

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JONAH

Author and Date

- I. “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai” (1.1).
 - A. “The hero of the story is without much doubt to be identified with the Jonah, son of Amittai, the northern Israelite prophet who, according to II Kings 14.25, lived during the reign of Jeroboam II (780-741 BC).”
 1. His own name combined with that of his father are found only in these two passages.²
 2. The Jewish tradition given by Jerome affirms that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath, whom Elijah raised (1 Kings 17.17-24),³ but this saying lacks sufficient evidence.
 - B. Outside of these references and the book itself, nothing is known about Jonah (whose name means “dove”).
- II. But did this prophet write the book?
 - A. Davidson affirms that the author of the short book “is unknown, and will always remain so. Jonah himself was not the writer, because internal evidence shows a late date.”⁴
 - B. Many trivial objections to an affirmation of Jonah as author are answered easily.
 1. Orelli argues that Jonah himself nowhere claims to be the author.⁵
 - a. But Jonah is *the* character of the plot, and who else but Jonah could describe such experiences as the narrative depicts? Granted, though, this argument presupposes a historical interpretation of the book.
 - b. The introductory phrase, “the word of the Lord came to Jonah” (1.1), is not unparalleled in the prophets (cf. Hosea 1.1; Joel 1.1; Micah 1.1; Zephaniah 1.1).
 2. The book is written in the third person, but this is no disproof of Jonah as author “as the *Commentaries* of Caesar and the *Anabasis* of Xenophon show.”⁶

¹Sanders and Kent, 339.

²Wade, lxxviii.

³Keil, 380.

⁴Davidson, 278.

⁵Orelli, 167.

⁶Wade, lxxviii.

3. The book of Jonah does not refer to the prediction of the success of Jeroboam II in 2 Kings 14.25 nor of any circumstance connected with the reign of Jeroboam. Therefore, the prophet alluded to in 2 Kings is not the author.⁷
 - a. But this is an argument from silence.
 - b. The book is not intended to be a comprehensive treatise of the prophet's oracles, nor is it a strict historical narrative.
 - c. And although the book itself is historical, as will be argued, the primary purpose is to show to Israel an important truth about God's care for all peoples, and such does not demand completeness in all external circumstances.
- C. Allen, arguing from a parabolic interpretation and a late date, talks about the "shrewd psychological insight in the choice of Jonah as the key figure."⁸
 1. Nothing was known about him except those facts mentioned in 2 Kings 14.24.
 2. None of his writings had been received into the Judean collection of holy books.
 3. "II Kings 14.25 sets him in the reign of the eighth-century BC king Jeroboam II as a nationalistic prophet who forecast the extension of the frontiers of the Northern Kingdom."⁹
 4. Thus, Jonah was the ideal choice for an attack on the religious exclusivism of post-exilic times.
 5. But several problems to this view are to be highlighted.
 - a. Why would an obscure eighth century non-literary prophet be preferred over the many well-known literary prophets of more contemporary times?
 - b. Why did the people accept this book as authentic, since they knew the prophet Jonah was from an earlier period, and especially so because the book condemned their exclusive spirit?
 - c. And was Jonah the only prophet to forecast an extension of the kingdom?
 - d. Some have assumed that the author of the book of Jonah elaborated on a handed-down tradition about the eighth century Jonah, but the record of any such tradition has been left unpreserved, except in the book itself which points more readily to an eighth century origin.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Allen, 179.

⁹Ibid.

- III. The evidence suggests that Jonah, son of Amittai, wrote the book that bears his name.
- A. Jeroboam's reign, during which Jonah prophesied, reflects a period of ease and prosperity. At this time, "Israel extended her borders farther than at any period following the days of Solomon."¹⁰
 - B. "But at the same time on the horizon was Assyria who would eventually swallow up Israel."¹¹
 - C. At no better time than this could the Lord send his prophet to Nineveh to prepare and temper the Assyrians for their role as executors of divine wrath on the self-righteous Israelites.
- IV. In all possibility, Jonah, after experiencing his ordeal and realizing the import thereof, wrote the book shortly after his return from Nineveh (ca. 750-740 BC).¹²
- A. Jonah resembles the former prophets (i.e., the historical books of the Old Testament) rather than the minor prophets, and this similarity makes the book compatible with an early date.
 - B. But many critics have rejected this pre-exilic placement of Jonah.
 - 1. In 3.3, Nineveh is spoken of as a city of the distant past ("was").¹³
 - a. Nineveh fell in 606 BC.¹⁴ Jesus ben Sirach mentioned Jonah as one of "the twelve" in Ecclesiasticus 49.12 (ca. 180 BC).¹⁵
 - b. Therefore, the book was written between 500 and 350 BC.
 - c. But "3.3 does not describe Nineveh as a city that had existed long ago in the past."¹⁶
 - (1) This verse only indicates the condition or size of Nineveh as Jonah found it.¹⁷
 - (2) Certainly the statement in Luke 24.13, "which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs," does not imply that the city of Emmaus had existed in the past but was no longer there.¹⁸

¹⁰Lewis, 39.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Young, 261.

¹³Smartt, 873.

