

CONTENTS

Foreword	7
Introduction and Acknowledgments	11
Chapter 1 Jonah — The Man and the Book.....	15
Chapter 2 Running Away from God	25
Chapter 3 The Whale-Way Express	47
Chapter 4 Three Days and Three Nights	63
Chapter 5 Jonah’s Prayer in Hell	75
Chapter 6 That Great City, Nineveh	95
Chapter 7 The Compassionate God	111
Chapter 8 Jonah and the Twenty-first Century	125

ONE

JONAH — THE MAN AND THE BOOK

The Old Testament Book of Jonah is the story of the almost incredible experiences of one special prophet in ancient Israel. The famous “fish story” of his survival from a three-day incarceration in a whale’s belly has been an object of unbelief and ridicule by skeptics for more than 27 centuries now. The same is true to almost the same extent with regard to his subsequent preaching in the great and wicked city of Nineveh in Assyria, resulting in the mass conversion of the entire city to faith in the true God. No extra-biblical record confirming either event has ever been found by historians or archaeologists, and so most scholars have concluded that the entire story is legendary and never really happened.

Practically all liberal religious scholars and theologians have jumped to the same conclusion, developing the pious theory that the author of the book was simply writing an allegory or parable

J
O
N
A
H
—
The
M
A
N
and
the
B
O
O
K

of some kind, with Jonah and his experiences somehow symbolizing the nation of Israel and her travails in the world.

The

R
E
M
A
R
K
A
B
L
E

And yet the Lord Jesus Christ — the Creator, Savior, and Judge of the whole world — accepted the entire record of Jonah as absolutely real and profoundly important. For all who believe in the incarnate deity of Christ, therefore, and in the inerrant authority of His written Word, the Holy Scriptures, it is essential to believe and study Jonah’s record as a factual history of real significance even today. That is the purpose of the exposition in this little book.

J
O
U
R
N
E
Y

First of all, we must realize that Jonah was a real man and a prophet sent by God, not merely a fictional character in a parable. Although there have been many and varied attempts by scholars to “spiritualize” the record into a non-historical allegory or fable of some kind, all such attempts have been refuted and discredited by conservative writers, so no attention will be devoted herein to such notions.

of

J
O
N
A
H

For those readers interested in dealing with *that* realm of speculation, the small book *The Problem of the Book of Jonah* is recommended as an introduction. It was written by Professor G. Ch. Aalders, who was professor of Old Testament in the Free University of Amsterdam, when his book was published in 1948 by the Tyndale Press of London, as based on a lecture originally delivered in Tyndale House, Cambridge. In that small monograph, Professor Aalders has compellingly refuted all these non-historical views of the Book of Jonah, insisting that the intent of the writer was simply to recount the real factual experiences of Jonah, incredible as they may have seemed.

That motivates this brief commentary as well. Jonah's account is taken at face value, not only as true history but also as a divinely inspired component of the canonical Old Testament Scriptures. That is the way it was taken by the Lord Jesus and by the Jewish scribes and religious authorities of His day, so that should be good enough for us.

The book was originally written in Hebrew, of course, as transmitted by skillful and careful copyists over many generations, compared and standardized eventually by dedicated Masoretic scholars, all prior to the invention of the printing press. There have been numerous English translations in recent years, but the one used herein is the highly accurate and time-tested Authorized King James Version. Due attention is paid to the insights of other translations whenever appropriate.

The Book of Jonah was almost certainly written originally by the prophet himself. It was written in the third person, but this was a common style of writing, even in autobiographical narratives. No one would have been able to write about his unique experiences except Jonah himself. Presumably the accounts were written later, perhaps after his return to Israel from Nineveh, but they were so extraordinary as to be indelibly etched in his memory (not to mention the overriding influence of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate author of all the books of the Bible).

The Book of Jonah, with all its supernatural aspects, was apparently accepted by the Jews as true and authoritative right from the start. It was included as canonical among the books of the prophets, even though (alone among all these books, from Isaiah through Malachi) it contained no prophecies except the

one (Jon. 3:4) proclaiming the imminent doom of Nineveh. That prophecy was not fulfilled until much later, of course, because the people of Nineveh did repent at that time.

Jonah did have true prophetic credentials, however. His father was named Amittai (meaning “truthful”), and he had been raised in the town of Gath-hepher, in the region given to the tribe of Zebulun west of the sea of Galilee (see Josh. 19:10, 13), near the present site of Nazareth. This region later became known as Galilee and was in King Herod’s tetrarchy during the time of Christ.

Jonah had uttered a famous prophecy which had been happily fulfilled. At a time when the northern kingdom Israel had lost much of its territory to heathen conquests, Jonah prophesied that God would restore “*the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain*” (2 Kings 14:25). This was accomplished during the reign over Israel of King Jeroboam II (believed to be from about 793 B.C. to 753 B.C.).

The prophecy, therefore, was uttered either early in the reign of Jeroboam II or in the latter years of his predecessor Jehoash, possibly around 790 B.C. The prophets Hosea and Amos were at least for a short time his contemporaries (note Hos. 1:1 and Amos 1:1). In addition, Jonah may well have known the prophet Elisha, whose ministry had extended into the times of Jehoash. It is even possible that Jonah could have been one of the “*sons of the prophets*” whom Elisha had trained (2 Kings 6:1–7). Thus, Jonah may well have been the first prophet chronologically of the 16 writers of the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

As an interesting aside, it may be that the father of Peter and Andrew, Christ's disciples, had been named after Jonah. Remember that Peter was known originally as Simon Bar-Jona (*"Simon, son of Jona"* Matt. 16:17; John 1:42). Jonah was definitely a much-revered prophet among the Jews at the time of Christ, as indicated by the two key references by Jesus to Jonah when rebuking the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 12:40–41; see also Luke 11:29–32).

Since the kingdom of Assyria is prominent in Jonah's record, we need to review a little of its history and its situation at the time of Jonah. According to the biblical record, one of Shem's sons was Asshur, and the name Assyria undoubtedly comes from him (Gen. 10:22). It is reasonable to assume that he founded the city of Asshur, which (although it is never mentioned in the Bible) was the first capital of Assyria. Thus, Asshur was founder of Assyria, and the nation is occasionally called Asshur (e.g., Hos. 14:3). Asshur was also later deified as Assyria's chief god. One might speculate that Asshur originally tried to maintain the worship of his father's God there among his own family and followers, and that this was at least part of the incentive for him to leave Nimrod and Babel (Gen. 10:11).

Be that as it may, it wasn't long before Nimrod ventured from his own city, Babel, north into the region where Asshur had settled (that is, Assyria) and either founded or captured Nineveh, which would eventually become Assyria's capital and chief city. Like Asshur, it was near the banks of the Tigris River, about 100 miles north.

There seems to have been almost perpetual conflict between Assyria and Babylonia from the time of Nimrod on until Assyria was finally defeated decisively about 609 B.C., possibly originating