



Lessons For The Last Days: The Prophet Jonah¹

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THE BOOK OF JONAH IS OFTEN RELEGATED TO myth in modern biblical scholarship. However, indicators within the book regarding its historicity are striking. In an age of skepticism these significant indicators need to be reviewed.

The first part of this study will highlight these. The theological import of the book will then be clearly seen as vitally relevant for "last-day Christians."

Historicity Of The Book Of Jonah

The last century and a half or so the book of Jonah has sustained a major frontal attack by modern critical scholars.² It is argued that the

¹In honor of the life and ministry of an esteemed and beloved professor of systematic theology, Norman Gulley.

²For example, James Smart argues that if the book of Jonah is considered historical, it would obscure the message of the book as a whole, and then decides that "The form of literature into which the book of Jonah fits most naturally is that of parable.... This would explain many of its characteristics and would also justify its place among the twelve minor prophets;" James D. Smart, *The Book of Jonah*, "Introduction," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., vol. vi, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 871, 872.

Ze'ev Haim Lifshitz relegates the book of Jonah to myth: "In this unique mythological and mystical book, the book of Jonah, we learn to see the problem of man versus God in a new and precious light;" Ze'ev Haim Lifshitz, *The Paradox of Human Existence: A Commentary on the Book of Jonah* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), xxiv.

Modern critical scholarship is summarized by another: "No critical scholar

book cannot possibly be recounting actual history. Two lines of reasoning predominate.

First, it is argued that most other prophetic books are composed chiefly of the sacred oracles announced by the prophet, with a lesser amount of biographical material. In the book of Jonah this proportion is reversed. The prophet's message consists of only a few words: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4).³ Instead of a lengthy prophetic message as found elsewhere in many prophetic books, in the book of Jonah we find an extended focus on the life of the prophet.

However, this textual proportion need not relegate the book of Jonah to mythology. The lives of non-writing prophets such as Elijah and Elisha in the books of the Kings exhibit the same proportion, with the text recording extensively what they did much more than what they said.

A second reason the modern critics of Scripture often reject the historicity of the book of Jonah is due to the supernatural details in the text, such as the "great fish" swallowing Jonah, and his remaining alive for three days inside the fish.

However, it is not aberrant for supernatural occurrences to be linked with a prophet's life in Scripture. We find this again within the chronicles of the prophets Elijah and Elisha recorded in First and Second Kings. Elisha's ministry is a good example, linked with many

today advocates the historicity of the prophet and his fantastic misadventures;" Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Twelve Minor Prophets," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1199.

T. Desmond Alexander provides the following classification (with representative proponents) of various fictional genres suggested for the book: allegory, midrash, parable, prophetic parable, legend, prophetic legend, novelle, satire, didactic fiction, and satirical, didactic short story. T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah," *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 70.

³Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

miracles.⁴ The book of Jonah simply cannot be dismissed as a myth on the basis of the supernatural phenomena associated with the life of the prophet himself.

In fact, it is interesting to note that the miraculous events in the book of Jonah are referred to very briefly and in an almost off-handed manner. The "great fish" is mentioned in only three verses. The same can be said for the two winds, the worm, and the plant all spoken of as under God's control. They are included without any fanfare or surprise at finding God's power displayed in the natural world.

Though a common attitude now, the tendency to view Jonah as fictional is a relatively recent development. The vast majority of early Jewish and Christian writers believed that the events recorded in Jonah actually occurred. Among first-century Jewish writers, Josephus the historian clearly viewed the book of Jonah as historical and incorporated it into his history of the Jewish people.⁵ Indeed, it is impressive to review the centuries of biblical scholars who were convinced that the author of Jonah's book was not writing fiction.⁶ In fact, there are several indicators within the text itself that underscore its historical nature.

