

Jonah

1. Introduction

1. Literary genre

The book of Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets – unlike the other writings, Jonah is a narrative account of an episode in the life of the prophet.

What type of literature is this? The answer we give to that question will influence the way in which we interpret Jonah.

(a) Jonah is not fiction

It is sometimes claimed that Jonah is a work of fiction because:

- The book of Jonah recounts a number of miracles, e.g. the miraculous calming of the great sea storm, the great fish which delivered Jonah from drowning, and the speed with which the vine grew up to provide shade for Jonah. But miracles don't happen. So Jonah must be fiction.
- Jonah is larger than life. People who discount Jonah as fictitious identify details which they consider to be exaggerations, e.g. the magnitude of the sea storm, the size and population of Nineveh, and the extent of the repentance of the people.
- Jonah contains factual errors, i.e. it is claimed that there historical inaccuracies in the story, such as the identification of Nineveh as the chief city of Assyria, and the use of the title "king of Nineveh".

Scholars who consider Jonah to be a fiction typically classify the book as allegory, parable, legend or short story. However:

- Miraculous events can only be discounted because of a presumption against them. The presence of miracles in a story does not inevitable label that story as a fiction. After all, the author of 1 and 2 Kings was recording history, and he saw nothing contradictory about reporting miraculous events in his accounts of the lives of Elijah and Elisha.
- The enormous size of Nineveh and its large population are compatible with the view that "Nineveh" refers to what we might call "greater Nineveh", i.e. the populated region around Nineveh including the city of Calah.
- The middle of the 8th century was a period of political weakness in Assyria and it is consistent with what is known of the time that Nineveh was the chief city of the rulers (see *Historical Background* below). The title "king of Nineveh" is consistent with the practice of the chroniclers of Israel to refer to a king in terms of his chief city, e.g. the king of Israel was often called the "king of Samaria".

So the case for labelling Jonah as fiction is not proved.

(b) Jonah is historical

The traditional understanding has been that Jonah is a work of historical narrative. This is clearly what the author of Jonah intended – the introduction to the book sets it in an historical context: “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying...” (1:1). “Jonah son of Amittai” was a prophet from Gath-hepher who, according to 2 Kings 14:25, ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II (782-753 BC). Moreover the whole style of Jonah is so like that of the other Biblical historical writings (e.g. 1-2 Kings) that it would have been natural for Hebrew people to have read it as (deliberately) historical and factual.

2. Historical background

Jonah ministered in the middle of the eighth century BC, during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel. Assyria had entered a period of political weakness and internal division:

- The kings of Assyria were weak. They led Assyria on fewer military campaigns against other nations, and they suffered from a number of rebellions in Assyrian cities.
- Severe famine in 765-759 BC and a total solar eclipse (15 June 763 BC) would have been regarded as solemn omens, provoking fear and apprehension in the nation.

Jeroboam II took advantage of the weakness in Assyria and expanded the northern borders of Israel. In fact, this expansion was according to the word of LORD spoken by none other than Jonah (2 Kings 14:25).

National expansion opened up new markets; new markets brought new wealth; the new wealth encouraged decadence. And Jonah’s contemporaries, Amos and Hosea, prophesied against this moral rot in the nation, announcing that God would punish Israel – in fact, that God would use Assyria to punish Israel.

This background suggests:

- why the preaching of Jonah so shocked the population of Nineveh to repent (they had been prepared for it by political instability, famine and signs);
- why both king and nobles issued the decree in Nineveh (the king, being weak, needed the backing of the nobles for any effective action);
- why the king is called “the king of Nineveh” rather than “the king of Assyria” (because his authority was limited outside of “greater Nineveh”);
- why Jonah was so resistant to his commission to preach against Nineveh (he understood from Amos and Hosea that a resurgent Assyria would bring disaster to Israel – better that Nineveh be destroyed).

3. Message and Purpose: Salvation belongs to the LORD

Jonah's message is found (centrally) in 2:9, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

From a conventional point this is a comforting message. And indeed, the book opens with a relatively conventional story: God commissions one of his people for a task; the man of God refuses the commission; the LORD pursues his man and takes him in such a way that (a) the man himself is brought to repentance, faith and the experience of salvation, and (b) the pagan sailors who were caught up in the events are brought to confess that the LORD is God, and they too experience his salvation. "Salvation is of the LORD!"

But the second half of the book provides an unconventional and discomfiting perspective on the meaning of "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" Nineveh repents, but does not confess that the LORD is God – no sacrifices are offered, no vows are made. And yet, because of God's compassion, Nineveh is delivered from destruction – even though this means that Nineveh (Assyria) will be resurgent and will bring ruin on Israel. What, in that context, does "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" mean? How is Israel to understand God's grace towards their enemies? And how is Israel to understand God's salvation (his compassion and mercy, longsuffering, covenant love and faithfulness) after 722 BC and the destruction and deportation of Israel by Assyria?

