

Jonah's Commissioning and Flight

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Jonah is commissioned by God to go to Nineveh, but he flees away from God
2. aim – To cause us to understand why Jonah flees, and how to avoid the same sinful attitude
3. passage – Jonah 1:1-3

b. outline

1. The Biography of Jonah (Jonah 1:1)
2. The Commissioning of Jonah (Jonah 1:2)
3. The Flight of Jonah (Jonah 1:3)

c. opening

1. the **outline** of the book (again)
 - a. based on a *parallelism* twice-over repeated, followed by a *conclusion*:
 - b. **A¹**: Jonah's Commissioning and Flight (**1:1-3**), **B¹**: Jonah and the Sailors (**1:4-17**), **C¹**: Jonah's Grateful Prayer (**2:1-10**)
 - c. **A²**: Jonah's Recommissioning and Compliance (**3:1-3**), **B²**: Jonah and the Ninevites (**3:4-10**), **C²**: Jonah's Angry Prayer (**4:1-3**)
 - d. **D**: God's Lesson for Jonah (**4:4-11**)

I. The Biography of Jonah (Jonah 1:1)

Content

a. the biography of Jonah

1. "*Jonah, the son of Amittai*" = not just a *random* Jonah, but an *identifiable man* in the history of Israel
 - a. "*Jonah*" = Hebrew: a ceremonially clean domestic bird; **dove** – **ITC**: a *parallel* between the man and his times (**i.e.** a symbol of being "*silly and without sense*"; **Hosea 7:11**)
 1. **i.e.** Jonah lived during a period of great "*silliness*" amongst his people, prospering greatly, even under the blessing of God, but having abandoned the true worship of God for idols
 2. and ... Jonah himself is portrayed here as a *silly man* ...
 - b. "*son of Amittai*" (*amit-tay*) = this is a *typical* Hebrew identifier (**e.g.** "*son of*" = family name)
 1. **i.e.** connecting him to the *specific* prophet named in **2 Kings 14:25**
2. **2 Kings 14:25** says he is "*from Gath-hepher*" – a village located between the Mediterranean and the Sea of Galilee, along the N edge of the Jezreel Valley
 - a. some see it C inland (**IMO**), some see it W, closer to the Mediterranean
 - b. Gath-hepher is mentioned as a *border town* for the territory of Zebulun in **Joshua 19:13**
 - c. **note**: although Jonah's *tribe* is never mentioned, it is *possible* he was from Zebulun, giving its *specific location* on the border of that tribe

b. the times of Jonah

1. **here**: a more *biblical* examination of the times in which this prophet lived (**2 Kings 13-14**)
 - a. **i.e.** what is going on in N Israel c. 760BC? what is the *social, political, and spiritual* world of Jonah?
2. the Assyrians begin their march to capture **the wealth of Egypt** c. 1000-850BC, attacking Syria (Damascus) to their W, then heading S into Israel, making it as far as Mount Carmel
 - a. strong kings had pushed this agenda across the Fertile Crescent, grabbing the imperial trade routes – nations into which they ventured were forced to capitulate, *including the N Kingdom*
 - b. Syria (Damascus) became a *vassal* to Assyria, and then the *primary* threat of Israel
3. Jehoahaz (814-798BC) – lost much territory to Syria (**2 Kings 13:3**)
4. Jehoash (Joash of *Israel*; 798-782BC) – was given respite from the relentless attacks of Syria
 - a. from c. 782-745BC, under three weak kings, Assyria "*retreated*" to deal with internal matters, having to ward off attacks from their N – this gave Israel an "*opening*"
 - b. Jehoash consulted Elisha as the prophet lay on his deathbed – Elisha foresaw Israel able to rebuff Syria, but only three times (**2 Kings 14:17ff**; before an eventual *Assyrian* campaign)
 - c. so, according to **2 Kings 13:22-25**, Jehoash was able to take back (across three campaigns) much of the territory lost in the N from Ben-Hadad, king of Syria (
 1. **note**: **2 Kings 13-14** is not *entirely* in chronological order (**i.e.** Elisha's death is *after* this)

