

“Go to Nineveh”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Jonah (1)

Texts: Jonah 1:1-3; Revelation 18:1-8

Most everyone knows the story of Jonah – a reluctant Hebrew prophet who was thrown overboard by his terrified shipmates, only to be swallowed by a big fish (usually assumed to be a whale) and then spend three days and nights in the fish’s belly, before being vomited up by the fish on a foreign shore, forcing Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites, who repented *en masse* when Jonah—however reluctantly—finally fulfilled his evangelistic mission. The story is simple enough it can be understood by a child, but complex enough that theologians and biblical scholars still debate its meaning. The Book of Jonah is next up in our series on the Minor Prophets. Lord willing, we’ll spend four weeks in this book before we come to the third Sunday in advent.

Whenever we begin a study of any new book of the Bible it is important to ask and answer several questions to make sure we interpret the book and its message correctly. Who was Jonah, when did he live, why did he write this book, and what is in it? How does this particular prophecy compare with the other Minor Prophets (the Twelve)? These questions are especially important with a book like Jonah, which many think to be an allegory or a moral fable, seeing the story as so implausible that it cannot possibly be speaking of historical events. How can someone be swallowed alive by a whale and live for three days? No, the critics say, this cannot be history, so it must be an allegory, a teaching parable, or a work of fiction, designed to teach us some important spiritual or moral truth.

When we interpret Jonah’s prophecy through this fictional lens, the reader’s focus usually falls upon Jonah himself, the prime example of a reluctant prophet who refuses to obey God’s will. By not obeying God, Jonah finds himself in the belly of a whale, until God relents and the whale then spits Jonah out safe and sound—if a bit shook up. The moral to the story is that should God call you to do something you do not want to do, learn the lesson of the story of Jonah. Obey the Lord and avoid the kind of calamity which comes upon those who, like Jonah, will not do what they know God wants them to do.

But when we ask and then answer the “Who?” “When?” “Why?” and “What?” questions, it becomes clear that Jonah’s prophecy is not an allegory, nor does it offer such a trivial and moralistic message. This is not a “once upon a time in a land far away” kind of book. The prophecy opens with Jonah’s personal ancestry—revealing the name of his father enabling us to compare other biblical references to this family, thereby tying Jonah’s ministry directly to the reign of Jeroboam II, one of the last rulers of Israel (the Northern Kingdom)—as we saw in our just concluded series on Amos, and in our introductory sermons on the Minor Prophets.

Jonah’s prophecy comes in the form of a prophetic narrative (much like 1 and 2 Kings) with a song/Psalm included within the narrative (chapter 2). It is clearly set in a particular period of time—the final days of Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Yet unlike the books of the Kings, the Book of Jonah does not emphasize God’s prophet’s obedience to undertake a difficult prophetic call. On the contrary, the Book of Jonah focuses upon the prophet’s determined reluctance to fulfill his mission.¹ But what is that mission? That is the critical question not often properly considered.

¹ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 435.

When the reader steps back from the sensational particulars of the story—the sailors and the storm, the big fish, the three days—what becomes clear is that God’s ultimate purpose (whether Jonah responds appropriately to that purpose or not) is to extend salvation into the heart of the same nation (Assyria) which is about to invade Israel (the Northern Kingdom), wiping Israel out and killing, capturing, or exiling its inhabitants. Jonah’s reluctance to preach YHWH’s message to Israel’s enemy highlights the importance of that message—even in the days of Israel and Judah (mid 700’s B.C.), YHWH’s gracious purpose is to save sinners, and that purpose is not limited just to Israel.

As for the prophecy, Jonah is the one through whom God’s purpose is revealed. He clearly functions as the protagonist in the story. But we must not miss the larger the redemptive-historical thrust of the prophecy which emphasizes God’s intention to extend salvation to the pagan Gentiles who are outside the covenant line of Israel. When we look at the message of Jonah through the wider lens of redemptive history, his prophecy takes on a whole new and expanded meaning—God’s mercy extends to the ends of the earth—not just to Israel. Jonah’s actions must be interpreted in light of YHWH’s greater purpose.

