

Study Notes for Jonah 1-2

JONAH 1-2

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The book of Jonah is the fifth book of the twelve minor prophets. The book is unique among the prophetic books in that it does not contain a series of prophetic oracles but rather consists of a story about the prophet himself and his disobedient relationship with God after being told to go to Nineveh – one of the oldest cities of Assyria (Genesis 10:11-12) and later to become its capital – to preach repentance.

Jonah lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793-753 A.D.). This was a time of prosperity and expansion of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 14:25). Jonah is clearly a nationalistic Israeli with strong pro-Israel and anti-foreign views. He has no desire at all to help out Nineveh in any way since Nineveh represented to the Israelites all the terror of the Assyria nation. One could easily see he would not have minded preaching judgement and condemnation on Nineveh but to preach repentance was something entirely against his nature and beliefs. He would much rather have preached like Nahum (seventh minor prophet) who prophesied the Lord's anger and vengeance on Nineveh. Keep in mind when reading this book that within 50 years, Assyria, with Nineveh as its capital, would completely destroy the northern kingdom of Israel and relocating its inhabitation throughout its empire (722 A.D.). As well, it would severely threaten the southern kingdom of Judah.

The major theme of the book is God's sovereignty and grace. He is sovereign over all things on earth (wind, sea, fish, humans) and he alone decides on whom he wishes to have compassion and forgiveness. The goodness, fairness and grace of God is defined by whatever God does. This concept was extremely difficult for Jonah and the Israelites to fathom. They could well understand God's love and compassion for them and his judgement on the other Gentile nations who despised God's people, but they could not fathom God's love and compassion for an enemy nation that threatened Israel's very existence. This kind of God was too much for Jonah to accept during his time and has continued to be a problem for Jews and Christians alike throughout history. The book is therefore not so much about Jonah and what happened to him but about God and who he is; his absolute sovereignty and his grace that extends to all peoples.

Jonah flees from the LORD (1:1-17)

- 1:1 "The word of the LORD came ..." is a well used expression in the OT (used over 100 times) referring to a direct communication by God to his servant or prophet. See 1 Kings 17:8; Jeremiah 1:4 or Haggai 1:3 as examples. The Israelites listening to the text of Jonah's book would understand that this came from a divine revelation (Allen, 202).
- Not much is known about Jonah. The only other reference to him in the OT is 2 Kings 14:25 which states he was a citizen of Gath-Hepher in the region of Zebulun. This is about five miles northeast of Nazareth. So he was from the northern kingdom of Israel.
- 1:2 Nineveh was located on the east bank of the Tigris River about 500 miles east of Jonah's home town of Gath Hepher. (See Genesis 10:11-12) It is called a "great" city several times (1:2; 3:2,3; 4:11). This did not just refer to the size of the city but also how the city and nation it represented understood itself. The inhabitation of Nineveh viewed themselves as the center of the universe; all culture, power and military strength came from it. Such cities are not looked on favorably in Scripture (e.g. "Babylon the great" in Revelation) (Allan, 203).

“preach against” – nothing is said about the content of God’s message or that he will spare them. The message itself seems to be simply one of judgement (3:4b) and does not have a guarantee that God will relent (Stuart, 450). Yet, Jonah knew the *character* of God, that he is full of grace, compassion and abounding in love (4:2).

“for their evil has come up before me” – Nothing is said in Jonah about their particular sin but later the prophet Nahum states that their sin included plotting evil against the Lord (Nahum 1:11), cruelty and plundering in war (Nahum 2:12-13; 3:1,19), prostitution and witchcraft (Nahum 3:4) and commercial exploitation (Nahum 3:16). To the Judeans and Israelites, “Nineveh stood for the essence of human self-exaltation and anti-God power” (Allan, 203).

1:3 “ran away” – the reason is given in 4:2; because Jonah knew God was compassionate and would forgive Israel’s enemy.

“Tarshish” – about as far away as one could get in those days; Tarshish was located in the west region of Spain. This was the very opposite direction of Nineveh.

1:4-6 “the LORD sent” – this is one of the major themes of Jonah; God is sovereign and in control of all situations, Jonah’s actions notwithstanding. It mattered little what Jonah decided since God had other plans for him. See also “God provided” (v. 17), “the LORD commanded” (2:10), “the LORD God provided” (4:6), “God provided” (4:7) and “God provided” (4:8). In this case, God sent a storm to stop Jonah. The listener to this story is immediately gratified; Jonah’s disobedience to God should not go unpunished.

The ship captain, much to his annoyance, finds Jonah sleeping. He uses the same word that God used in v. 2, “call” (NIV and NASB use different English words but the Hebrew word is the same). But Jonah does not call or pray. (Allan, 208)

1:7-10 “cast lots” – this was a common method to find out what God’s (Leviticus 16:8; 1 Chronicles 24:13 and many others) or in this case, the sailor’s gods will was. However, again it is God’s sovereign choice that determines the out come of the lots (Proverbs 16:33).

“I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” – the sailors would have immediately understood this to mean that Jonah’s God was the supreme God (although still one of many). This statement from Jonah, like all his statements about God (2:9; 4:2) are all completely theologically correct and orthodox. Jonah knew all the right theology about God and could correctly state God’s attributes but he was not willing to listen and obey God because it meant betrayal of his nationalistic views.

Notice all the questions the sailors ask. Five questions in one verse (see also v. 6 and vv. 10-11 for three more)! See v. 16 for their ultimate answer.

1:11-12 “pick me up and hurl me into the sea” – Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh was not his fear for his own safety. He was quite willing to die for Israel, but he was not willing to live for Nineveh’s salvation. By being thrown into the sea would have been his final solution to his problem; if he were to drown he would not have to go to Nineveh. It is interesting to note that Jonah does not pray to the LORD; he does not confess his sin of disobedience. He would rather die than do what God had asked him to do.

1:13 “Nevertheless” or “Instead” – the men tried to save Jonah’s life. Their actions contrasts drastically with Jonah’s. Jonah had put them in harms way but they were willing to risk their lives for him. Nineveh had put Israel in danger of its existence also but Jonah did not want to help them. In this sense the pagan sailors where more righteous then Jonah.

“greatly feared the Lord” – the pagan sailors were amazed at what they saw and experienced. However, their actions of sacrifice and vows does not mean they became followers of the Lord. Their view of the supernatural was that there were many God and Jonah’s God, however powerful, was just one more.

1:17 “the Lord provided” – underlines God’s sovereignty. It is God’s plan that Jonah would be rescued from drowning in the particular way.

“great fish” – provided by God but it is not the Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1) or the “monster of the deep” (Job 7:12; Psalm 74:13; Ezekiel 32:2).

“three days and three night” – this can mean one full day and parts of two additional days. Jonah’s stay in the fish is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ time in the tomb (Matthew 12:40; Matthew 16:4; Luke 11:29-32).

Jonah rescued by God’s grace (2:1-10)

This is Jonah’s psalm of thanksgiving to the Lord for rescued him from the inevitable death of drowning by providing a large fish to swallow him.

2:1 “from inside the fish” – note the fish is not mentioned in the prayer itself. Much of the prayer has to do with Jonah’s condition just before he is swallowed. However, it is also a prayer of thanksgiving that reflects back on what happened.

2:2 Jonah’s distress (exact translation is “belly of Sheol”, ESV) causes him to call out to the LORD. This is the first time Jonah prays to God. (The next time is in 4:2). The storm itself had not cause him to pray to the Lord but only at his moment of death. It is in this condition that he prays and God listens. This is the summary of Jonah’s prayer: Jonah prayed and God answered. The rest of the psalm contains the details (Baker, 113).

“Sheol” – this term refers to the place of the dead but can also mean the place were the wicked go after death. Considering this later meaning, Jonah would have had good reason to fear going to the place of the wicked where he would be abandoned by God.

2:3 “For you cast me” (ESV) or “You hurled me into the deep” (NIV) – It was of course the pagan sailors that threw him overboard at Jonah’s own wish. But here Jonah acknowledges God’s absolute sovereignty in all things – the ultimate responsibility for Jonah being thrown into the sea was God’s.

The rest of this verse has a very vivid description of what it was like to be thrown into the sea. Note throughout this psalm the many Hebrew parallelisms where the same idea is repeated twice with the second time being more detailed.

2:4 In this verse Jonah believes that he has been completely rejected by God for his disobedience (“I have been banished from your sight”, NIV). He thinks his destiny is Sheol. However, the next sentence there is hope. It may be that finding himself in he

fish he has hope that he will again see “your holy temple” or possibly after his ordeal was over he looked back and saw that there was hope.

Note the two halves of the verse: in the first half, all hope is gone if God does not see Jonah and in the second, hope is restored if Jonah sees God (“your holy temple”).

- 2:5 Jonah fate seems inevitable and death is immanent.
- 2:6 “roots of the mountain” – it is unclear what this phrase might mean (it is only used here in all the Old Testament). It may mean that the roots of the mountains on land go all the way to the bottom of the sea.
 “down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever” (ESV) – Jonah sees the bottom of the sea as a gate which locks in its prisoners. That is, there is no escape.
 “But” or “Yet” again introduces a contrast between the inevitable death by drowning and the rescue by God. Jonah’s long downward spiral into the bottom of the sea is stopped and he is “brought up.”
 “pit” is a synonym for grave and often is a parallel to Sheol (Baker, 116).
- 2:7 Just at the moment of death Jonah remembers the Lord. And in his remembering he prays. Jonah had deliberately tried to forget God. But like the prodigal son, at the moment of his most dire condition he remembers. Jonah’s prayer demonstrated his willingness to come under God’ sovereignty. When he did so, the Lord provided a way for his rescue. See Hebrews 4:16.
- 2:8 The first part of this verse is straight forward. It is referring to those people who practice idolatry. The second part of the verse contains only two Hebrew words and can either mean that such people have forfeited God’s grace (“steadfast love”) that was theirs (NIV, ESV) or such people have abandoned their faithfulness to God (NASB). Of course, either meaning is true.
- 2:9 Jonah clearly made promises to God while in the sea or the fish. Now he makes good on those promises. He will “sacrifice” and fulfill his “vows.”
 “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (ESV) – As Alexander states “No other words could summarize better Jonah’s appreciation of all that God has done for him” however it is exactly this truth that Jonah was running from and which causes Jonah such intense anger later on (Baker, 119).
- 2:10 The story now returns to narrative. Again God’s sovereignty is evident in that it is God who commands (speaks to) the fish. Jonah is then very unceremoniously and with no dignity deposited onto dry land.
 “vomited” – no doubt the fish was quite happy to get rid of Jonah.

Biography:

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