Seen in this light, Jonah is a theodicy – an investigation and vindication of the (often mysterious) wisdom and sovereign purpose of God.

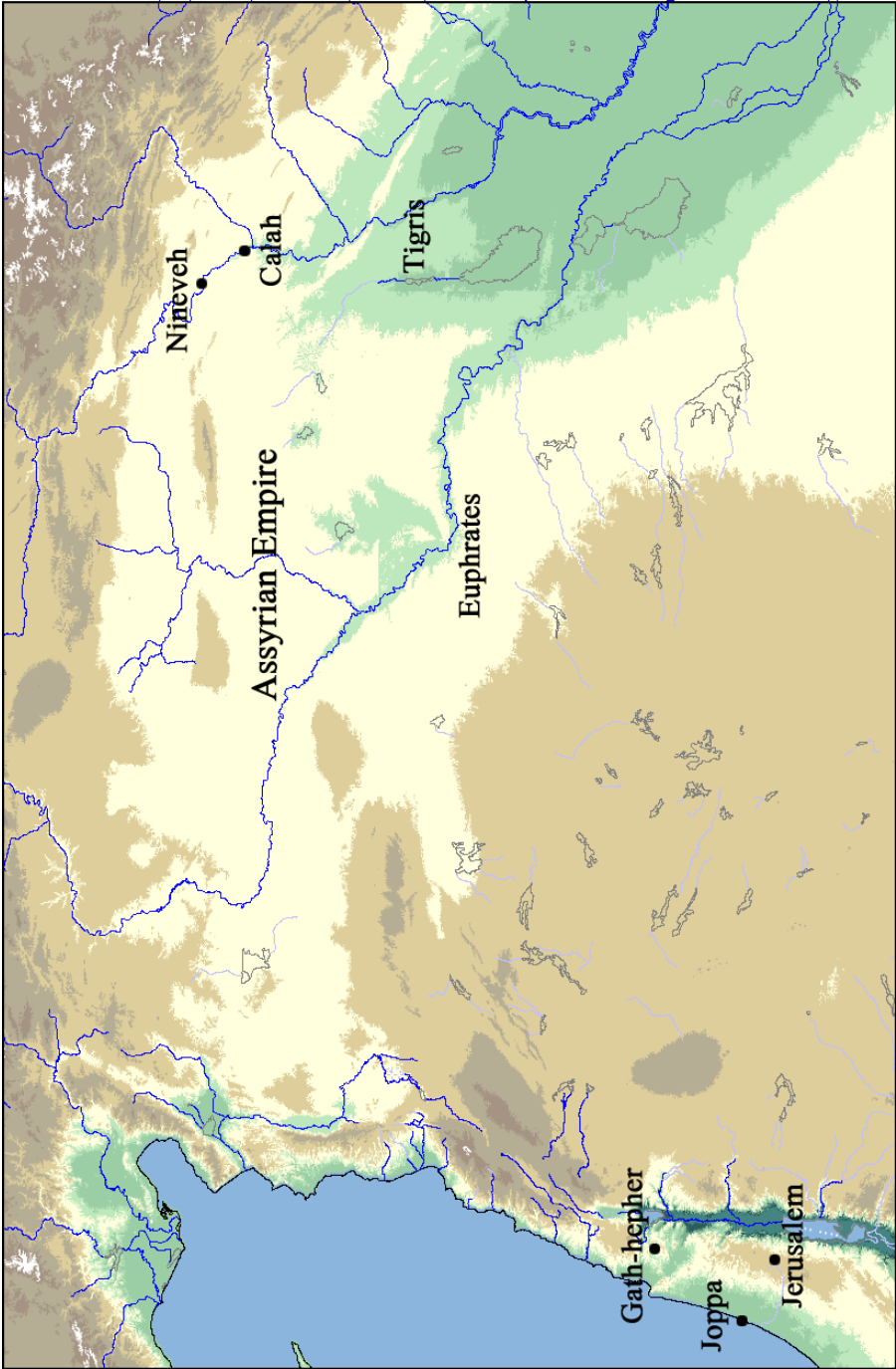
4. Structure

Part 1 (1:1-2:10) *Jonah and the Sailors*

- 1:1-3 Jonah is commissioned but heads west away from Nineveh.
- 1:4-16 Jonah and the pagan sailors.
- 1:17-2:10 Jonah's psalm of praise for his experience of God's salvation.