Just as he was merciful to Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II—YHWH sent prophets to warn the nation and call them to repent at a time when the nation turned away from YHWH to gross idolatry—so too YHWH will be merciful to the Gentiles in Nineveh, and even to Jonah’s pagan shipmates.² As we read in Revelation 7:9, God’s gracious purpose is to save a multitude so vast they cannot be counted. This becomes clear when the ministry of Jesus comes to its climax and Jesus himself speaks of the “sign of Jonah” as the reason why Israel must believe and accept Jesus’ teaching—the “sign of Jonah,” foretells of Jesus’ forthcoming resurrection from the dead after three days and nights in the tomb. Christ’s death and resurrection is the foundation for that gospel which is to be preached to the ends of the earth—the “sign of Jonah” lives on in the church’s mission to preach the gospel to all nations.

Well then, who was Jonah? We learn in verse 1, that Jonah was the son of Amittai, who is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 in connection with the reign of Jeroboam II, who “*restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.*” Jonah lived about 760 B.C., is the son of a prophet, and from Gath-hepher near Nazareth (in the region of Zebulun). Unlike his contemporary Amos—whose ministry to Israel was on-going when YHWH called Jonah to preach to the Ninevites—Jonah was an Israelite. His name means “dove,” which some commentators consider a subtle message about the book itself—that Jonah is a fictional character who is passive and prone to running away. I see nothing symbolic. This is Jonah’s name, nothing more or less.

Amos and his prophetic oracles are much different in structure and purpose than the prophecy and ministry of Jonah. In fact, the Book of Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets in terms of its style. Its prophetic narrative is unlike that of the other minor prophets who reflect more the oracle/prophetic contents of Amos. The two contemporaries, Jonah and Amos, could not be more different. Amos was not from a prophetic line or guild. Jonah was. Amos was from Judah (the Southern Kingdom). Jonah was a loyal son of Israel—a patriot of sorts, who detested the Assyrians to the north, to whom he was sent to preach, and to whom he refused to go. Amos was called in a dream and then given a series of visions to preach to Israel—a difficult task because his message was confrontational and intended to expose Israel’s sin and call the people to repentance. Jonah also received “*the word of the Lord which came to him*” establishing him as a prophet in the line of Moses. But Jonah was called by YHWH to go and

² Bryan D. Estelle, Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy (Phillisburg: P & R, 2005), 28-29.

preach to Nineveh—Israel’s enemy. So the “who?” and “when?” questions find straightforward answers. Jonah is a prophet. He’s contemporary of Amos, and was called by YHWH to preach to the Ninevites about 760 B.C., during the reign of Jeroboam II.

The “why” and “what” questions are more complicated to answer because they are tied to the nature of the book itself. Critical scholars openly scoff at the assertion the Jonah is describing historical events—that he was really swallowed by a large fish, and that he spent 72 real hours in the fish’s belly—surviving despite a lack of oxygen and despite the fish’s digestive juices which ordinarily would have dissolved Jonah’s remains rather quickly. Because the work cannot be accepted as historical the critics contend, the Book of Jonah must be an allegory telling some sort of moralistic tale—“dare not to be a Jonah,” or “obey God when he calls you, so you don’t suffer the consequences,” or some such.

The better critical scholars see a broader redemptive historical purpose in Jonah. Israel failed in its mission to be YHWH’s witness to the Gentile nations—which is another reason why YHWH was about to bring judgment upon the nation. So, before Israel’s destruction in 722 by the Assyrians, YHWH raises up a prophet (Jonah) who will do what Israel failed to do—go to the source of Israel’s impending destruction (the heart of the Assyrian empire) and call for Gentiles to believe in YHWH and repent of their sin. To these scholars, Jonah’s apologetic purpose (in the form of a sermonic parable) does not require the events within the book to be true. This is certainly a possible interpretation of Jonah’s overall mission and this apologetic purpose may indeed be behind YHWH’s prophetic call of Jonah.

