

Jonah

Preface

As I thought about Jonah I came to the realization that the world has had the privilege of experiencing a modern day Jonah. Billy Graham, like Jonah was a man who knew that God called him to be a proclaimer of the Gospel, however, Dr. Graham wanted to be a college president of a prestigious university. It didn't take him long to acquire his goal. He became the youngest university president in America. His wife Ruth did not agree with his decision to head Wheaton College. She urged him to leave the university to preach the good news and so he often preached but only when it was convenient.

In 1949 at the urging of men like Cliff Barrows and George Beverly Shea, Billy Graham agreed to go to Los Angeles and hold a tent revival. He went reluctantly traveling by train to the big city. Upon arrival, he was surprised to find a crowd of reporters asking for interviews. Amidst popping flash bulbs and numerous questions a startled Billy Graham made his way downtown to a small tent full of folding chairs and light bulbs hanging from tent poles.

Well the rest is history except for the mysterious story of William Randolph Hearst, owner of the L. A. Times and the L. A. Examiner. The question has been asked many times "why did this man, who had never met Dr. Graham, a man worth millions of dollars utter the now famous words "puff Billy Graham." Jonah had his "giant fish" and Billy had his world famous "communications magnet." And so the headlines blared "come see the man with a voice like a trumpet and the courage of a lion." And so the world now knows of an ancient prophet named Jonah and a modern evangelist named Billy Graham. For the rest of the story I would suggest you read a biography of Dr. Graham entitled "Just As I Am."

Introduction

Jonah was a prophet who did not want to take the Word of God to Assyria. God intervenes with a sea monster and Jonah very reluctantly takes the gospel to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, as a result many Assyrians are saved; as a result Assyria becomes a client nation to God.

The Book of Jonah receives its name from the main character of the narrative. The book, arguably, was written by the rebellious prophet himself probably from around Nineveh in about 760 B.C. Jeroboam II was King of Israel at that time.

Nowhere in the text is there any statement that the prophet himself wrote the book. However, tradition has steadfastly maintained that Jonah was the author.

Taken as a historical narrative of a prophet active in the time of Jeroboam II the events of the book would have occurred sometime between 780 and 750. Jeroboam had succeeded in re-establishing the power of Israel over most of the territory north of Judah.

In the previous century the Assyrian empire had been a threat to its neighbors along the eastern Mediterranean coast, and had become well known as a cruel and ruthless oppressor. During the reign of Jeroboam, though the power of Assyria had subsided, but it was still to be reckoned with. Nineveh had not yet become the capital of the empire, but Calah, one of the parts of the old city-state complex that included Nineveh, was the capital between 880 and 701.

There is no Assyrian inscription stating that a spiritual revival like that described in the Book of Jonah ever occurred. But during the time when Queen Semiramis was co-regent with her son Adad-Nirari III, there is historical record of a brief national move toward monotheism. There were two severe plagues in Assyria in 765 and 759, both of which were normally regarded by the ancients as evidence of divine judgment and these two plagues could have prepared the hearts of the people for the preaching of Jonah.

The Assyrian Empire at its height was bounded on the west by the Mediterranean, on the east by the Persian Gulf, on the north by Asia Minor and the Caucasus, and on the south by the Arabian Desert.

For the most part, the land around Nineveh was hilly and well-watered; the city was situated along the banks of the Tigris River. The hills were covered with oak and pine trees, while the main products of the country were fruits, dates, olives, wine, wheat and barley. Large wild beasts such as bears, panthers, wolves, lynxes, foxes, marmots, deer, lions, and wild boar roamed the country-side surrounding the city.

According to Gen 10:8-12 a Babylonian king named Nimrod founded the city of Nineveh."

Gen 10:8 Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth.
Gen 10:9 He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD."

Gen 10:10 The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar.

Gen 10:11 From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh ...