⁴Such as, the healing of a water spring (2 Kgs 2:19-22), miracle of the widow's oil (2 Kgs 4:1-7), raising a young boy from the dead (2 Kgs 4:8-37), a stew of poisonous food cured (2 Kgs 4:38-41), miraculous feeding of many through a small amount of food (2 Kgs 4:42-44), healing of leprosy (2 Kgs 5:1-19), and the iron axe head floating on water (2 Kgs 6:1-7). Alexander, 72, referring to these miracles in the Kings narrative, writes: "After all, the author of the biblical book of Kings incorporates into his historically based account events which are no less incredible than those found in Jonah. . . , and clearly, he was quite prepared to accept these as having actually occurred."

⁵"But, since I have promised to give an exact account of our history, I have thought it necessary to recount what I have found written in the Hebrew books concerning this prophet [Jonah];" *Jewish Antiquities*, R. Marcus, trans. (London: Heinemann, 1937), IX, 206-214.

⁶Gerhard F. Hasel summarizes the history of Jonah scholarship regarding historicity: "Neither Jews nor Christians have ever, until quite recently, regarded the book of Jonah as anything but a historical narrative or a record of the experience of Jonah, whatever they have understood its message to be;" Gerhard F. Hasel, *Jonah: Messenger of the Eleventh Hour* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1976), 104.

First, the book of Jonah commences with the formula: *vayabi* (often translated, “and it came to pass”). This exact expression is also found at the opening of many books of the Old Testament (OT), such as: Joshua 1:1; Judges 1:1; Ruth 1:1; 1 Samuel 1:1; 2 Samuel 1:1; Esther 1:1; and Ezekiel 1:1. Different English translations of this Hebrew expression may not give this impression, but the identical term is used at the outset of each of these and several other historical books in Scripture. If one accepts Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, Esther and Ezekiel as historical personages, to be consistent Jonah cannot be excluded.

When the term *vayabi* is employed it consistently indicates that what follows is directly linked to what has already happened. It never reflects the “once upon a time” phraseology which often is found at the beginning of a fairy tale. Instead, the reader is alerted to a linkage of previous history, with now a subsequent progression of events.⁷

Second, the description of Jonah’s prophetic call in the first chapter of the book is identical to that of many other biblical prophets. The book opens: “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah...” (Jonah 1:1 NKJV). This “introductory formula” should grip the reader’s attention! It is the same phrase used of such prophets as Jeremiah (1:4; 2:1), Ezekiel (1:3), Hosea (1:3), Joel (1:3), Micah (1:1), Haggai (1:1), Zephaniah (1:1), and Zechariah (1:1). Many prophetic materials open with the formula: “The word of the Lord that came to . . .”. To receive the “word of the Lord” was an “authenticating mark of a true prophet,”⁸ as we are told of Samuel: “Then the Lord appeared again in Shiloh. For the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh *by the word of*

⁷Joyce Baldwin writes concerning this introductory phrase, “And it came to pass”: “The Hebrew idiom strictly indicates continuity with what has already happened and the factual nature of the account to follow;” Joyce Baldwin, “Jonah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, vol. 2, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk*, Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 552. Cf. Alexander, 76: “To anyone familiar with Hebrew narrative, such an introduction must surely have suggested that what followed was intended by the author to be treated as fact.”

⁸Baldwin, 552.

the Lord” (1 Sam 3:21, emphasis added). This “introductory formula” or phrase “the word of the Lord came to...” also authenticates that the message which follows does not originate with the prophet, but comes from God Himself. It is “the word of the *Lord*” that comes to each prophet, including Jonah. This is an impressive introduction. It should remind us each time we encounter it in Scripture that we are not only studying history, but even more importantly, sacred words.

Third, Jonah’s divine instructions also mirror those of other biblical prophets. For example, God summons the prophet Elijah: “Then the word of the Lord came to him [Elijah], saying, ‘*Arise, go to Zarephath...*’” (1 Kgs 17:8-9 NKJV). Also, on another occasion: “Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, *Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel...*” (1 Kgs 21:17-18 NKJV). The prophet Jeremiah receives an analogous injunction: “*Arise, go to the Euphrates and hide...*” Jeremiah afterward recalls, “I went and hid by the Euphrates as Yahweh commanded me...” (Jer 13:4-5 NKJV; cf. 13:6-7).