5. Jeroboam II (781-753BC) – continued the work of recapturing lost territory (**2 Kings 14:23-27**)
 - a. Jeroboam II is able to restore Israel's borders "*from Lebo-hamath*" (a geographical area in N Syria) to "*the Sea of Arabah*" (the Dead Sea in the S) – **i.e.** the original *Solomonic* borders
 - b. and, based on the phrase "*Judah in Israel*" (**2 Kings 14:28**), it would appear that the success of Jehoash and Jeroboam II even brought *the S Kingdom of Judah* under its *temporary* control
 1. making Jeroboam II a second "Solomon", reuniting the kingdom under a single king
 - c. and, Israel experiences a time of *economic prosperity* under Jeroboam II – fueled by good harvests
 1. conditions that bred *complacency* and the *exploitation* of the poor – the world into which the first *writing* prophets (Amos and Hosea) appear to speak *against* this spiritual rot
 2. **i.e.** Amos and Hosea warning that the Assyrians *will be back* unless the people repent
- c. the appearance of Jonah**
 1. **2 Kings 14:25b** suggests that it was *Jonah* who told Jeroboam II to retake these borders
 - a. the constant troubles with the N had left Israel "*very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel*" (**v. 26**)
 - b. "*bond or free*" (see also **Deut. 32:36; 1 Kings 14:10, 21:21; 2 Kings 9:8**) = a *strange* idiom, probably indicating an inability within the royal household to help the king during times of trouble
 - c. **i.e.** Israel had become *weak* and *disillusioned*, but (strangely!) God felt sorry for them
 2. thus, Jonah, sent by God to the royal household, comes as a *messenger of strength* to the king, instructing him to use the time wisely *politically* and *socio-economically*
 - a. **in fact:** it is suggested that Jonah may have begun his prophetic work in the days of Jehoash, Jeroboam's father, around the time of Elisha (**i.e.** the *parallel* to Elisha mentioned **before**)
 - b. **i.e.** *another* act of mercy by God upon the N Kingdom (**e.g.** Jehu's purge of Ahab's house; **2 Kings 10**), even though it had *completely forgotten* the proper worship of God
 3. but ... was Jonah *blinded* to the *larger* issues in Israel? did his support for *nationalistic* success cause him to *miss* the deeper *spiritual realities* that Amos and Hosea clearly saw?
 - a. **i.e.** if Israel could "hang on" to its Syrian conquests in the N, these territories could act as *buffers* between Israel and the Assyrians, *if* the Assyrians should ever rise up again (if ever??)
 - b. it is into this world (and to this man) that God's call comes ... after being the instrument to announce favor upon the *apostate N Kingdom*, a *new call* from God now comes ...

II. The Commissioning of Jonah (Jonah 1:2)

Content

a. the call of God upon Jonah

1. "*Nineveh, that great city*" = the second-greatest city in the nation of Assyria, located at the NE end of the Tigris River, top of Mesopotamia (**i.e.** with Assur the *first* capital)
 - a. **today:** the city is located in the N Iraqi city of Mosul, with the outline of the original city walls clearly visible, a partially excavated *tell* on its SW, and a great portion covered in houses
 1. in mid-19th C. the city was explored, uncovering the great palace of Sennacherib, along with stone tablet reliefs picturing the destruction of Lachish in 701BC (**2 Kings 18:13-14**)
 2. Sennacherib was rebuffed back to Nineveh by a miracle at Jerusalem (**2 Kings 19:35**)
 - b. the city was established by descendants of Nimrod, Noah's great-grandson (Ham-Cush; **Genesis 10:11**) – the Hebrew of "*he*" (KJV) *and ancient tradition* suggests *Asshur* built the city, not Nimrod
 1. it was considered to be the largest city in the world by c. 800BC
 2. Jonah describes it as a "*three day's journey in breadth*" (**3:3**), with a population greater than 120,000 (**4:11**), potentially as many as 1m (depending on the interpretation of **4:11**)
 3. however, the journey probably included going through the *region* around Nineveh, including the cities of Rehoboth, Calah, and Resen (**i.e.** its exurbs, **Genesis 10:11-12**)
 - c. Nineveh eventually supplanted Assur as the capital (over time), rising to its greatest power under Sennacherib, about 60 years after Jonah goes into the city
 1. but, Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612BC, with the Assyrian Empire ended c. 605BC
 - d. **LOW:** Jonah is being sent by God to the *greatest city in the world*, the capital of an empire *at the zenith of its power*, to bring a divine message before *the emperor himself*, Ashurdan III
2. "*call out against it, for their evil has come up before me*" = bring a message of *judgment* upon the people of Assyria, in *anticipation* of them receiving repentance and mercy *as divine gifts*
 - a. the Assyrians were a *polytheistic, pagan people*, worshipping the same set of gods in their temples as the Babylonians in the S, the primary god being Ashur (**i.e.** as in all of Mesopotamia)
 - b. so, this judgment is *probably* a condemnation of their warring ways *on top of* their paganism