An early literary reference to Assyria was found in a tablet written in 2350 B.C. Nuzu lay east of Asshur near Kirkuk in modern Iraq. It is here that much evidence of the early patriarchs was found. The Assyrians of historic times were a fierce, war-loving people, much more aggressive than their Semitic neighbors.

Often acting as tyrants at home, Assyrian kings also served as army field generals; they rarely missed expeditions to exact tribute and plunder from their neighbors. The whole organization of the state in Assyria was built around the king and his military. The king was supreme. The culture and religion of Assyria were essentially Babylonian except for the predominance of their national god named Asshur. Asshur was their god of war, represented in Assyrian art by the sun disc, topped by an archer shooting a shaft. He was always honored as the divine founder of the nation.

One of the early rulers, Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076), left a rather full account of a lengthy reign and a series of conquests. He claimed to have conquered 42 countries. He was distinguished by his restoration of several conquered cities. Shalmaneser III (858-824) also had a long and effective rule. His record relates 33 campaigns. He strengthened his conquests by placing governors over the conquered districts.

During Shalmaneser's reign, Assyria began to loom large on the horizon of Israel. Certain writers of antiquity tell of contact between Shalmaneser and Israel at the battle of Qarqar (c. 853). Here Shalmaneser met and defeated the combined forces of Damascus, Hamath, Bedouin Arab nomadic forces and King Ahab of Israel. In 842, Shalmaneser defeated Hazael of Damascus, and according to his famous Black Obelisk (now in the British Museum) he claimed tribute from Tyre, Sidon, and Jehu, king of Israel. The Assyrians continued to be an international power up to 612 when they were defeated by Babylonians.

Interpretations of the Book

Much controversy has arisen concerning the meaning of the Book of Jonah, precipitating a wide range of views. Those who have maintained the historical character of the book have held that an actual prophet (Jonah) experienced what is recorded and thus fulfilled, in part, the missionary task of Israel in ancient times. For us Jonah is a factual story. Important passages that support this view are found in the New Testament. (Mat 12:39-41; Luk 11:29)

Mat 12:39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:

Mat 12:40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Mat 12:41 The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.

Luk 11:29 And when the people were gathered thick together, he began to say, This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet.

The position of this overview is that the story of Jonah is an historical account. Clearly Jonah's being in the belly of the great fish for three days is a picture of Christ being in the grave for three days.

The Message of the Book

The narrative itself is uncomplicated, fast-moving, and touching. A prophet, Jonah, is told by the Lord to go preach to the citizens of Nineveh. Instead, he flees and takes passage on a ship due to sail to what was then the far edge of the world. He secludes himself and goes to sleep. Soon after the ship sets sail, a severe storm stirs up the Mediterranean Sea into mountainous waves, and the sailors in terror throw the cargo overboard and frantically pray to their gods.

By the casting of lots Jonah is identified as the culprit who had offended their god, (little they knew). The storm ceases only after Jonah, at his own suggestion, is thrown into the sea. He is swallowed by a great fish. Now truly penitent, he prays earnestly for salvation, whereupon God delivers him unhurt upon the shore. This time the prophet obeys the command to go to Nineveh, and cries aloud, throughout the city, his briefly worded message of woe.

The people of Nineveh, from king to lowest subject, respond with earnest repentance, even putting sackcloth on the cattle. The Lord hears their cry and lifts the threat of destruction. Jonah, however, sees the deliverance of Nineveh only as a negation of his personal prayers and deepest desires—the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah complains to the Lord in prayer.

In order to teach the prophet a lesson, God prepares a fast growing plant to shade him from the sun, but the next night allows a worm to destroy it. Then He sets a hot east wind blowing. As a result, Jonah faints in spirit and wishes for death. The story closes with a declaration that whereas Jonah is concerned for shade trees, God is concerned for the salvation of sinful men.

Basic Teachings of the Book:

- When people are positive, the ball is in God's court and He will see to it that the glorious gospel arrives. Tit 2:11
- In the face of a difficult task, men are often inclined to evade responsibility.
- God is powerful and can, at will, use the forces of nature for His own purposes.
- The most unlikely mission fields are often the most responsive.