¹⁴Smith, 486.

¹⁵Wade, lxxxiv.

¹⁶Young, 263.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

2. “It is also unlikely that a contemporary of the king of Assyria would call him ‘the king of Nineveh’ (3.6).”¹⁹
 - a. But if a contemporary of the king of Assyria would not designate him as such, why suppose that a post-exilic writer would? Were post-exilic peoples unaware that Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire?²⁰
 - b. Biblical parallels substantiate early use of the type of terminology chosen by Jonah.
 - (1) The king of Israel is called the “king of Samaria” (1 Kings 21.1; cf. 20.43).
 - (2) The king of Syria is termed the “king of Damascus” (2 Chronicles 24.23).
3. The universal emphasis of the book is thought by many to be indicative of a late date.
 - a. But this theme can be seen throughout all periods of Old Testament literature.
 - b. As early as Genesis 9.27, this tendency can be observed.²¹
4. Aramaic words in the text attest to a late date.
 - a. But, “Aramaisms occur in Old Testament books from both early and later periods” (e.g., texts from Ras Shamra contain Aramaic expressions; ca. 1500-1400 BC).²²
 - b. These Aramaic words, many only so-called,²³ cannot be used as criteria for date.
5. The colossal size attributed to Nineveh (3.3) “reflects the exaggerated tradition echoed by the fourth-century Ctesias rather than literal fact.”²⁴

¹⁹Smartt, 873.

²⁰Archer, 310.

²¹Young, 263.

²²Ibid., 262.

²³See Archer, 312.

²⁴Allen, 186.

- a. But this is merely an Oriental expression which depicts neither the diameter or the circumference of the city,²⁵ but rather its entire administrative district.²⁶
 - b. And 3.3 only affirms that Jonah took three days to go through the city on his preaching mission (i.e., “a day’s journey, and he cried” in 3.4).²⁷
 6. Allen argues a late date based on the existence of Persian customs in the book (e.g., the part of domestic animals in mourning ceremonies in 3.8 and the linking of king and nobles in the decree of 3.7),²⁸ but that Assyria did not have such customs is not proven.
 7. Also, Jonah’s supposed use of other prophets (i.e., Joel and Jeremiah) and the psalms does not demand a late date.
 - a. It is possible that Joel preceded Jonah.
 - b. Because of his tendencies, Jeremiah probably borrowed from Jonah if he borrowed at all.
 - c. The psalms that contain phrases similar to Jonah possibly were written before Jonah or even taken from Jonah, and literary independence is not impossible.
- V. All in all, the evidence points toward an early date for the book of Jonah.

Unity

- I. The basic argument against the unity of Jonah comes from his prayer in 2.2-9.
 - A. Some assert that this prayer contains language from various post-exilic psalms that put 2.2-9 at a late date.
 1. The prayer does reflect phrases evident in many psalms.²⁹
 2. But most of these psalms are attributed to David.
 3. Those psalms that are late possibly could have been taken from Jonah or could have been composed independently of his work.
 - B. Bentzen argues that a psalm of “lamentation” would be more appropriate than the psalm of “thanksgiving” in 2.2-9, since Jonah is said to have “prayed” (2.1).³⁰

²⁵Robinson, 80.

²⁶Harrison, 909.

²⁷Archer, 310.

²⁸Allen, 186.

²⁹Moeller, according to Young, 265, notes these resemblances: Jonah 2.3b = Psalm 18.7 and 120.1; 2.4b = 18.6 and 30.4; 2.5 = 42.8; 2.6 = 31.23; 2.7 = 18.8; 2.8 = 18.17 and 30.4 and 103.4; 2.9 = 142.4 and 143.4; 2.10 = 88.3

³⁰Bentzen, 145.

1. But “praise was regarded by the Hebrews as a very legitimate and important part of prayer.”³¹
 2. And the psalm is one of thanksgiving for deliverance from drowning, not a lament to be delivered from the belly of the great fish.³²
 - a. The phrases used—“the belly of Sheol,” “the deep,” “the heart of the seas,” “the flood,” “your waves and your billows,” “the waters,” “weeds,” and “the Pit”—all have reference to the sea.
 - b. A proper understanding of the prayer dismisses all notions of disconnection with Jonah’s experiences.
 - C. But surely Jonah is not a creature of gratitude and thanksgiving as 2.2-9 depicts.³³ However, such is not contrary to Jonah’s character, since he rejoices in response to God’s act of deliverance in 4.6.³⁴
 - D. And, “it has been maintained that the text reads smoothly without this psalm, if 2.10 be placed immediately after 2.1.”³⁵
 1. This omission has no basis in textual evidence.
 2. Furthermore, “if 2.2-9 be removed the symmetry of the book is destroyed.”³⁶
 - a. Sections 3.1-3a and 1.1-3a strikingly are similar.
 - b. Also, 4.2 and 2.2 are alike in that both mention Jonah’s praying.
- II. Others³⁷ have found a variety of sources in Jonah (i.e., using the divine names), but these assertions are premised on weak foundations; therefore, the book stands as a harmonious unit.

³¹Archer, 314.

