

A WAYWARD PROPHET LEARNS A LESSON (JONAH)

(Robert Chisholm)

Unlike the other prophetic books, the Book of Jonah is a prophetic biography. It tells the story of Jonah, an Israelite Prophet from Gath-hepher, located in the northern kingdom on the border of Zebulun's tribal territory (see Joshua 19:13). Jonah is mentioned in one of the passage in the Hebrew Bible. According to 2 Kings 14:25, he prophesied the military success of king Jeroboam II, who ruled from 793-753 B.C.

Traditionally, the Book of Jonah has been understood as a historical account of an episode in the life of the prophet. Most modern scholars reject this notion and understand the book as legendary, allegorical, or parabolic.

They argue the various elements in the book are too fantastic to be anything but fiction. For example, Jonah is preserved alive inside a large marine creature for three days and three nights and even prays (in beautiful Hebrew poetic verse) from within the insides of the fish.¹ When he preaches in Nineveh, which seems to be portrayed as much larger than it really was (see Jon. 3:3), the Ninevites repent en masse. Furthermore, secular history provides no evidence of such a spiritual revival among the Assyrians. Within just a few decades of their alleged conversion, they were once again building their empire with unprecedented cruelty.

Despite the modern scholarly consensus that the book is fictional, many evangelicals continue to defend its historicity on presuppositional and philosophical grounds, arguing that a commitment to historicity, biblical inspiration; and supernaturalism demands such a view. Defenders of the book's historicity argue that its alleged fanciful elements can be attributed to divine intervention. Indeed, other stories about prophets (for example, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Balaam) also record some unusual incidents. They also point out that Jesus assumed its authenticity when he spoke of Jonah's ordeal in the belly of the fish and contrasted the repentant Ninevites with the unbelieving generation of his own day (see Matt. 12:39-42; Luke 11:29-32).

The debate over the book's historicity will undoubtedly continue, because for some it is a litmus test of orthodoxy that proves whether or not one is committed to historical Christianity. Surely such an attitude makes a Philosophical "mountain" out of a literary "molehill." Unlike the exodus and the resurrection of Jesus, the historicity of the book of Jonah is not foundational to redemptive history and biblical faith. Unfortunately, the debate over the book's historicity has often distracted interpreters from focusing on its theological message, which is not affected by how one understands the book's literary genre. Whether the book is labeled historical narrative, legend, parable, or something akin to a historical novella, its themes seem apparent. It assumes that the God of



¹ Some defenders of the book's historicity even attempted to find other instances of men being preserved alive after being swallowed by marine animals, but at least some of these alleged parallels have been exposed as "fish stories." See Uriel Simon, *Jonah*, trans. L. J. Schramm, JPSBC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), xvi, and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 907-8. While Harrison states that "not all of these ought to be dismissed as ridiculous, he points out that Jonah "was fully conscious and coherent, both mentally and emotionally, being able to compose a penitential psalm and worship his god before being regurgitated by the great fish." He adds: "This is a vastly different experience from that of any modern counterpart of Jonah, and in itself raises a major obstacle to the acceptance of a literal interpretation of the prophecy" (908).

Israel is sovereign over the nations. It also affirms that he is merciful and compassionate, not willing that anyone should perish without being given an opportunity to repent. More profoundly, the book makes the point that God's justice must be tempered and balanced by his mercy if God's world is to continue. It is also possible that the book is a polemic against sinful Israel, represented by the disobedient prophet. Despite all he knows about God, Jonah, because of his obsession with justice, is unwilling to carry out God's commands and get in line with God's program, in contrast to the pagans, who respond immediately and appropriately to God's revealed will and exhibit genuine fear before him.

The book exhibits a symmetrical design in which chapters 1-2 stand parallel to chapters 3-4. Several elements in part one have corresponding elements in part two, as the following outline of the story's structure indicates:

Part One (chapters 1-2)

- A The Lord commissions Jonah (1:1-2)
- B Jonah rejects his commission (1:3)
- C The sovereign Lord reveals his power (1:4)
- D The sailors submit to the Lord and avert disaster (1:5-16)
- E The Lord uses a fish to retrieve Jonah (1:17)
- F Jonah prays, thanking the Lord for saving his life (2:1-9)
- G The fish disgorges Jonah (2:10)

Part Two (chapters 3-4)

- A' The Lord commissions Jonah (3:1-2)
- B' Jonah accepts his commission (3:3)
- C' The sovereign Lord reveals his plan (3:4)
- D' The Ninevites submit to the Lord and avert disaster (3:5-10)
- E' Jonah prays, complaining that the Lord has saved Nineveh (4:1-3)
- F' The Lord uses a plant and worm to teach Jonah a lesson (4:4-11)

The symmetry between chapters 1 and 3 is readily apparent. Both chapters begin with Jonah's response to his commission and then focus on the reaction of foreigners to God's self-revelation. Though the structural parallelism between chapters 2 and 4 is not as tight, both chapters present a prayer of Jonah and focus on the prophet's reaction to the Lord's intervention. There is a sharp contrast between chapter 2, where Jonah thanks the Lord for delivering him, and chapter 4, where he objects to God's saving the pagan Ninevites. Because of its poetic style and apparent incongruity with the author's presentation of Jonah's character, many scholars regard the thanksgiving song in 2:2-9 as a later addition to the book. However, as the outline above indicates, it is integral to the book's structure and provides a foil, as it were, for Jonah's prayer of complaint in 4:2-3.