

INTRODUCTION TO JONAH

(John Walton)

Much of the book of Jonah is subject to controversy, but a few facts may stand uncontested. Outside the book, Jonah is referred to only once in the OT (2Ki 14:25). This reference connects him with the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, who reigned from 793-753 BC, thus placing Jonah in the generation after Elisha and immediately prior to the beginning of the great era of prophecy that began with Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah.

Prophets and Eighth Century Israel

Prior to the time of Jonah there lived those familiar prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, and earlier still, Nathan and Samuel. Immediately subsequent to the time of Jonah, we enter the period of "classical prophecy" (identified with the writing prophets, beginning with Hosea and Amos in the middle of the eighth century BC). Several distinctions can be made between classical and preclassical prophecy. Most important is that the preclassical prophets addressed their messages to the king, while classical prophets addressed the people as well as the king. Jonah's role in the book of Kings identifies him as fitting the preclassical mold.

The reign of Jeroboam II achieved unparalleled prosperity for the northern kingdom of Israel. Assyria was in a stage of weakness and was preoccupied with internal security, and Egypt continued in decline. Jeroboam was therefore free to expand his borders, with the Arameans as the only hindrance. This background is important because it shows that Israel at this time was near the top, not the bottom, in the realm of international politics. The book of Jonah, however, speaks little of Israel, for Jonah's mission was to Nineveh.

Assyria in the Eighth Century

A century earlier, the Assyrian Empire under Shalmaneser III had extended its control into the west and gained authority over Syria, Israel, Judah, and many other areas. The end of Shalmaneser's reign, however, saw revolt by several Assyrian centers, including Nineveh. His son, Shamshi-Adad V, managed to subdue the rebellion, but during his reign control over the west weakened considerably.

Shamshi-Adad V died about 811 BC and left as heir to the throne his young son, Adad-Nirari III. Until the boy came of age the country was ruled by Shamshi-Adad's widow, Sammuramat, who seems to have retained extensive control until her death. Adad-Nirari reigned from his city of residence and capital, Kalhu, until 783 BC. He was succeeded by three sons-Shalmaneser IV, Assur-Dan III, and Assur-Nirari V -but their successive reigns marked a period of Assyrian weakness that could be characterized as practical anarchy. Particularly notable is the series of rebellions between 763 and 758 BC led by disaffected officials, who seem to have usurped royal prerogatives. In such a political climate, a prophecy proclaiming the imminent fall of Nineveh would be taken quite seriously.

This trend was reversed in 745 BC with the accession of Tiglath-pileser III, who, though he claimed kinship to Adad-Nirari III, began a new dynasty that established Assyrian supremacy for a century. Tiglath-pileser was succeeded by Sargon II, Shalmaneser V, and finally Sennacherib, who was responsible for the enlargement of Nineveh. It was during his time that Nineveh became the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

Date

On the late end, the book of Jonah must have been written prior to the second century BC, since two apocryphal books from that time refer to the book of Jonah. Tobit 14:4 in some manuscripts mentions Jonah's exploits, while the Wisdom of Ben Sirach 49:10 speaks of "the twelve," showing that the canonical development of the twelve Minor Prophets had already been completed. On the early end, the book of Jonah cannot extend beyond the time in which the prophet lived, i.e., the first half of the eighth century BC.

