awe of what they just witnessed. Whatever superstitions they held before were just dwarfed by the acts of Jonah's Hebrew God. They offered a sacrifice to their new God and took vows to Him. Jonah had unwittingly made new converts.

The final verse is Jonah's fate. Jonah sums up this fate in just two sentences. Not only is there much debate on whether this is historically accurate or a parable, but even those who believe it to be fact have questions. Most people believe that Jonah would have to have been swallowed by a whale since that is the only animal that would be large enough to swallow a human and provide oxygen for Jonah. But the Hebrew word for whale isn't used here. Instead, the term "sea dog" or "dog-headed seahorse" is used.

Regardless of the living sea-vessel Jonah was trapped in, he resided there for three days and nights.

Chapter 2

V1-2

After fleeing from God, Jonah still showed signs of faith. He knew where he was, why he was there, and more importantly, Who put him there. Jonah does the only thing left for him to do.

It is noted that Jonah must have been an educated Jewish scholar as his prayer refers to at least three different Psalms (18:6, 42:7, and 31:22). And he would have been quoting from memory as he would likely not have been tossed overboard with his copy of scriptures, nor would he have light to read by.

V3-7

The bulk of Jonah's prayer shows his humility. Not only did Jonah disobey God, but he separated himself from God. As a prophet, this would have had the biggest impact on Jonah's spiritual well-being.

Jonah's description of the sea not only reveals the perils he faced after being thrown into the belly of a beast (seaweed wrapped around his head), but it also shows the knowledge of the day. The

people of the era were well aware that the land came upward out of the sea, and islands weren't just floating freely in the ocean, as Jonah describes the root of the lands in verse 6.

V8-9

The closing of Jonah's prayer shows his true repentance. Whether he was motivated by his circumstances or by true sadness from disobedience is debatable, but his repentance is real.

V10

The last sentence of the chapter is just as vague as the closing sentence of the first chapter. Jonah states very plainly what happened without much description or detail. Jonah doesn't even say upon what shore he was vomited back up on.

Chapter 3

V1-3

It is largely believed that Jonah was spit back up on the shore near his homeland of Israel, or at the very least along the same coast. This would mean he would not be near Nineveh. It is not made clear how much time elapsed between being vomited back up on shore and how long it took for Jonah to leave for Nineveh, but it is widely accepted that God did not wait too long for Jonah to recover from his ordeal before sending him on his way. This time, Jonah did not hesitate to obey.

What is made clear is that Nineveh was a large city. It would take a person three days to walk from one side of the city to the other.

V4

Jonah walked far into Nineveh before spreading the Word of God, such as it was. His entire message was one sentence. It was more of a threat than a message of redemption. It's because of this brevity and the tone of the message that most scholars believe that Jonah was begrudgingly obeying God. But if Jonah was truly obeying God, then he would be preaching the message that God had given him.

There are other schools of thought that believe that the book of Jonah is more of a synopsis of events, and the brevity of what Jonah preached is also just a summary of what was said, not the entire message.

V5-9

Why would the people of Nineveh even listen to Jonah, let alone let him enter their city?

Keeping with the theme of being vague, the book of Jonah gives no reason why the Ninevites would entertain the preaching of an Israelite inside their city walls. However, there is archaeological evidence to suggest that the Ninevites of the era were fascinated by sea creatures, possibly even worshipped them as deities. It is possible that the Ninevites were already aware of a man that had been inside the belly of a sea monster by word of mouth. It is also possible that Jonah bore the look of someone who had been inside the belly of a sea creature as that experience would have left Jonah in an astonishing physical state. Either way, this would have given Jonah an edge in Nineveh. They would hang on his every word.

As such, they took Jonah very seriously. The God of Jonah was not to be reckoned with. Everyone from the Ninevite king on down to the animals were to be in a state of repentance in order to appease the Hebrew God.

V10

God was pleased with the repentance of Nineveh, and just like a forgiving God does, He forgave. This would be in keeping with a biblical character description of God (see Jeremiah 18:7-8, for example).

Chapter 4

V1-3

Unlike God, Jonah was not pleased with the repentance of Nineveh. He was quite upset that his preaching had worked. In this passage, Jonah reveals why he was disobedient. He didn't flee out of fear of going to Nineveh. He fled because he was afraid God would forgive the Ninevites. He was afraid that God would be *too loving*. He was so filled with anger and hatred that he would rather die than see them be forgiven!

V4

Since Genesis chapter 3, God has never backed down from asking His creation hard questions. Here, God asks Jonah to confront his own feelings and why he feels that way. And God will ask this same question again later in the chapter.

V5-8

Jonah was still curious enough to stick around from a safe distance and watch over Nineveh to see if God would really forgive them or not. Again, the book is vague on exactly how long Jonah waited. This passage only describes the passing of a day rather than the intended forty days until destruction, but it is unknown how much time passed between the leaving of the city and the growing of the plant.

As Jonah watches over Nineveh, God protects him with shade. And the book of Jonah records the lead character being happy for the first time. But just as quickly as the plant grew to provide shade, a worm appeared to devour the plant and take away the one source of joy provided to Jonah in his entire journal. Jonah finds himself back to wanting to die like he did in verse 3.

V9-11

In the closing passage of the book, Jonah argues with a compassionate God. Jonah was of the common misconception that because the Jews were the “chosen people” that God belonged exclusively to them. But God makes it clear that He cares for everyone, not just the Jews. Jonah was being selfish. He didn't want to extend mercy to his enemies. He wanted grace and compassion for himself and cried when it was taken away. But he relished the idea of a vengeful God destroying his enemies. Instead, God used a reluctant, selfish, disobedient prophet to save an entire city.

It is Jewish tradition that Jonah completed his conversation with God by saying, “Govern your world according to the measure of mercy, as it is said, To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness.” However, this is not biblical. Part of this traditional closing can be found in Daniel 9:9. It is not

known whether this tradition came before the book of Daniel and Daniel is supposedly quoting Jonah or if the tradition came afterwards and the quote stems from the book of Daniel.

References

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