Part 2 (3:1-4:11) *Jonah and the Ninevites*

- 3:1-3 Jonah is re-commissioned but heads east to Nineveh.
- 3:4-10 Jonah and the Ninevites.
- 4:111 Jonah's anger that Nineveh should experience God's salvation.



Jonah 1-2

2. *Jonah and the Sailors – A Conventional Story*

God commissions the prophet to go to Nineveh and to call out against it because its evil/disaster had come up before him. But Jonah goes down to the sea port of Joppa and boards a ship bound for Tarshish. So God hurls a great storm down on the sea. The storm is so fierce that the sailors are unable to save the boat – it is evident to them that this storm has something to do with someone onboard. Jonah confesses his guilt and asks to be thrown overboard – only thus can the sailors be saved. When the sailors comply, the storm subsides. The sailors fear the LORD exceedingly, offer sacrifices and make vows – this is a conversion experience. Meanwhile, God provides a great fish to swallow Jonah. Within the fish Jonah repents, prays for deliverance and praises God. After three days the fish vomits Jonah out onto the shore.

The LORD sends Jonah. The LORD hurls the storm. The LORD appoints the great fish. The LORD speaks to the fish and it vomits Jonah out. The LORD is the object of the sailors' fear and Jonah's prayer. "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

1. **Jonah's descent (1:1-3,17)**

1:3 sets the tone for the career of Jonah: he rises to flee from the presence of the LORD. This does not mean that Jonah believed that it was possible actually to escape the presence of the LORD: it is a theological way of saying that Jonah was absolutely unwilling to fulfil his commission.

In practical terms, this means he went down to Joppa and took a ship to Tarshish. Joppa (modern day Jaffa) was the only natural harbour on the coast of Palestine. It was not under Judean control, and since Israel was not a seafaring nation the sailors Jonah encountered were pagan, possibly Phoenician.

The identity of Tarshish is unknown, although it is often identified as Tartessos on the south west coast of Spain. Its identity was obviously well known to the Hebrew people. Jonah was going to put as much distance as possible between him and his commission.

The most important point here is that Jonah went down to Joppa. In 1:5 he went down into the hold of the ship to sleep. And in 2:6 he describes what happened when he went down into the sea ("I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever...the pit").

When Jonah fled from the presence of the LORD he began a descent from which he was unable to recover himself. Although this journey may have begun with confidence (he was able to sleep in the ship – though perhaps he was emotionally exhausted by the fear of the LORD [1:9]), it was soon one of distress, crying for help (2:2) and fainting (2:7). Jonah was alarmed to find that he might actually have achieved what he set out to do – the man who rose up to flee from the presence of the LORD was distressed at that thought that "I am driven away from your sight" (2:4).

2. The sailors' fear and conversion (1:4-16)

1:4-16 tells the story of Jonah and the pagan sailors. This passage has been very carefully composed to place the focus on vv. 9-10, "And he said to them, 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD...' Then the men were exceedingly afraid..."

The emphasis is on fear (vv. 5, 9, 10, 16). The LORD is awesome, and his actions inspire fear in those who are caught up in them.

Significantly, the sailors' first response of fear is a reaction to the stirring up (or, rather, the hurling) of the storm, and it prompts them to call on their gods (1:5). But their final response of fear is a reaction to the calming of the storm, and they express it by worshipping the LORD (1:16). The sailors have been converted through their experience of the LORD's salvation.

3. Jonah's recovery (2:1-10)

The downward journey which Jonah was powerless to stop was arrested by the LORD (1:17; 2:10). 2:1-9 is Jonah's response to his experience of the LORD's salvation – 2:9 parallels the response of the sailors (1:16).

- Jonah reduces experience to two spheres: life and death. Death was literally present in the sea that closed over him: "The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head" (2:5). This was a picture of Sheol, the Pit – he was driven from God's sight (2:4). Life is found only in the temple (2:4,7), the place of God's presence.
- Jonah acknowledges his powerlessness to escape death. All he could do was called on God in his distress; cry for help out of the belly of Sheol.
- Jonah renews his commitment to the LORD. The turning point (literally) in his experience is in v. 6 where his descent is arrested, and the LORD brings him up from the pit. At this point Jonah confesses "O LORD my God". He expresses this renewed commitment in vv. 8-9.
- Surprisingly, Jonah does not confess his sin. And yet God delivers him. In fact, God delivers Jonah (1:17; 2:10) before Jonah prays (2:1-9). "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

4. Applications

This is a conventional story of salvation: the conversion of unbelievers and the recovery of a disobedient believer.