But if this is true, why does Jonah so actively resist YHWH’s call to the point that he states he would rather die than see the Ninevites repent (Jonah 4:3)? Jonah is a loyal Israelite. We know from 2 Kings 13 that Israel had been continuously at war with Syria—the Gentile kingdom immediately to the north. Syria was a sometimes client state, sometimes rival of Assyria, growing in power and geographically to the north of both Syria and Israel. According to the account in Kings, YHWH kept Syria at bay through Assyrian aggression—weakening Syria so they could not invade Israel—preventing either nation from conquering the Northern Kingdom. YHWH even granted Israel military success against Syria during the reign of Jeroboam II. These nations would have been Israel’s (and Jonah’s) natural enemies.

On this interpretation, Israel failed to be a witness to the Gentile nations around them. So God sends Jonah to preach to the Gentiles—even though Jonah despises the Assyrians. This would be like YHWH sending a patriotic South Korean into North Korea to preach to Kim jong-Un, with the preacher knowing full well that God’s mercy was so powerful Kim jong-Un might just convert after destroying South Korea. Then what? This is surely just one of the dynamics going on within Jonah’s prophecy. Jonah knows YHWH’s mercy can convert those whose destruction he (Jonah) truly desires. Jonah would rather see Assyria destroyed than converted by YHWH. How difficult it must have been for Jonah to know that through his own preaching, YHWH will spare hated Assyria from judgment, likely anticipating that Assyria then would be YHWH’s agent to bring judgment upon his own disobedient people, Israel.

There are two issues in the Book of Jonah frequently raised by critics. The first is the account of the fish, and the second are historical factors associated with Nineveh; the city possessing a king, being described as so large that it took Jonah three days to walk through it, and the fact that the city repented through Jonah’s preaching when there is no evidence this is the case. Nineveh, is mentioned in Genesis 10:11, as the city founded by Nimrod after Noah’s flood. The city was located just outside modern day Mosul in Northern Iraq. The fish story is said by critics to be impossible. The historical events associated with Nineveh are considered highly improbable.

As for Jonah being swallowed by a fish and surviving, we must not overlook the fact that critical scholars begin with a hermeneutic of suspicion (anything miraculous in the Bible must be discounted, “guilty until proven innocent”). But the exact opposite is (or should) be the case. We should ordinarily accept things as true, unless and until there are reasons not to. The fact that Jonah is tied to a well-known historical family and time period (the reign of Jeroboam II about 760 B.C.) points in the direction of a factual account—not a parable or allegory. Some defenders of the book have tried to argue that it is possible for someone to be swallowed by a large fish (the Hebrew text indicates this, and not a whale) and still survive. But on its face, this critical objection appears to be a powerful argument—people ordinarily do not survive in the digestive tract of large animals.

There are several responses to this. In an article in the learned publication *The Princeton Theological Review* (from 1927, vol. 25, 636), the author considers the account of a whaler actually being swallowed by a sperm whale and surviving—leaving behind verbal and written testimony to that effect. Such reports are interesting, but I am not sure this is the best way to defend the historicity of Jonah’s account of being in the belly of a great fish for three days and nights.

The matter is much better resolved by considering the fact that on at least three occasions (reported in Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32), Jesus appeals to the “sign of Jonah,” (i.e., Jonah being in the belly of the fish for three days and nights) as prefiguring his own death and resurrection. Simply put, if Jesus believed Jonah’s account to be historical, then so should we. If Jesus was raised bodily from the dead after three days in the tomb, then there is no reason to reject the account of Jonah on the supposed ground of implausibility. The bodily resurrection of Jesus establishes God’s supernatural intervention into history, not as a mere possibility, but tied to specific historical events. Jonah, and Jesus’s resurrection being but two instances of things supposedly impossible actually occurring in human history.

As for Nineveh, it is quite an interesting place and very important to the message of Jonah. As mentioned in Genesis, Nineveh is one of the oldest cities of antiquity, likely settled as far back as the neolithic period (new stone age—6000 B.C.). Later, the city became a center of Ishtar worship (the Assyrian equivalent of Baal), but was destroyed by a great earthquake, to be rebuilt by the Assyrians about 1800 B.C. Over time the city declined in importance. But about 700 B.C. (shortly after the ministry of Jonah), the Assyrian king Sennacherib turned the city into a magnificent showplace with square streets and a huge palace with winged lions in relief. Nineveh was completely destroyed when Assyria fell to the Medes and Persians in 616 B.C. Sadly, the archeological remains of the city were seriously damaged by Isis in 2016.