The prophet Jonah is similarly summoned: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying: ‘*Arise, go to Nineveh...*’” (Jonah 1:1-2). Jonah’s divine mandate is verbally identical with other prominent OT prophets, again underscoring the historical nature of the book of Jonah. If the historicity of Elijah and Jeremiah is accepted, Jonah’s prophetic ministry is linked to theirs in an obviously parallel manner. Again we are assured that we are not dealing with fairy tales, legends, or myths.

Fourth, the historicity of the book of Jonah is further emphasized by noting how it is flanked by two unquestioned prophetic books, Obadiah and Micah. The fact that Jonah is in the “Book of the Twelve,” as the “Minor Prophets” are called in the Hebrew Bible, illustrates that its content was not considered problematic for many centuries.

Moreover, the book of Jonah is situated within the Twelve Minor Prophets in a broadly chronological or historical sequence.⁹ And within that ordering, the book of Jonah encloses a prophetic stance involving the same issues of destruction and restoration fundamental to all biblical prophets. The city of Nineveh, like the city of Jerusalem, is destined for judgment if there is no genuine repentance. Also, we find in the book of Jonah, as with other prophetic books, that Yahweh will draw on His vast reserves of mercy to delay or defer destruction. The book of Jonah contains prophecy as genuine as any in the Old Testament.

Fifth, another important aspect of the book of Jonah consists of the narrative's connection to historical places such as the then-prominent cities of Tarshish and Nineveh. Cities, rocks, caves, fields and even trees are often named and linked to OT historical accounts.¹⁰ Family names and genealogies are often associated with geographical data as if to invite the reader to check the details for themselves.

All through the OT we find the Israelites having almost an "obsession" with history. Their historical record was the ground of their identity. All the Old Testament Bible writers regularly referred to their past history, linking it to local places and events. There are no other known ethnic records from any other ancient nation that are so heavily weighted with such a vast amount of historical details and records. All

⁹See, e.g., "The Chronology of the Old Testament Hebrew Prophets," in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 4:17-24.

¹⁰Examples include: (a) details of land Abraham bought: "So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over" (Gen 23:17, NASB); (b) the place where Rebekah's nurse, Deborah, was buried: "Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth" (Gen 35:8, NASB); (c) Judge Deborah's "court": "Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel came up to her for judgment" (Judg 4:4-5, NASB).

this attention to such detail serves to anchor the biblical materials in public and accessible features of human history. The deliberate massing of such myriad details accentuates the veracity of the events they describe. It is almost as if the Bible writers are urging their readers to check out the truth of what they are writing about,¹¹ insisting that their accounting of history can be trusted.¹²

In this respect, it is also significant that in the last quarter-century biblical and theological studies have returned to the biblical narrative, recognizing it not only as exquisitely crafted material, but also able to contribute significantly to historical and theological studies.¹³

¹¹For example, all through the Old Testament customs are explained: "Again the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them'" (Num 15:38-39). Ancient names and current sayings are traced back to their origins: "And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously" (Gen 28:19). Divine commands are assigned a concrete reason as well as a slot in history: "And the Lord appeared to him [Isaac] the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for My servant Abraham's sake'" (Gen 26:24; see also Josh 5:2-7).

Personal names, family ties, and geographical data are provided, as if to invite readers to validate the details for themselves. For example: "Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God" (Gen 3:1). Many other examples could be listed, for this is typical of Hebrew narrative history.

¹²Extra-biblical data appears to synchronize well with the biblical record, as suggested by Wilkinson and Boa: "The repentance of Nineveh probably occurred in the reign of Ashurdan III (773-755 BC). Two plagues (765 and 759 BC) May have prepared the people for Jonah's message of judgment;" Bruce Wilkinson, and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), 257; James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 107.

