

An Attempt To Listen To God
A Survey of The Book of
Jonah

By

Rowan Jennings

Introduction

1) Historical Background of Israel When Jonah Prophesied:

- a) Jonah prophesied concerning Israel, and while I cannot be sure of when he prophesied, his prophecy about the restoring of the boundaries of Israel was accomplished during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash (2 Kgs. 14:25). It was also during Jeroboam's reign that Hosea and Amos prophesied (Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1). I can find no specific scripture as to whether they were contemporaries with Jonah.
- b) Evidently Jonah ministered prior to the reign of Jeroboam or during it. Those early days of Jeroboam were days of bitter affliction and weakness in Israel. Their land had been conquered by Assyria. In those dark days the ministry of Jonah seems to be that of encouragement (2 Kgs. 14:25).

2) Interrelationship with other prophets.

- a) Being as accurate as *possible*, with Biblical dating Jonah's ministry to Nineveh was approximately one hundred years before the prophecy of Obadiah. Both deal with the same people who, despite the revival at this time, ultimately became depraved as ever again.
- b) He was the first Hebrew prophet/missionary who was sent to a heathen nation. (Jon. 1:2)
- c) Jonah and Nahum present balancing truths. Both were taken up with Nineveh but Jonah deals with the mercy of God and the spiritual revival of the people, whereas Nahum deals with the justice of God.

Author

- a) Jonah came from Galilee. This shows the very distinct exaggeration of the Pharisees when they said: "Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (Jn. 7:52), for they knew Jonah was a Galilean. Galilee was a despised place, perhaps that which we would call a slum area, and in amazement the question was asked: "Shall Christ come out of Galilee?" (Jn. 7:41)
- b) In the scriptures Jonah is given two names, Jonah (Jon. 1:1) and Jonas (Matt. 12:39), both which mean "a dove". Jonah, the son of Amittai, was from the town of Gath-hepher in Zebulun in Galilee (2 Kgs. 14:25). Apart from the scriptures and according to Jewish tradition, Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath whom Elijah raised from the dead (1 Kgs. 17:17-24); he was the servant who went with Elijah when he fled from Jezebel (1 Kgs. 19:3); and he was the young man who was sent to anoint Jehu by Elisha (2 Kgs. 9:1-10). Whither these things are true or not we cannot tell, and had they been important the Lord would have told us of them in the scriptures.
- c) Being a prophet who prophesied of the prosperity of Israel, for him to go to Nineveh was a very hard task. He disobeyed God! Why? Was he a coward, a bigot?
 - i) It would be easy to say it was because he was a coward, but whatever else he was, he was not a coward! I wonder how many today would go into the middle of London, Los Angeles, Auckland, etc., and stand alone and preach the gospel? This man did not care what others thought of him. He knew the command of God.
 - ii) He was a man who knew Isaiah had prophesied that Assyria would come and destroy Israel. I wonder how many would go to a people to warn them to repent or the judgement of God would fall if there was the knowledge that these same people would soon come to destroy his own people?
 - iii) Jonah was a man who was aware of the wickedness of the Assyrians. They were feared due to their brutality. They skinned people alive and had a pyramid of skulls outside the city. Jonah saw them as a people who deserved God's punishment. Surely righteousness demanded they be punished, yet God was sending him to preach repentance to them! This was going against everything that seemed right and just.

- iv) Furthermore, going to preach salvation to them would be viewed as a traitor by his own people whom he loved. By going to the Assyrians it was as if he was turning his back on his people in supporting the ultimate enemy.
- v) He himself gives us one reason why he disobeyed. He knew the character of God. Read again his words: “Was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled into Tarshish: for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil” (ch. 4:2). He knew that if the people repented God would be gracious.
- vi) I can understand Jonah getting angry but who did he get angry at (ch. 4:5)? He got angry at the God who in grace was sparing these people who were enemies of Israel. Thus, despite being a prophet of God, this man very naturally failed to recognise the fulness of divine love, and had no interest in the spiritual welfare of the people. To him the justice of God should have cancelled out the love of God and not spare such an evil depraved people even if 120,000 could not discern between their right hand or left (ch. 4:11).
- d) There can be no doubt that Jonah was a real historical figure and his experience with the great fish was not a myth or parable. The Lord would never have used a myth or hypothetical figure to give evidence of His own experience. (Jon. 1:17 with Matt. 12:39-40; Lk. 11:29)
- e) Israel was never meant to be an isolated community. They were to be separate from the heathen but not isolated. They were to be a “light to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6). Paul uses the same scripture and applies it to himself (Acts 13:47). God will seek to manifest His presence, power, and grace to the whosoever will. He did it to the Egyptians through Moses (Ex. 4:2, 8:8); the Babylonians throughout Daniel and the three Hebrew servants (Dan. chs. 2, 3, 4, 5); the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39); and Cornelius (Acts 10:2; 25-48).
- f) It is only from Jonah’s experience that we know the Lord was in the earth three days and nights (Matt. 12:40).
- g) God calls Jonah. Some times we are told what God said to the individual, but we are very seldom told how they knew it was God calling. We are told about God’s calling to Abram (Gen. 12:1); Moses (Ex. 3:10); Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1 - 2:1); Jeremiah (Jer. 1:2-3). God deals with us as individuals as is seen in our conversion. I expect that most of us have heard possibly hundreds of conversions, yet not one is the same because God treats each as an individual.