When Jonah mentions the “king of Nineveh” in chapter 3:6, critical scholars contend that such a king would be king of Assyria, not Nineveh. But the same manner of speaking occurs in the Old Testament, when Ahab, the king of Israel, is called “king of Samaria,” because Samaria is within the larger area over which he ruled (1 Kings 21:1). Critical scholars also claim Jonah’s speaking of Nineveh in the past tense must mean the prophecy was composed after Nineveh was destroyed in 616 BC. Therefore Jonah’s prophecy is not historical but written long after the time period it purports to describe. Since ancient Assyrian records mention Nineveh as an important city long before the time of Jonah, and indicate that the city was a winter residence of Assyrian kings during the time of Jonah, it may be the case that by the mid-700’s B.C. the city was not as important as it once had been—explaining Jonah’s use of the past tense.

Critical scholars also contend that the city was not big enough in the mid 700’s B.C., to take someone three days to pass through it. But there were a number of villages surrounding the city (as suburbs). If such villages were part of the city, that could add considerable distance to Nineveh’s circumference. It

could also be that Jonah walked into the city on day one, preached on day two, walked out on day three.³

As for the mass conversion of the city as reported in Jonah 3:4, critics point out there is no historical record of such a thing happening—which is indeed the case. Jonah’s report is the only record we have, but that does not mean such a thing did not happen—there is no reason why the biblical record is not to be trusted as primary source documentation. We do know that several significant cosmic and historical events were witnessed by the Ninevites about the same time as Jonah’s preaching. Between 765-759 B.C., Nineveh experienced a total eclipse of the sun and two significant plagues—this may have made the citizens receptive to Jonah’s preaching. One of the Assyrian kings who ruled shortly before Jonah’s prophetic mission to the city—a man named Adad-Nirari III—was a monotheist, worshiping the god Nebo. Nineveh may be quite ready for a Jewish prophet like Jonah so that when YHWH’s word was preached to them, “*the people of Nineveh believed God*” (Jonah 3:5).⁴

I mention these matters in this detail only because it is important to see that there is nothing problematic with the historicity of Jonah, other than critical scholars looking for a way to discredit Jonah’s prophecy. The evidence clearly points in the direction of Jonah being historical and the arguments against this book being factually true arise solely from modern prejudices, not from any compelling historical evidence.⁵

As for the contents of the book of Jonah, the book opens with Jonah’s prophetic call and his fleeing from that call (1:1-3). We will cover this in our remaining time. Then, in chapter 1:4-16, Jonah encounters pagan sailors who see him as cursed and a threat to their safety—they throw Jonah overboard. We’ll take up this theme next time. In 1:17-2:10, we read of Jonah’s gratitude for being spared from certain death. In chapter 3, Jonah is re-commissioned for his prophetic call—preaching to the citizens of Nineveh. In chapter 4, we discover Jonah’s anger at God before learning of YHWH’s purpose in being merciful to the inhabitants of Nineveh, who otherwise would be wiped out.

With the “Who?” “When?” “Why?” and “What?” questions answered, we turn to our text, the introductory words of Jonah. We have already taken note of Jonah’s prophetic call, and his ancestry. “*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai.*” The specific content of YHWH’s call to Jonah is given in verse 2. “*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.*” A loyal subject of Israel, YHWH is calling Jonah to go and preach to a city and a people whose sin has “*come up before me,*” says YHWH. Jonah is commissioned to “call the people out,” because of their great sinfulness. While the biblical record is clear that all people are sinful—Adam being our biological and federal head—there are times when evil seems to be concentrated in particular places. God will bring judgment upon one such place, Nineveh, unless the people heed Jonah’s preaching and repent. The Bible singles out several cities as centers of evil—Nineveh is one such place, but so too the cities of Tyre (in nearby Lebanon), and Babylon are mentioned as places of concentrated

³ John D. Barry et al., eds., The Lexham Bible Dictionary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), entry on “Jonah and History.”

⁴ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), entry, “Jonah, Book of.”