¹³The book by Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), is considered one of the most significant books discussing the literary phenomena of Hebrew narratives in Scripture.

We find this same pattern in the book of Jonah. The narrative is connected to prominent cities of the time.¹⁴

Sixth, "Jonah the son of Amittai" is identified elsewhere in the Old Testament as a historical figure (2 Kgs 14:25). "This naturally raises the question," Desmond Alexander perceptively asks, "Why, if they never actually occurred, did the author apparently associate the events recorded in that book of Jonah with a known prophet? Is it not strange that having invented the entire plot the author did not likewise invent his central character?"¹⁵

Finally, in the New Testament, Jesus Himself speaks of the prophet Jonah and correlates His own ministry to the experience of Jonah. In fact, Jonah is the only prophet to whom Christ personally aligns His mission (Matt 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32). H. L. Ellison insightfully comments on Christ's reference to Jonah: "Our Lord referred to the story of Jonah as something obviously historical. . . . Even if it were true that his knowledge had been restricted in the way demanded by the kenosis theory, it is impossible to think that, filled with the Holy Spirit as he was he would not have been able to distinguish between history and allegory or parable."¹⁶

"What's It All About?"

The details of the story of Jonah are familiar. But what is the narrative really about? What was the purpose behind the writing of this book?

¹⁴The narrator of the book of Jonah had an intimate and accurate knowledge of the city of Nineveh of the eighth century BC. For an impressive array of evidence for this conclusion, see especially Donald J. Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979): 29-51.

¹⁵Alexander, 75.

¹⁶H. L. Ellison, "Jonah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 362.

What was the writer really trying to communicate?¹⁷ When the story is told to children, attention is often given to the "great fish." But surely this was not the primary focus in the writer's mind. That sea creature is but briefly mentioned in only three verses as we noted earlier.

Is the book ultimately about Jonah? Perhaps the writer, through the subtle comparisons made between Jonah and the sailors in chapter one, and then with the Ninevites in chapter three, is instructing how much more trouble God can have with one of His own people than He does with the worst of the pagan world.

Possibly, readers are also to be reminded that God is very serious about His divine commissions. God has given the Church the greatest mandate of all. He has told the Church to "Go" (Matt 28:19), just as He did Jonah. Christ entrusted His believers with what is now called "The Great Commission." Perhaps we should learn from Jonah's experience that God's commands are not to be taken lightly. Perhaps, we, like Jonah, need to learn to see the world from God's perspective: "Men boast of the wonderful progress and enlightenment of the age in which we are now living; but God sees the earth filled with iniquity and violence."¹⁸

In contrast to the prophet Jonah's attitude toward his divine commission to a major city, one recalls the apostle Paul. Rome was a leading capital city of Paul's time. And Paul makes three strong personal statements regarding his divine appointment, in an attitude very different from Jonah's:

¹⁷For further discussion of the theological message of the book of Jonah, see, e.g., Terence E. Freitheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977); Allan M. Harman, "Jonah: Theology of," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 798-802. George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," *Interpretation* 21 (1967): 3-31; and John H. Stek, "The Message of the Book of Jonah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 4 (1969): 23-50.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1917), 275.

"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:14-16, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Paul's message to Rome was not a "warm fuzzy." The first issue he discusses with the Romans is, like Jonah's message to the Ninevites, the judgment of God against sin. Prophetic messages rarely focus sentimentally on the love of God. In the New Testament (NT), the very first sermon Peter preached after the climactic outpouring of the Holy Spirit was not "I have a heart-warming message for you: God is a God of love." Instead, we hear Peter insisting:

"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know – this Man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross" (Acts 2:22 NASB; 23 NIV).

We can learn through Jonah and all the prophets (along with the apostles) that God apparently desires that "the great things of His law, the principles of justice, mercy and love therein may be set forth in their true light."¹⁹ He is serious about this.