- Disobedience is shown to be a downward journey from which there is no human means of recovery. But salvation belongs to the LORD.
- God tosses believers and unbelievers together with a view to the conversion of the unbelievers. But it is not ultimately the confession of the believer which brings this about – it is the work of God, filling the unbeliever with fear through acts of judgement and salvation. Salvation belongs to the LORD.

Jonah 3-4

3. *Jonah and the Ninevites – An Unconventional Story*

Jonah is a two-part narrative. Part 1 (chapters 1-2) is conventional and predictable: Jonah (representative of God's people) is recovered, and the sailors (representative of the pagan nations) throw away their idols and confess that the LORD alone is God. Salvation belongs to the LORD.

But Part 2 is unconventional and raises discomfoting questions, asked by Jonah (4:2) and the LORD (4:4,9,11). Chapter 3 opens with Jonah being re-commissioned to call out God's message to Nineveh. He obeys. He preaches. And the people repent. But there is no conversion of the Ninevites – unlike the sailors in chapter 1, the Ninevites do not confess that the LORD is God, make no vows to the LORD and offer him no sacrifices.

Nevertheless, God sees what they did, and he relents from the disaster that he had said he would bring upon them – salvation, after all, belongs to the LORD. And Jonah is angry, angry enough to die! He knows that repentance can be short-lived. He knows that within a generation, Assyria would recover its strength and devastate Israel. But salvation belongs to the LORD, and the LORD has the last word: "Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city?" It is an unexpected and discomfoting application of an orthodox and conventional truth.

1. **God takes no pleasure in disaster**

The word "evil" is ambiguous. It can mean what is morally bad or what is naturally bad. Jonah deliberately uses this ambiguity in 1:2. "Arise go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." God sees both the moral evil of the city and the natural evil (the disaster) which hangs over it. Jonah sees it too. That's why he didn't want to go to Nineveh – he wanted to be sure that disaster would fall on the evil city.

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be *overthrown!*" "Overthrown" is used for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, i.e. total annihilation directed by heaven.

God takes no pleasure in this. "When God saw what [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (3:10)

God "repented/relented". The word basically means to breathe deeply, and therefore to sigh with relief, and to find comfort and consolation. This suggests that it was a relief to God to be able to step back from the judgement of the city. In pity God sent a prophet to announce the city's overthrow – the preaching of Jonah had the effect God desired – the people repented, the disaster was averted, and God was consoled.

People who never seek God' mercy go to a lost eternity. But God takes no pleasure in it. "As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die...?" (Ezek. 33:11; c.f. Luke 19:42).

2. God cares about people

God cared for the sailors and Jonah – and he cared about the Ninevites: “Should not I pity Nineveh, *that great city*, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (4:11)

Nineveh is called “that great city” at key points in the book (1:2; 3:2; 4:11). It was “great” because of (a) its size, (b) its importance, (c) its arrogance. When God says that the evil of “that great city” had come up before him (1:2), “great” connotes “very bad indeed”. This sets the scene for the overthrow of the great, important, sinful city – and good riddance in Jonah’s eyes.

But in 4:11 God gives the word “great” a new twist – the city is “great” because it is “significant” to God – the people matter to God; he cares about them.

There is much that is big and bad and an affront to God. And the threat of judgement hangs over it all. But we must not lose sight of the fact that people matter to God.

God cares about people because he made them – he has laboured over them, and taken pains to form them (c.f. the “labour” Jonah had not expended over the plant that had shaded him, 4:10). He cares about them because they bear his image. And he cares enough to save them from judgment at great cost to himself.

3. God rebukes hardness of heart

The book of Jonah is really interested in two questions.

First, what is God like, and why does he behave the way he does? God is compassionate and gracious (4:2) and so he cares about people and takes no pleasure in disaster.

Secondly, what is Jonah like, and why does Jonah behave the way he does? Or, more personally, what am I like, and why do I behave the way I do?

Jonah didn’t welcome the application to Nineveh of the truth that salvation belongs to the LORD. Nineveh’s experience of salvation was in reality just a temporary reprieve of execution – but it was a breathing space which allowed Assyria to recover from its weakness – and within 40 years resurgent Assyria would destroy Israel. The apparent injustice of it made Jonah very angry – and God had to rebuke him: “Do you do well to be angry? And should I not pit them?” (4:4,11).

That is the question that hangs in the air at the end of the book.

- Do we harbour a selfish indifference to the welfare, not to mention the lost condition, of our neighbours, colleagues and friends?
- Does hardness of heart warp our estimate of the justice and mercy of God’s dealing with them?
- Are we satisfied only with naïve and undemanding applications of the truth that “salvation belongs to the LORD”?