- God is a God of love and grace and it is His desire for all men to come to a saving knowledge of Christ.

Jonah's message was for his audience, the Ninevites. God had ordered the prophet to: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it." However, the written message was for Israel and Judah, not Nineveh. The readers of the book were Jews who in their nationalistic zeal forgot that God had called them to be his conduit of blessing to the Gentiles. What we have in Nineveh was that which God promised in 2Ch 7:14.

2Ch 7:14 If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

Outline of the Book of Jonah

I. Fleeing 1:1-17

A. The Lord's command 1:1-2

Jon 1:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

Jon 1:2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

B. A ship to Tarshish 1:3

Jon 1:3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

C. A storm at sea 1:4-14

1. Asleep during the storm 1:4-6.

Jon 1:4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

Jon 1:5 All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

Jon 1:6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

2. The culprit found 1:7-10

Jon 1:7 Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

Jon 1:8 So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What did you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

Jon 1:9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

Jon 1:10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

3. Sailors in distress 1:11-14

Jon 1:11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

Jon 1:12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Jon 1:13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

Jon 1:14 Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased."

D. Cast overboard 1:15-17

Jon 1:15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

Jon 1:16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Jon 1:17 But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

II. Praying 2:1-10

A. Cast out 2:1-4

Jon 2:1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.

Jon 2:2 He said: "In my distress, I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave (Sheol) I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

Jon 2:3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

Jon 2:4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'

1. There have been instances of men or large animals being swallowed whole by great fish, and in some cases of both men and beasts the victim has been removed from the fish's body, even after many hours. But usually the fish's digestive juices had taken a severe toll from the victim's skin and hair after each immersion.

2. This explains better perhaps Jonah's hyper sun sensitivity.

B. Brought up 2:5-6

Jon 2:5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.

Jon 2:6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.

C. Paying vows 2:7-9

Jon 2:7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

Jon 2:8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

Jon 2:9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

D. Delivered 2:10

Jon 2:10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

III. Preaching 3:1-10

A. The Lord's second command 3:1-2

Jon 3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

Jon 3:2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

1. In spite of the fact that three times in the Old Testament Nineveh is called a "great city (Gen 10:11, 12 and Jon 1:2 and 3:3)," skeptical Bible critics long believed the statement to be greatly exaggerated.

2. When the walled city was excavated it was found to be less than nine miles in circumference. There were claims that the author, Jonah, did not know what he was talking about.

3. Later excavations have proved that Nineveh had many suburbs, three of which are mentioned in connection with it in Gen 10:11 and 12.

Gen 10:11 From that land Nimrod went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah

Gen 10:12 and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.

4. One first century writer (Diodorus Seculus) justifiably says Nineveh was a quadrangle measuring about sixty miles in circuit. A "great city" indeed.

5. A city of three days refers to the time it took to walk around the city. The statement indicates the city was sixty miles in circumference. Surprise, Surprise!

B. Declaring the message 3:3-4

Jon 3:3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city-- a visit required three days.

Jon 3:4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

C. Nineveh's repentance 3:5-9

1. In sackcloth and ashes 3:5-6

Jon 3:5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Jon 3:6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

2. The king's decree 3:7-9

Jon 3:7 Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

Jon 3:8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

Jon 3:9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

D. Judgment withheld 3:10

Jon 3:10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

IV. Learning 4:1-11

A. Complaint 4:1-3

Jon 4:1 But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

Jon 4:2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Jon 4:3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

B. The gourd, the worm, the wind and the sun 4:4-8

Jon 4:4 But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

Jon 4:5 Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

Jon 4:6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.

Jon 4:7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.

Jon 4:8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

C. The lesson 4:9-11

Jon 4:9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

Jon 4:10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

Jon 4:11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Because of an ancient prophet named Jonah and a modern day "Jonah" named Billy Graham, hundreds of thousands of believers now live in heavenly homes enjoying ecstatic happiness.