Jonah's Commissioning and Flight

1. **irony**: a city built by the descendants of Nimrod (**like Babel**), typifying humanity organized in opposition to God – ignoring the *true God*, developing a pantheon of *human-like* gods, and then subjecting *other men* to their never-ending lust for power and control
- c. **IOW**: Jonah is being sent by God to announce the (seemingly!) destruction of the city (and the empire) because of the evil of the people there, a message Jonah *eventually* brings (**3:4**)
 1. **ITC**: a message brought by other prophets **to Israel** ...

III. The Flight of Jonah (Jonah 1:3)

Content

a. the flight of Jonah away from God

1. “*Joppa*” = a Mediterranean port city in Judah, about 35 miles NW of Jerusalem, about the same distance from Samaria SW – exactly *opposite* the direction Jonah would need to get to Nineveh
 - a. Jonah pays the “*fare*” to board a *cargo vessel* headed W (**see 1:5**) – he sleeps *in the hold*
2. “*Tarshish*” = probably: a port city at the S of Spain; possibly: the whole of Spain itself
 - a. its exact location is unknown, but ... that is *utterly irrelevant*, given that Jonah *never made it*
 - b. **i.e.** a *fictional place* of Jonah’s dreams – where he could find peace and safety “*away from the presence of the Lord*” (**IOW**: a place of *disobedience* conjured up in Jonah’s mind)

b. the reason for the flight of Jonah

1. **question**: why does Jonah *flee* from God’s commission? and, *why* does he believe that he can get “*away from the presence of the Lord*?”
 - a. **i.e.** what is it about this command that *spooks* Jonah, and makes him want to *hide from God*?
2. a **popular** answer: Jonah was afraid to travel through enemy territory (Syria and Assyria), enter the great city of Assyria (to the danger of his own life), and pronounce a message to an emperor
 - a. yet ... Jonah *must have known* that he could *never* escape the presence of God – to *run from God* would be to put his life *in even greater danger*, since he knew that God’s power *was greater*
 - b. **IOW**: while *some* of this may be true, it doesn’t *fully explain* Jonah’s response to God in **4:2**:
“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.”
 - c. Jonah contends that his primary reason for fleeing is that he fully expected God *to show mercy to the Ninevites*, something which made him “*exceedingly*” angry (**4:1**) ... **but why?**
3. the **biblical** answer (**given all of the above detail**): Jonah *refused* to announce a message *which might lead Israel’s mortal enemy to repent*, thus removing its condemnation and *leaving it as a strong people* always ready to threaten Israel again
 - a. if Jonah went to Nineveh, his own people (and his conscience) would denounce him as a *traitor*, for warning the Ninevites about God’s displeasure (and leaving them to continue)
 - b. however, if Jonah *did not* go, Nineveh would be left under judgment, and **Israel would finally be rid of the Assyrian threat** – left to bask in the political and economic revival under Jeroboam II
 - c. **IOW**: because Jonah *himself* was the one who helped usher in the “good times” in the N Kingdom (with the threat posed by Assyria temporarily withdrawn), the prophet believed it would be best to “resist” God’s command, **and get as far away from Nineveh as possible**
4. the **applied** answer: **we cannot run away from what God has commanded us to do**
 - a. the church of Jesus Christ has been given the responsibility to take the gospel to the nations – we cannot “hide” from this work (or run away from it)
 1. **i.e.** those who *truly belong to Christ* cannot help *but* speak of him – the regenerate heart of the believer *cries out* in gratitude to profess faith in him
 2. **i.e.** a message of *repentance* to the nations that results in God’s power bringing even rebel nations into conformity to his law, with his elect being drawn out from them specifically