Key Verse

- a) In my understanding there are several key verses:
 - i) “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord” (ch. 2:8–9).
 - ii) “I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled unto Tarshish: for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil” (ch. 4:2).

Key Words

Words	No. of References
Believed God	1
Sackcloth	3
Repent	3

Words	No. of References
Great	9

The word “great” is used in the following connections:

- a) “That great city” (ch. 1:2; 3:2, 3)
- b) “A great wind” (ch. 1:4)
- c) “This great tempest” (ch. 1:12)
- d) “A great fish” (ch. 1:17)
- e) “Great kindness” (ch. 4:2)

As well as those listed above, certain words in Hebrew also have “great” associated with them:

- a) “exceedingly afraid (Heb. “with great fear” ch. 1:10)
- b) “nobles” (Heb. “great man” ch. 3:7)
- c) “exceeding glad” (Heb. “great joy” ch. 4:6)

Key Concepts

We must never think that God can be halted in His method of functioning and need a “Plan B”, for “Known unto God are all His works” (Acts 15:18). God has ways to bring the most disobedient, unwilling individual back to the place of glad obedience. There are several lessons for our encouragement in this situation:

- i) Even when we are disobedient to God He still cares for us. When the children of Israel were idol worshippers in Egypt (Ezek. 20:5-8) He still cared for them. When there was opportunity to go back to Israel many stayed in Babylon under the Medo-persian Empire, and when their lives were in danger Esther was in the Palace to supplicate for them (Est. 7:1-6). One of the most difficult things to do when we are away from God is to see calamities for what they are, which is God speaking to us. They are not just random acts of “that’s the way things happen”.

Aspects of God

- a) Jonah may have had a distorted concept of God, thinking that God was selective in His love and care. I thank God that He “will have all men to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4). The scripture still stands true: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezek. 33:11). Nineveh was a wicked city (Jon. 1:2; 3:8). Such is the tender love of God that He sent His messenger with the message of salvation. Sadly Jonah had no heart for the unsaved of Nineveh. Despite being a prophet and knowing about God and speaking for God, Jonah knew little of the grace, mercy, and love of God. What a lesson for each of us.
- b) God is ever seeking to teach His people lessons. He provided the great fish for Jonah for his preservation. Jonah learnt that God was the master, not only of the seas, but of the creatures that live in it. This was a lesson Peter learnt when He cast in a line and caught the fish with the coin in its mouth (Matt. 17:27). God also prepared a gourd, but this was ~~for~~ to teach Jonah that his priorities were wrong (ch. 4:9-11).
- c) The sailors acknowledged that this was no ordinary storm. It was one sent by the God of the Universe. God is the Master of the sea.
 - i) It is He who determines their extent (Psa. 8:29)
 - ii) He is their source (Neh. 9:6); and determines their duration (Rev. 21:1)
 - iii) They are under His feet (Job 9:8)
 - iv) And He rules over them (Psa. 89:9)

Satan can also use the wind and the seas (Lk. 8:24) for had it come from God, He never would have rebuked it.