In fact, ultimately, the book of Jonah must surely be about the God of heaven and earth. So many of His attributes are revealed in just four chapters. With this point we are reminded that when Bible writers speak of God, they do not permit us to conjure up at will random ideas of what He is like. Even they do not concoct ideas about Him out of

¹⁹Ibid.

their imaginations. Not one of them ever expresses any doubt that God exists. Nor do they ever try to prove the existence of God. Instead, with great conviction, they fill the pages of Scripture with a detailed record of God acting in human history.²⁰ The book of Jonah is part of this vast panorama. Let us consider how our understanding of God is enhanced in this book.

1. We are reminded of the cosmic extent of God's sovereignty. Even the pagan mariners aboard the ship in chapter one recognized that the ferocity of the "great storm" was resulting from more than just natural causes. That dangerous storm drew their attention to the great God of heaven and earth.

In the book of Jonah, as in all Scripture, there is no serious comparison between the true God and any false gods. The decisive and powerful actions of Yahweh are always seen in stark contrast to all other deities. Unlike human idols, the God of the book of Jonah is capable of doing something that really matters. The reader is reminded in each chapter of God's omnipotence and His authority over His creation.²¹

2. God's universal system of morality is clearly seen. God deals on a consistently equal basis with Jonah, the pagan sailors, and the Ninevites. The wicked Ninevites themselves, when falling under the judgment of God, were convicted of the correctness of God's sentence. Even the king of Nineveh included himself with the Ninevites and their violence. He didn't avail himself of modern political devices of evasion. All their consciences, from the greatest to the least, were under

²⁰As George Ladd cogently notes, "The uniqueness and the scandal of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events." Cited by William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth And Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 157.

²¹"The Lord is in active communication with every part of His vast dominion. He is represented as bending toward the earth and its inhabitants. He is listening to every word that is uttered. He hears every groan; He listens to every prayer; He observes the movements of every one;" Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), 56.

conviction from the same standard of morality seen all through Scripture.²²

3. In the book of Jonah we see God involved in personal relationships. He is never represented as an abstract idea or some vague impersonal power. One whole chapter in the book of Jonah records a conversation between God and His petulant prophet.

The God of the Bible is not a distant Being uninvolved with the people on this earth. He is not an impersonal force. Nor is He a cosmic dictator who seeks mindless submission on the part of His subjects. Instead, God yearns for relationships in which men and women enter as freely as He does Himself. All through Scripture we find Him reasoning and pleading with human beings. God Himself offers the invitation: "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa 1:18 NIV). We could review many biblical examples, including the book of Job. When responding to Job's urgent questionings, God's reply fills four chapters (Job 38, 39, 40, and 41). The conversation of God with Jonah is yet another of many such personal encounters.

The God revealed in Scripture is not a deity who requires mindless obedience. The charge that God expects thoughtless subservience is a concept invented by those not correctly informed of God's character as revealed in the biblical canon. Biblical figures, including Jonah, frequently question God. In the New Testament, God is not less dialogical. Jesus is seen constantly engaging and interacting with all kinds of people.²³ God apparently yearns to be known by us far

²²Long before the giving of the Decalogue in Exodus 20, one finds embedded in the Genesis narratives indications that the principles of the Ten Commandments were already the ethical standard for humanity: the first murder, Gen 4; lying and stealing, Gen 27; putting away idols, Gen 35:1-2; recognition of the sinfulness of adultery, Gen 39:9; God commends Abraham because he "obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws" (Gen 26:5, emphasis added); and so forth.

²³Some of the many recorded conversations of Jesus include Nicodemus (John 3); the Samaritan woman (John 4); the Syrophenician mother (Mark 7:24-37); and Peter (John 21:15-17). Even more, Christ graciously gave human beings time and

more than we want to know Him. Turning our hearts fully toward Him is often a long, difficult process for Him and for us. But God is personally and relentlessly committed. Jonah's experience teaches this if nothing else.

