

JONAH

BIBLICAL BACKGROUNDS

In Hebrew, **Jonah** means *Dove*, an ancient symbol of peace and, in the New Testament, of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:10, Matthew 3:16, Luke 3:22, John 1:32). On the other hand, the dove was also a traditional emblem of folly; see, for example, Hosea 7:11: “Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense.” **Nineveh** was the capital of the Assyrian empire, which destroyed Samaria in 722-21 B.C.E. Nineveh was itself destroyed in 612 B.C.E. by the Medes and Chaldeans.

I. OLD TESTAMENT

A. THE MOSAIC COVENANT

EXODUS 20:5-6

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

B. JONAH AS PROPHET

II Kings 14: 23-27

²³In the fifteenth year of King Amaziah son of Joash of Judah [786 (or 782) B.C.E.], King Jeroboam [II] son of Joash of Israel began to reign in Samaria; he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he caused Israel to sin. ²⁵He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. ²⁶For the LORD saw that the distress of Israel was very bitter; there was no one left, bond or free, and no one to help Israel. ²⁷But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Joash.”

II. NEW TESTAMENT: JONAH AS SIGN

Matthew 12:38-41

³⁸Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” ³⁹But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

INTERPRETIVE AXES

Orthodox

Written (probably) by Jonah, who prophesied in Jeroboam II's time

in the 8th century B.C.

The story is an historical narrative based on actual occurrences. The historical character of Jonah's miraculous rescue by the fish and his preaching to the Ninevites is attested by Christ, who compares His own death and resurrection to Jonah's experience (Mt 12:38-41).

No other miracle of Scripture has called forth so much unbelief. It is no more difficult to believe the miracle of the fish than to believe other Biblical miracles.

Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the great fish is a *Type*; it foreshadows Christ's death and resurrection.

Chiefly Jonah typifies Christ as the Sent-One, raised from the dead, & carrying salvation to the Gentiles.

It would take three days to walk around Nineveh, for it was sixty miles around and twenty across.

The conversion of Nineveh is the greatest revival in recorded history.

Jonah is *prophesy*. God's dealings with him prefigure the history of of Israel, her captivity in Babylon and failure to accept salvation.

Jonah is a didactic exposition of God's compassion and Israel's reluctance to fulfill her missionary purpose.

Conservative

Probably by the prophetic circles that told stories about Elijah and Elisha

perhaps in the 8th century B.C.

Those who doubt the historical basis of Jonah should not dismiss the pervasive interest of OT writers in history. Though it must be acknowledged that Biblical writers were not mere historians, their honesty should not be questioned. The book recounts real events in the life and ministry of the prophet.

Questions about the historical truth of Jonah often spring from inappropriate doubts about the miraculous as such; we should not assume that the story arose from the author's imagination.

The NT uses Jonah's experience as a type of the burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Jonah finally obeyed the LORD, though only reluctantly, since he still wanted the Ninevites to be destroyed.

Greater Nineveh had about a 60-mile circumference, but "three days" may indicate a medium-length distance.

The conversion of Nineveh was at best temporary.

Jonah signifies Israel's jealousy of her favored relationship with God and her unwillingness to share the Lord's compassion toward the nations.

The book depicts the larger scope of God's purpose for Israel in order that she might share his loving concern for all people.

Reformed

Possibly written by a (post-exilic) follower of 2nd Isaiah

in the 5th or 4th century B.C.E.

Jonah is a fiction--a *parable* composed from legendary and mythical elements. Jesus's comparison of himself to Jonah does not "attest" the "historical character" of Jonah. Jesus compares himself to Jonah as a *sign* of judgment; thus, the primary relation between the two is *figurative* rather than literal.

Jonah is a fish story, a work of literary imagination that makes deliberate use of *hyperbole* (exaggeration) for comic purposes: the "miracle" is that Jonah is *not* reborn, morally or spiritually.

The typology in Matthew represents a self-conscious effort to show that Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets (5:17).

Jonah's hypocrisy and obstinate hatred render him a highly unsatisfactory type of Christian salvation.

Archaeological excavations have discovered a city about three miles long and about one and one-half miles wide.

There is no extra-Biblical evidence to support this fictive conversion.

Jonah (Israel) is allegorized *history*. The fish is Babylon; Nineveh is the gentiles, for whom Israel should become "a light ... to eyes that are blind" (Isaiah 42:6-7).

Jonah is a satire; its purpose is comedic and richly ironic. Its "message" is communicated *parabolically*, as a question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" (4:4)