⁵ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 440.

evil, rebellion, and hostility to God and his people.⁶

As we read in Revelation 18 (from our New Testament lesson), Babylon the Great figures prominently in John's vision. The ancient city of Babylon is no doubt behind John's reference to "Babylon the great"—an obvious reference to Rome, the city founded on seven hills with its imperial cult and emperor worship, which in John's day was openly persecuting the people of God. Imperial Rome of the first century is the supreme city of evil. In John's vision, Rome is a sort of ancient Babylon on steroids—"Babylon the great." It is a combination of all such places of evil in biblical history (Nineveh, Tyre, Babylon). Notice too that God calls his people out of such places—we are to leave before we find ourselves conforming to the evil practices around us. *"Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities"* (Revelation 18:4-5). From the time of Augustine, Christians have seen the city of Rome (in the days of the empire) as a sort of living picture of the city of man, standing in direct opposition to the City of God. I think that is a correct interpretation of what John describes in Revelation 18.

But by virtue of his prophetic call from YHWH, Jonah is instead sent into one of these "cities of man" filled with great evil—Nineveh. Jonah is not to flee the city, but is to go into the city and call its inhabitants, including its king, to repentance. Jonah is to *"call out against [Nineveh], for their evil has come up before me."* The task is difficult enough, but Jonah's personal circumstances make it much more difficult for him. Nineveh is not only filled with evil, it is in the heart of that empire soon to destroy Jonah's own people. Not seeing YHWH's greater purposes, and only realizing the threat such a mission poses both physically and emotionally to himself, Jonah instead, decides to attempt to run away and not fulfill his prophetic commission. We read in verse 3 that *"Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD."*

Nineveh was five hundred miles to the north—not an easy trip, but doable given the well-established trade routes. Fleeing YHWH's call, Jonah instead heads to Joppa (modern Jaffa), which is the nearest seaport on the Mediterranean coast. Jonah paid his fare, and boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, likely a Phoenician seaport in what is now Spain—some two thousand miles to the West, completely across the Mediterranean Sea. If Jonah was going to foolishly attempt to flee the presence of the Lord, he would go to the very end of the earth, as far away from Nineveh as someone in that age could possibly travel. Jonah's act is nothing less than open rebellion and defiance against the Lord's prophetic call. No wonder he is often called the "reluctant prophet."

It is not until chapter 4:2, we learn of Jonah's reason for his disobedience. *"And he prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.'"* Jonah knew that YHWH was merciful. He also knew that if he preached YHWH's word to these people—no matter how much evil was present in the city—YHWH might just spare them. Jonah's struggle is "what if the Ninevites (his enemies) repented?" Well, then, they would be spared. Imagine the knot in Jonah's stomach when he saw his own people, Israel stubbornly refuse to repent and return to the Lord. But YHWH's salvation might come to hated Assyria, even as judgment would come upon Israel. Jonah surely struggled with this possibility. But the Lord will ensure that his word will be proclaimed to the Ninevites whether Jonah is willing or not.

⁶ G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation, NICGNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 850, 900.

As we proceed in the coming weeks to work through this fascinating book, let us keep two things in mind. In the foreground, we have the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet. His story is compelling and a lesson to us all—Attempting to flee from God due to some sin we have committed, or because of spiritual rebellion is a fool’s errand. As David once lamented in Psalm 139:7–8, “*where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*” When we attempt to flee from God we may not end up in the belly of a giant fish, instead the Lord will hold us captive in a much more difficult and demanding prison—the prison of our own guilty conscience. Often, he will allow us to remain in this prison until we seek his face and forgiveness, through the merits of Jesus—his shed blood and his perfect righteousness.

But the bigger picture throughout the prophecy of Jonah is the revelation of God’s gracious purpose to take the gospel far beyond the borders of Israel to the ends of the earth—the Ninevehs and Babylons of Jonah’s age and ours. The Book of Jonah is not just a moralistic tale about obeying God. It is a book about world mission—the word of YHWH going out to ends of the earth—even to Anaheim. The truth of that gospel which calls us to faith in Jesus, is grounded in his death on the cross for our sins, and in his bodily resurrection from the dead—“the sign of Jonah.”

Ironically, it is Jonah, the reluctant prophet, who reminds us of the great missionary calling of Christ’s church. “Go to Nineveh!” “Take the gospel to the ends of the earth.” Amen.