Notes

- 1) The book of Jonah has a number of doublets which are set in contrast to each other:
 - a) There are two repentings.
 - i) The first is the repentance of an individual, Jonah (ch. 2:3-9)
 - ii) The second is that of a people (ch. 3:5-10).
 - b) Twice over Jonah wants to die.
 - i) In ch. 4:3 he wants to die because he is not pleased with that which the grace of God has done
 - ii) In ch. 4:8 he is not pleased with the goodness of God's ways toward him.
The man was thinking of himself and immediate comfort and wanted God to be gracious to him and save him from the heat of the sun. He was not happy with God's gracious dealings in giving the people salvation.
 - c) There are two recognitions of the Godhood of God by pagans (ch. 1:14, 16; 3:5-9)
 - i) The first was by the supernatural change in nature
 - ii) The second by the simplicity of the message and sincerity of the preacher. The preacher had experienced the reality of divine judgment and therefore with earnestness would warn others of its reality.
 - d) The wind is twice mentioned (ch. 1:4; 4:8)
 - i) While both were acts of divine judgment, the first was used to teach the unsaved about the true God (ch. 1:14, 16)
 - ii) The second was to teach Jonah lessons about himself (ch. 4:9-11)
 - e) Jonah was called twice by God (ch. 1:2; 3:2)
 - i) The first call resulted in his disobedience and a hard lesson for himself, but God kindly used it to bring pagans to the knowledge of Himself.
 - ii) With the second call Jonah obeyed and it brought pagans to repentance toward God and a hard lesson for Jonah which showed his error in priorities.
 - f) God prepared two things for Jonah (ch. 1:17; 4:6)
 - i) In the first case it was to convict Jonah that his service was not yet done.
 - ii) In the second it was to convict Jonah of his wrong attitude and priorities.
- 2) Jonah became a shadow of the Lord in death and resurrection.
 - a) Did Jonah actually die? Many are the teachers of the scriptures which side one way or the other on this matter. With either teaching there are several problems which are not easy to answer. If Jonah died, is there the indication here that there is a place for prayer beyond the grave? Does this bring into question the parable of the rich man (Lk. 16:24) and whether it is a parable or a real situation? If Jonah did not die then in what way would he be a fitting type of the Lord in resurrection? Such questions are beyond the scope of this paper but certainly matters to consider in due time.
 - b) His coming out of the fish certainly prefigures resurrection. When Paul wrote concerning the Lord: "He rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:4), I am sure he had several shadows and prototypes of the Old Testament in view, as well as plain scriptures. Among those Old Testament pictures are the figurative resurrection of:
 - i) Isaac (Heb. 11:19)
 - ii) Jonah (Jon. 3:10)
 - iii) The live bird (Lev. 14:7)
 - iv) And the man whose body touched the bones of Elisha (2 Kgs. 13:21)
 - c) The resurrection of Jonah also has a prophetic perspective as regards to Israel. The words of Hosea ring out: "After two days will he revive us: in the third day He will raise us up" (Hos. 6:2). In the present

dispensation Israel is viewed as being dead, but there is a future for Israel and God will raise them to be “the head, and not the tail” (Deut. 28:13); then as the valley of dry bones and the sticks, Israel and Judah shall be reunited and live (Ezek. 37:1-14; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2).

Suggested Structure

It is evident that the book is in two distinct sections each beginning with a commission from God (ch. 1:1-2; 3:1-2). The first section ends with amoral creation responding to the dictates of God (ch. 2:10), and the second ending with moral man responding to the dictates of God (ch. 3:4).

Putting it in table form:

Section 1		Section 2	
chs. 1:1 - 2:10		chs. 3:1 - 4:11	
First commission		Second commission	
Jonah’s disobedience		Jonah’s obedience	
God’s executed judgment on Jonah blended with mercy		God’s pronounced judgment on Nineveh blended with mercy	
Prayer of Jonah for mercy		Prayer of Jonah for death	
Have mercy on me by deliverance		I do not want you to have mercy on them	
Ch. 1 “I don’t want to go”	Ch. 2 “I will go”	Ch. 3 “I’m here”	Ch. 4 “I did not want to come”

Practical

- 1) Every geographical journey either takes us further in fellowship with the Lord or from the presence of the Lord.
 - a) Since God is everywhere, how can one flee from His presence?
 - i) Adam and Eve tried to hide from “the presence of the Lord” (Gen. 3:8)
 - ii) Cain went out from “the presence of the Lord” (Gen. 4:16)
 - iii) Satan went forth from “the presence of the Lord” (Job 1:12; 2:7)

Jonah is the only individual of whom it is said: “from the presence of the Lord” three times (Jon. 1:3 (twice), 10). When the Lord comes to the earth He will take vengeance on them that know not God . . . and shall be punished with everlasting destruction from “the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:8-9).
- 2) When God calls us to do a work, and if He has deemed that we do it, if we fight He will come very heavily against us. He will make us of our own volition, even if totally against our will, to do His bidding.
- 3) I wonder how Jonah preached? He had no heart for the people, and that which caused the stirring was not the result of the yearnings of his heart for the people. That which he did have was a belief in the enablement of God to punish and the grace of God in giving repentance.
- 4) When the Lord told Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh he went the direct opposite. Nineveh is northeast whereas Tarshish is west. I am sure that most of us can relate to this characteristic for has there not been

times when the Lord has prompted us to witness to an individual, and like Jonah, we found something else convenient to do and failed to obey. Peter did the same thing.

- 5) How can we run from “the presence of the Lord”? Cain went out “from the presence of the Lord”. How? We can never hide from God for He is omnipresent and omniscient. The Old Testament teaches this clearly: “Whither we go to heights or depths, east or west we cannot get away from the presence of the Lord” (paraphrase Psa. 139:7-8). “The LORD he is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath” (Deut. 4:39). Can any hide himself in secret places, that I see him not? Do not I fill the heaven and earth. (Jer. 23:24)
- 6) When in the great fish Jonah cries: “I am cast out of thy sight” (ch. 2:4). It is a cry many a saint feels as a result of the discipline of God because of disobedience. Life is ever so dark and guilt lies heavy upon them. They know God forgives but it is so hard to forgive themselves. I am sure Jonah must have asked himself, “What was I thinking of when I tried to run away from God?” Many a saint has asked the same question.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia