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## REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF JONAH

Though a mere four chapters long, the Book of Jonah has spawned more than its share of art, books, and speculation, as does its protagonist, the prophet Jonah. Here I attempt to address a fraction of the issues and insights this book brings to the table, namely the historicity of the book, parallels to Jesus Christ, the theology of hope, and an application to Christian missions.

### **Jonah's Historicity**

The person of Jonah son of Amittai is a historical figure mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, who correctly prophesied concerning Jeroboam II's expansion efforts. Jeroboam II reigned forty-one years somewhere between 793-741 BC. Depending on whether Jonah was a young man or an old man when he uttered this prophecy and depending on whether this prophecy was toward the beginning or end of Jeroboam II's reign, Jonah lived somewhere between 863-691 BC.

Whether the Book of Jonah relates a historical event or is fictional is a point of contention among scholars and difficult to prove either way. Most assume it to be one or the other and proceed from that viewpoint. The primary argument against its historicity (aside from its miracles, which always make some scholars uneasy) is that we have no record of a city-wide conversion of Nineveh during Jonah's lifetime. However, historical records for Nineveh during this period are sporadic and one could question whether an event like this (where the king humbled himself) would have been recorded, since Assyrian history tends to only record history that puts its kings in a positive light. The primary argument against being a fictional account is that it is highly complex without a single point. Most fictional stories, such as parables or allegories, are shorter and tend to have a particular obvious point or intended use.

If the Book of Jonah is historical, the likely king of Nineveh would be Ashur-dan III<sup>1</sup> who ruled from 773-755 BC. This Assyrian king lived for a time in Nineveh, which would earn him the title "king of Nineveh" as well as "king of Assyria". His reign was marked by famine, a solar eclipse, and a possible earthquake, all of which would have been viewed as omens of divine disfavor, and may have prompted him to believe Jonah's message and to be desperate enough to seek God's mercy.<sup>2</sup> Another possibility is Ashur-dan III's father, Adad-nerari III, during whose reign Assyria halted its expansion initiatives and this relative peace lasted about forty years.<sup>3</sup>

### **Jonah and Jesus**

An allusion to Jonah is drawn in the story of Jesus calming the sea in Matthew 8:23-27. Jesus and his disciples get in a boat to travel to the other side of the lake. Like Jonah's story, a dangerous storm suddenly appears, and like Jonah, Jesus is asleep. The disciples wake Jesus, who speaks to the wind and waves, and they become calm. This mildly contrasts but still recalls Jonah's adventure, where the captain wakes Jonah, the sailors interrogate him, and after Jonah is

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1 Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31, (Waco, TX: Word, 2004), 446.

2 Ibid., 491-492.

3 H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984), 82.

thrown overboard, the sea becomes calm. In both accounts, the sailors and disciples witness the power of God and are afraid.

Jesus later explicitly draws the link between Jonah and himself:

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 11:39-41, NIV)

Since Jonah refers to the belly of the fish as “the depths of Sheol” (Jonah 2:2), this comparison is apt. Like Jonah, Jesus will be dead for three days and then rise again. Jonah’s descent into the sea/ whale/ Sheol and ascent onto dry land carries a lot of death/ resurrection/ rebirth metaphors. Phyllis Tribble even refers to the belly of the fish (who is first described in masculine terms and then later feminine) as its “womb”.<sup>4</sup> Notice Jonah “dies” on his mission to save Nineveh, while Jesus dies on his mission to save humanity. Also, both Jonah and Jesus are from the area later known as Galilee. (Gath Hopher, Jonah’s hometown, is about three miles northeast of Nazareth.)

In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus makes a similar remark to his first. A few verses later when Peter proclaims Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus refers to Peter as “Simon son of Jonah,” the only time Peter is ever referenced this way. (16:4, 16-17) Jesus’ remark should be viewed as complimentary. Contrary to common views of Jonah, his parallel with Christ makes him a positive figure rather than a negative one.

### **“Who Knows”: A Theology of Hope**

Neither the sailors nor the Ninevites are guaranteed of God’s mercy and instead hope for it, saying “Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish,” and “Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” (Jonah 1:6; 3:9) This sentiment is shared by David in 2 Samuel 12:22: “Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live,” and by the prophet Joel: “Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing.” (Joel 2:14) God cannot be forced to show compassion, but appeals may be made. The hope is that God can and will change his behavior in response to human behavior. This hope does not require God to act on whim but instead acknowledges his freedom.<sup>5</sup> He is free to judge and he is free not to judge. He is free to bless and not to bless.

God’s freedom is an attribute of his divinity. He is not a robot that he is required to dispense strict justice, nor is he a human who reacts out of anger. His justice works in tandem with his compassion. As Hosea 11:8-9 says, “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger... For I am God, and not man.”

Though God’s freedom in dispensing grace is welcomed by those who benefit from it, it is often objectionable to those observing it. Jonah objects to the compassion God shows the

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<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Tribble, “The Book of Jonah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, Daniel, The Twelve Prophets*, Vol 7 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, (Nashville: Abington, 1996), 505.

<sup>5</sup> James K. Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 100.

Ninevites. (Jonah 4:1-2) Likewise, the older son objects to the lavish reception given to the prodigal son (Luke 15:28-30), and the workers in the field object that those who worked one hour are paid as much as those who worked a full day. (Matthew 20:10-12)

Answering Jonah, God replies, “Have you any right to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4) Jonah had been disobedient and deserved death, but God had shown him grace. Those who receive God’s grace should show grace, too. In God’s freedom there is hope for all of us, because all of us need his grace.

### **Jonah and Christian Missions**

In one sense, Jonah is a bad missionary. He doesn’t have any compassion for the sailors on the ship who suffer because of Jonah’s disobedience. He also doesn’t have any compassion for the Ninevites God sent him to. On the other hand, when it is time for him to speak, he doesn’t balk at telling the truth. He proclaims to the sailors, “I am a Hebrew. I worship Jehovah, the God of Heaven who made the sea and the land.” Once he arrives in Nineveh he boldly calls out, “Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

Despite Jonah’s disobedience and lack of compassion, everywhere he went he won converts to Jehovah. It is tempting to wonder what more he could have done if only he had been obedient and compassionate! But the truth is there was nothing more he could have done even if he had been obedient and compassionate. The success of Christian missions does not lie in the missionary but in God himself. Jonah’s ability and his attitude—for good or for bad—were irrelevant. God won the worship of the sailors and orchestrated the otherwise impossible repentance of the Ninevites. Do not underestimate the transforming power of God’s message or the ability of people to respond to it.

One could argue that Jonah’s ministry was ultimately ineffective. The people of Nineveh eventually returned to their evil ways and God finally did destroy them, as graphically prophesied in the book of Nahum. For the brief period they were repentant, they called upon the generic “God” rather than Jehovah, likely never knowing which God had threatened them and relented. However, the sailors Jonah met made vows—indicating a long-term commitment<sup>6</sup>—to God, calling upon him and knowing him by name as Jehovah, the God of the Hebrews and heaven and Creator of the sea and land. Ironically, these sailors were not the people Jonah had been instructed to visit, but people he had met as a result of his disobedience.

In biblical history, Jonah is not the only one to resist God’s calling. Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah all protested God’s call (Exodus 3:10-4:17; 1 Kings 19:1-18; Jeremiah 1:4-10), although Jonah is unique in taking flight. Some point to Jonah’s story as proof that resistance to one’s calling, ministry, or mission is ultimately futile.<sup>7</sup> God’s power and orchestration are apparent throughout the text.

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart, 465.

<sup>7</sup> Bruckner, 20.

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