4. In the book of Jonah, the Old Testament reaches one of its pinnacle points of revealing God's tender concern for all His creatures. With God's final question to Jonah, "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, ... as well as many animals?" (4:11), we find one of the most amazing biblical glimpses of the personhood of God and His entanglement in the affairs of this world. This question by God should make us more sensitive to how much His heart must ache when He sees human beings and all of His creation being destroyed. God cares deeply about this world. His covenant, renewed with Noah and Abraham, includes even the animals.²⁴

room to listen thoughtfully and answer responsibly. He allowed them to dispute His Word, or simply not to listen. He never communicated in a way that forced anyone to simply hear and assent.

²⁴In Scripture one is taught that both human beings and animals have the same origin – from the hand of the same Creator. Humans and animals alike, were created as "living souls." In fact, there are many similarities between human beings and animals given in Scripture:

1. They were both created as '*nephesh ha-ya'*: Gen 1:20, 24; 2:7, 19.
2. They were both blessed by God: Gen 1:22, 28.
3. They were both given a vegetarian diet: Gen 1:29-30.
4. Animals as well as humans have blood in their veins. That blood is a symbol of life: Gen 9:4-6.
5. They both could be responsible for murder: Gen 9:5; Exod 21:28-32.
6. They are both a party to God's covenant: Gen 9:9-10.
7. They are both under the death penalty if they are engaged in bestiality: Lev 20:15-16.
8. They should both keep the Sabbath rest: Exod 20:8-10; Lev 23:10-12.
9. They will both live together in peace and will return to original conditions in the kingdom of God: Isa 11:7-9; Hos 2:18-20.
10. Firstborn from humans and animals belong to God: Exod 22:29-30; 13:12-13.
11. Priests and sacrificial animals have to be without spot or blemish: Lev 21:17-21; 22:19-25.
12. Animals could not be sacrificed unless eight days old and then they were to be

We do not often worry about the deterioration of the planet until it affects us personally somehow. Even worse, we usually think of the Fall of Adam and Eve in terms of its effects on the human race. Perhaps we need to reflect more on how it has affected God. The Bible devotes the first two chapters to the glories of the original creation. All the rest that follows describes the agonizing course God has chosen to take to restore His creation to His original magnificent plan. And before the canon closes, in the last book, one is again reminded of God's pointed regard for this planet, in the hymn of the twenty-four elders:

"We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came...to *destroy those who destroy the earth*" (Rev 11:17, 18, emphasis added).

5. An issue the Church faces each generation is how to present God in a contemporary manner. One of the tempting practices is to bring God down to a level where people will respond, "Oh, I can accept a God like that." Sometimes we are afraid to make people face the true God in Scripture. This results in one of the tragedies of the present era when the Christian Church sometimes capitulates by suggesting, "It really doesn't matter. There are Buddhists and Hindus and Christians, but we are all trying to get to the same place."

But that is where the pagan mariners were in the first chapter of the book of Jonah. Each of them was crying to "his god" in the great storm. Then they saw something dramatic happen. And they were compelled to call upon the true God – a God who was all-powerful.

dedicated to God. The same time period of eight days was given for a boy to be circumcised: Lev 22:27; Exod 22:30; Gen 17:12. Jiri Moskala, *The Laws of Clean & Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11: Their Nature, Theology, & Rationale, An Intertextual Study* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 2000): 298-299.

We can learn from the book of Jonah that we never need apologize for the God of Scripture. People may be scornful. But true conversion only comes when one encounters the true God. We see this graphically in the book of Jonah. Surely this was an extraordinary time when heathen sailors on board a ship (chapter one), and later the whole city of Nineveh (chapter three) were convicted to call upon the name of the true God.

6. We are also instructed concerning the nature of divine judgment in the book of Jonah. When God calls people or nations to judgment, He is not angrily vindictive. Rather, with His strong warnings, He seeks to convert. In the book of Jonah, He called a wicked and violent city to judgment so that they might turn from their evil ways and be saved. And when they repented, in His mercy He delighted to forgive their past acts of rebellion.

