

Prophet Jonah

1. Author and Time of Writing

The prophet Jonah (= a dove) is already mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. He was the son of Amittai and was of Gath-hepher in Galilee north of Nazareth. In 2 Kings we also read that he was a servant of God and a prophet who had prophesied that the borders of Israel from Hamath in Syria down to the Dead Sea would be restored. This took place during king Jeroboam's II time of reign (793 – 753 BC). Jonah therefore must have ministered during Jeroboam's time or shortly before it. He thus was one of the first writing prophets after Joel and next to Hosea and Amos.

Assyria was the mightiest empire of the East at the time of Jonah. The capital of Assyria was the old Nineveh which had already been built by Nimrod together with Rehoboth, Resen and Calah (Calah is the only town to be called the great city in Scriptures). It is possible that the expression "that great city" in Jonah 1:2 is to be understood in the same way. In this case the three days' journey in Jonah 3:3 would be of no difficulty.

2. Purpose of Writing

Jonah received the commission of Jehovah to announce God's judgment to the heathen, godless and hostile city. But Jonah inwardly refused God's wanting to speak to the despised nations other than to Israel. This is why he fled to Tarshish. But God caught up with him. He sent a tempest in the sea so that the ship was like to be broken. He also had the lot to fall upon Jonah upon which the mariners cast him forth into the sea. Finally Jehovah prepared a great fish in whose belly Jonah had to spend three days and three nights until the fish vomited out Jonah upon the dry according to Jehovah's command.

After all this Jonah was finally ready to carry out God's commission and to preach the message to Nineveh: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" But when the people of Nineveh repented upon Jonah's preaching and God annulled the threatening judgment we see Jonah's pride as a Jew again and his annoyance over the grace of God towards the heathen. He yet had to learn that he himself thankfully received God's proof of His goodness for his bodily needs but that he showed no understanding when God wanted to show mercy for the souls of these unbelieving people.

Jonah was a prophet. In contrast to all other prophets of the OT his ministry was directed to the heathen inhabitants of Nineveh and not to the people of Israel. The only prophetic message that Jonah announced was the one about the coming judgment over Nineveh. Jonah therefore is the only prophet of the OT revealing the grace of God towards the heathen.

Jonah's experiences form the main contents and purpose of the book. The prophetic significance of this book not only lies in the short message in Nineveh but also in the entire history of Jonah described in his book. Many critics however want to lower the book of Jonah to an allegory, a parable or a legend because of the miracles described in it (especially the appearing of the great fish devouring Jonah). But Jesus in the NT himself testifies clearly the historicity of the prophet Jonah and his experiences. He also points to two significations of the book.

Firstly, the book of Jonah is a proof of God's unlimited grace and mercy not only for His earthly people Israel but also for the impious heathen city of Nineveh. It shows that God has given these people repentance for life. For Israel or the Jews, respectively, this was very difficult to understand for they considered only themselves as God's elect people.

Secondly, the book of Jonah contains a typological representation of the history of the people of Israel. Israel has failed as a witness for God as has Jonah and has been in the sea of nations or the dispersion for a long time. But Israel has been kept as Jonah was kept in a miraculous way and will be God's witness for the nations in a future day. The gospel of the kingdom will one day be spread by converted Jews over the whole globe.

Thirdly, Jonah is a type of Christ. In Matt. 12: 39-40 Jesus is announcing to the scribes and Pharisees that no sign but the sign of Jonah will be given to them: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the great fish's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Another sign for Israel was Jesus' going out to the nations as we read in Luke 11:30.

Fourthly and finally, Jonah shows the character of the human heart. The human heart which, also as far as believers are concerned, often reluctantly submits to the will of God, seeks its own honour, looks after itself first of all and which can be as hard as stone towards other men. Even the truth of God pleases the human heart often only as long as the own importance can be stressed by it! All this Jonah had to learn. This little book therefore contains very practical lessons for every reader.

3. Peculiarities

The Miracles of God

The book of Jonah is a book of miracles. The miracles partially look like coincidences but the hand of God is behind them all.

Jehovah called for the tempest in the sea (chap. 1:4)

Jehovah had the lot to fall upon Jonah (chap. 1:7)

Jehovah had prepared a great fish (chap. 1:17)

Jehovah commanded the fish and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land (chap. 2:10)

Jehovah prepared a gourd (chap. 4:6)

God prepared a worm and it smote the gourd, that it withered (chap. 4:7)

God prepared a sultry east wind (chap. 4:8)