

Background of Jonah

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I offer this introductory material in preparation for the Valley Church sermon series on Jonah in April-May, 2009. This work begins with Ken Gilbert's famous disclaimer. Don't believe anything I say. Study for yourself. Sometimes I play the role of "Devil's Advocate", expressing a view that isn't necessarily mine. I invite argument against any such view, but I expect any argument to be reasoned, supported, and substantive, and based on something more solid than doctrine. Visit the church library and your local public library. Anyone who is honestly and openly studying to understand these writings will encounter these views. Unless otherwise stated, many of the sources cited or quoted here represent a consensus of serious modern scholars of the Bible texts. Though we may not agree with all of them, we should be aware of them, and have good reasons for maintaining divergent views.

Literary Features

The ESV notes (which see for more detail) describe the book as a "literary masterpiece" of Hebrew literature. "While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible." Satire dominates, with the "giantesque" motif, pervasive irony, and humor. While not prophecy, it describes an event in the life of a prophet.

The message is didactic and is based on a historical figure (the prophet Jonah). The genre is debated, ranging from pure allegory, through allegory anchored on a historical event (Jonah's message to Nineveh), to historical narrative.

Geography

There is no specific geographical place known as Tarshish. Josephus thought it referred to Tarsus, but other historians and linguists offer alternatives. See JewishEncyclopedia.com for detail. Any large vessel capable of making a long sea-voyage was styled a "ship of Tarshish," though this did not necessarily mean that the vessel sailed either to or from Tarshish (Ps. xlvi. 7; I Kings x. 22, xxii. 48; Isa. ii. 16; et al.). Some see it as a generic reference to a distant coast or other place which has not heard of Yhwh.

Nineveh was a magnificent city of the ancient world, with most of the construction apparently done by Sennacherib around 700BC (after the time of Jonah). It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Its history seems to relegate the influence of Jonah to little more than an annoyance. He might have had a moral influence, but it certainly didn't prevent Assyria from conquering Israel and assimilating the northern kingdom, and it certainly didn't establish the worship of Yhwh as the religion of Assyria.

Chronology

2 Kings 14:23-28 places Jonah at work during the reign of Jeroboam II, who ruled the northern kingdom from 782-753BC, before Assyria under Sargon II conquered the northern kingdom in 720BC. That destroyed the northern kingdom as a political unit, and its 10 tribes as a people with a uniquely-identified heritage and a worship of Yhwh. These tribes were “lost” by geographic dispersal and genetic and cultural absorption. (Bauer p. 375)

MacArthur suggests that the receptivity of the Ninevites to the message of Jonah might have been enhanced by plagues in 765 and 759BC and a solar eclipse in 763BC.

Nineveh was conquered in 612BC by an alliance of Medes, Scythians, Babylonians, and Susianians. It was then “razed to the ground” (Wikipedia).

A reference from the second century BC (*Sirach* 49:10) refers to the “twelve prophets” (the 12 minor prophets), of which Jonah is the fifth, the book was written some time between the middle of the eighth and the end of the third centuries (ESV notes). The book is anonymous, and its author is never named elsewhere. It is plausible that Jonah provided the source material, or even wrote the book himself.

References

1. MacArthur, John, notes to The MacArthur Study Bible. Nashville: Word Bibles, 1997.
2. Grudem, Wayne, ed, notes to ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007.
3. Bauer, Susan Wise, The History of the Ancient World. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007.