When God chose not to punish Nineveh, there was no real change in God. The object of the divine judgment message was the conversion of the Ninevites so that He would not have to bring destruction. God's threatenings are often conditional. He Himself said so through Jeremiah:

"At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them" (Jer 18:7, 8 KJV).

It is unfortunate that the King James Version translated the verb in Jonah 3:10 as God "repenting." The Hebrew word *nacham* used there means to "relent, to have compassion." God is not repenting from doing wrong. He is turning away from judgment in mercy, as He wanted to all along! Even the psalmists were constrained to write hymns praising the merciful nature of God. For example:

"As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, So the

Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps 103:12-14 NKJV).

In the book of Jonah, the reader is again instructed regarding God's capacity and inclination to forgive. This divine propensity for forgiveness apparently is a difficult concept for sinful human beings to appreciate. Jonah surely had a hard time, admitting his resentfulness:

"Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2).

In the New Testament Jesus Himself spent much time talking about God's forgiveness. All four Gospels frequently recount that God is far more generous with His forgiveness than many of us think. A number of Christ's parables even draw attention to this.²⁵

The book of Jonah is one of the most profound pictures of God's forgiveness in the entire Bible. Perhaps this is the reason why this book is read by the Jewish people at *Minchah*, the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement, near the holiest hour when Yom Kippur is nearing its peak. In the final hours, when judgment is about to close, the book of Jonah is read, for it closes with God Himself declaring His inclination to forgive.²⁶

²⁵For example, the parable of the Prodigal Son also provides deep insight into the forgiving nature of the father (Luke 15:11-32). The parable of the generous employer (Matt 20:1-16) who gives the workers hired at the eleventh hour a full day's wage draws attention to the extreme generosity of the nature of salvation. Jesus also spoke of how human parents, sinful as they are, know how to give their children good things. He then emphasizes the analogy that God, the heavenly Father, is even more generous and loving. If we ask God for bread, we will not get a stone (Matt 7:7-11).

²⁶See b. *Megillah* (Talmudic Tractate) 31a. For further discussion of the linkage between the Day of Atonement and the message of the book of Jonah, see Hayyim Angel, "The Book of Jonah: A Call to Personal Responsibility," *Tradition* 30(1995): 56-

7. Finally, the book of Jonah shows how God labors with both saints and sinners. Jonah's book is one of the most evangelistic books in the Bible. God is seen saving people. Even cantankerous Jonah was constrained to admit this as he vents to God: "I know You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm" (Jonah 4:2 NKJV). Tragically, it is God's gracious nature that Jonah finds very offensive.

The repentance of the Ninevites also reminds us of the susceptibility of heathen people to the word of God, and their willingness to turn and forsake their evil ways if given the opportunity.

In fact, salvation is what is highlighted in each of the four chapters of the book of Jonah. At the end of chapter one, the heathen sailors find salvation and pray to Yahweh. The urgent prayer of Jonah from the great fish (in chapter two) climaxes in the final phrase "Salvation is of the Lord!" (2:9 NKJV). In chapter three, the entire city of Nineveh, including the monarch, repents before the King of kings and finds mercy (3:10). The last chapter concludes with God's own words of grace: "Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city" (4:11 NKJV).

Conclusion

As the Christian Church seeks to fulfill the Great Gospel Commission of Christ in the 21st century, the book of Jonah remains contemporary and crucial in the issues it raises: instructing us in the gracious nature of God, and His yearning for all His human children.

The book of Jonah may be in the "Minor Prophets," but it is definitely not in the "minor leagues." It commences and concludes with the word of God to one of His erring children. And in between we are

67; and Hayyim Granot, "Jonah and Yom Kippur," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26 (1998): 201-202.

given one of the clearest pictures of God's universal love, sovereignty and redemption anywhere in Scripture.



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