

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DATE OF JONAH

(Tom Constable)

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Jonah is the fifth of the Minor Prophets in our English Bibles. The Minor Prophets are called "The Book of the Twelve" in the Hebrew Bible. Jonah is unique among the Latter Prophets (in Hebrew: Isaiah through Malachi) in that it is almost completely narrative, similar to the histories of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17—19; 2 Kings 2:1—13:21). The exceptional section of this book, of course, is Jonah's psalm in 2:2-9 (cf. Hab. 3).

"... the peculiarity of the Book of Jonah is not the presence of narrative, but the apparent absence of all prophetic discourse."<sup>1</sup>

As with his two predecessors, Elijah and Elisha, Jonah also ministered in and to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, as well as in Phoenicia and Aram. Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet on record whom God sent to a heathen nation with a message of repentance. Nahum's later ministry to Nineveh consisted of announcing certain overthrow, although, had the Ninevites repented again, God might have relented again.

Jonah was Israel's "foreign missionary," in that he went with a message from God to a foreign people, whereas Jonah's fellow Israelite prophet, Hosea, was Israel's "home missionary." However, Jonah did not have a missionary's proper attitude, a missionary's message of hope, or a missionary's objective of bringing his audience into a personal relationship with Yahweh. The books of Jonah and Hosea reveal important characteristics about God: Hosea, God's loyal love to Israel, and Jonah, his compassion for all people, specifically Gentiles.

Jonah's hometown was Gath-hepher in Galilee (2 Kings 14:25; cf. Josh. 19:13). It stood north of Nazareth in the tribal territory of Zebulun. Jonah prophesied in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Israel's King Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.; 2 Kings 14:23-25). Second Kings 14:25 records that Jonah prophesied that Jeroboam II would restore Israel to her former boundaries, which that king did.

It is very probable that God sent Jonah to Nineveh, which was at this time a very significant city of the great Assyrian Empire, during the years when that nation was relatively weak. Nineveh was not yet the capital of Assyria, nor was Assyria yet a world power that threatened Israel. Following the death of King Adad-nirari III in 783 B.C., Assyria was not strong again until Tiglath-pileser III seized the throne in 745 B.C. During this 37-year period, Assyria had difficulty resisting its neighbors to the north, the Urartu mountain tribes, who allied with their neighbors, the people of Mannai and Madai. These invaders pushed the northern border of Assyria south, to within 100 miles of Nineveh. This vulnerable condition evidently made the king and residents of Nineveh receptive to Jonah's prophetic message of imminent doom.

Donald Wiseman argued for a more specific time within this period for Jonah's visit to Nineveh, namely, during the reign of Assur-dan III (772-755 B.C.).<sup>2</sup>

Nineveh became one of the capitals of Assyria during the reign of Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), and it became Assyria's sole capital during the reign of his son, Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.).<sup>2</sup> This city stood on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. It had walls 100 feet



<sup>1</sup> John H. Walton, "Jonah," in Daniel-Malachi, vol. 8 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary, revised ed., p. 458.

<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," Tyndale Bulletin 30 (1979):29-51.

high and 50 feet thick, and the main one, punctuated by 15 gates, was over seven and one-half miles long. The total population was probably about 600,000, including the people who lived in the suburbs outside the city walls (cf. 4:11). The residents were idolaters and worshipped Asur and Ishtar, the chief male and female deities, as did almost all the Assyrians.

Assyria was a threat to Israel's security (cf. Hos. 11:5; Amos 5:27). This is one reason that Jonah refused to go to Nineveh. He feared the people might repent and that God would refrain from punishing Israel's enemy (4:2).

## DATE AND WRITER

Many critical scholars date this prophecy in the postexilic period of Israel's history, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, or later. They base their opinion on linguistic features of the book and legendary descriptions, specifically: the size, population, importance, and king of Nineveh, plus late customs and audience. Critics also point to the differences in style between Jonah and Hosea, another northern prophet. Many conservative scholars believe that these arguments do not outweigh the evidence for a pre-exilic date that many features of the book and the traditional Jewish commentaries present.

If the book records events that really happened, the record of them must have come from Jonah himself. However, the book nowhere claims that Jonah was its writer. It seems to argue against this possibility by relating the story in the third person rather than in the first. Therefore, some unidentified writer appears to have put the book in its final form. However, Jonah could have been describing himself in the third person. Daniel did this in the Book of Daniel, which most conservatives believe Daniel wrote. The compilers of the Old Testament canon probably placed this book in the Book of the Twelve (our Minor Prophets) because they believed that Jonah wrote it. The title, however, honors the chief character in the narrative as much as its traditional writer.

One conservative scholar suggested that what we have is a version of the story that someone wrote for the nation of Judah. The writer supposedly did this to teach Judah's people the lessons that God earlier taught His prophet, the Ninevites, and the residents of Israel. Such a message would have been appropriate when the weakened Southern Kingdom faced a threat from another formidable power to its north, namely, Babylonia. However, the arguments for the writer being Jonah are quite convincing.

Douglas Stuart argued that the writer was not Jonah, because the story is so consistently critical of Jonah, at least more so than any other Bible book is critical of its writer.<sup>3</sup> This argument seems weak to me. Inspired writers of Scripture were frankly self-critical (e.g., Moses, Samuel, David, et al.), compared to their contemporaries, who omitted their flaws and tried to make themselves look as good as possible.

The events recorded in the book probably covered only a few months, or years, at the most. Jonah lived during Jeroboam II's reign over the Northern Kingdom of Israel (793-753 B.C.; cf. 2 Kings 14:25). Probably a date of composition somewhere in the neighborhood of 780 B.C. would not be far from the exact date of writing.

"From the death of Elisha to the prophesying of Amos nearly forty years must have elapsed, during which the only recorded prophetic voice is Jonah's."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 432.

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 55