³²Young, 269.

³³Allen, 183.

³⁴Ibid., 185.

³⁵Young, 264.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷See Smartt, 873.

Interpretation of the Book

- I. The entire narrative of Jonah is beyond what is normal and even fabulous.
 - A. The storm arises at the most appropriate time and becomes calm when, as it seems, the wrath of God is appeased by the casting of Jonah into the sea.
 - B. The lot of the sailors falls on the right man.
 - C. The great fish swallows up Jonah and rescues him from the sea, then vomits him appropriately on dry ground.
 - D. The entire city of Nineveh, with its animals, is moved to repentance by Jonah's message.
 - E. A plant magically appears to provide shade for Jonah, but later it withers.
 - F. Can these phenomena be factual and historically true?
- II. Three distinct approaches to the interpretation of Jonah have been suggested.
 - A. Historical. This is the traditional interpretation.
 1. The book's main character and author was historical, and although much of the out of the ordinary events seem bizarre to modern-day thinking, these type of occurrences in the Bible seem to cluster around great events such as the Exodus. And what greater catastrophe could there be than that of 722 BC, the fall of Samaria, the capital of Israel, to the Assyrians?
 2. Jonah's immediate predecessors Elijah and Elisha (cf. 1 Kings 17.9ff; 2 Kings 5.1ff.) were "characterized by the same kind of miraculous features evident in their own ministries."³⁸
 3. Jesus credits two of these happenings with historical validity.
 - a. Matthew 12.40 states, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."
 - b. Matthew 12.41 says, "The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."
 - c. But Allen argues that "it is not strict exegesis that is reflected in Jesus' use of the narrative of Jonah and the fish, but the popular Jewish understanding, which the Lord took up and employed as a vehicle for truth concerning himself."³⁹

³⁸Harrison, 905.

³⁹Allen, 180.

- (1) But if this is true, then Jesus plausibly deceived the people by not correcting their misunderstanding.
 - (2) Also, Jesus refers to the Queen of Sheba in the same passage (Matthew 12.42), and she was without doubt a historical person.⁴⁰
 - (3) And, “every other instance where an Old Testament typical event is referred to in Scripture, a historical episode is involved.”⁴¹
4. Although much debate has ensued concerning the “great fish” of 1.17,⁴² the Bible says, “and the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” It seems reasonable on this basis that a naturalistic interpretation is not necessary.
 5. The growth of the plant in chapter four is likewise the result of God’s intervention and providential care.
 6. But what explains the response of the Assyrians to the proclamation from a Hebrew prophet? What brought about this *en masse* repentance?
 - a. Archer suggests that “the narrative makes it plain that the will and power of God Almighty were behind the whole enterprise,” and it is certain that God himself would “*make* the prophet’s preaching effectual.”⁴³
 - b. But if the event is historical, this explanation seems to reflect an extreme determinism and must be rejected.
 - c. A better explanation is to be found in the realization that “in the low fortunes of Assyria prior to the accession of Tiglath-pileser III (ca. 745 BC) the Ninevites readily would have listened to a prophet who forecast disaster.”⁴⁴
 7. Finally, the form of the book (i.e., a historical narrative) was regarded by Jews and Christians as such until about a century ago.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Harrison, 906.

⁴¹Archer, 313.

⁴²See Harrison, 908f.

⁴³Archer, 311.

⁴⁴Payne, 653.

⁴⁵Robinson, 84.

- a. But all the parables of Jesus resemble records of historical events.⁴⁶
 - b. And since the book is not part of a larger historical corpus, it is hard to draw any valid conclusion about historicity from form and style alone.⁴⁷
- B. Parabolic.
1. This view claims “that the book is merely a social tale with a didactic end in view, comparable with Nathan’s story to David (2 Samuel 12.1ff.) or with our Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.30ff.).⁴⁸
 - a. But the length and complexity of Jonah has no parallel among the parables of the Bible.
 - b. And the immediate application of Jonah, if it is only a parable, is missing (e.g., “you are the man” of Nathan or “go and do likewise” of Jesus).
 2. Driver counters these objections by affirming the real design of Jonah’s narrative, namely, “to teach that God’s purposes of grace are not limited to Israel alone, but that they are open to the heathen as well.”⁴⁹
 - a. But this argument fails to account for the inclusion of the episode about the great fish.
 - b. Nor does it allow for the use and application of the book by Jesus.
 3. The parabolic interpretation has major difficulties, possibly the greatest being the historic reality of the prophet whose name the book bears.
- C. Allegorical.
1. This view depicts the incidents of the book as analogous to another series of events. Thus, “Jonah represents the nation of Israel, the fish is Babylon, the swallowing the Exile, etc.”⁵⁰
 2. Allegories are common in biblical literature, but this view is hindered by its failure to account for many specific details in the book.

Conclusion - The book of Jonah is a factual account of that prophet’s mission to Nineveh (ca. 750 BC).

⁴⁶Harrison, 910.

⁴⁷Ibid., 910-911.

⁴⁸Payne, 653.

⁴⁹Driver, 323.

⁵⁰Payne, 653.

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David W Fletcher, October 1976

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