

What difference does it make to the main point of Jonah whether it is historical or not.

Whether Jonah is an historical account or not probably makes no difference to the book's main point and purpose. It is more important to define its main theological message for us. We must be aware that the Hebrew Bible is an historical book in itself. But should it be taken literally? A Christian is going to have a different point of view from a non-believer. Someone reading from a Jewish perspective will certainly not see the point William L. Banks suggests regarding Jonah's three days in a whale, is one which

'typifies or prefigures the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'¹.

I will consider various sources to establish a viewpoint and then try to assert what the message of Jonah meant then and what it means for us today.

According to D.W.B Robinson the story is

'entirely concerned with the personal dealings between God and his servant the son of Ammittai'.

The writer suggests these arise out of a

'prophetic commission and its attempted evasion'.

The writer explains that God's thoughts are not his thoughts and his ways are not God's ways. The story tells of a prophet who is asked by the Lord to go to Nineveh, but attempts to escape from God's presence by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish, only to be consumed by a raging storm, then thrown overboard and swallowed by 'a great fish' (in Hebrew 'dā'g') where he remained for three days. According to Joyce Baldwin:

'The statement that Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights raises some problems. Since Jonah had no means of observing days and nights, he had no chance to measure the passing time and no one else could do so'².

¹ William L. Banks, 'The Reluctant Prophet', 29:1996

² Baldwin Joyce, 'The Minor Prophets', Jonah 1990:566

What we can see is that God is able to use Jonah's disobedience for his own glory. However, we need also to question the story's historical accuracy and why Christ uses this to symbolise his death in Mt 12: 40 – 43, LK 11:29 – 32 :

'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a fish, so the son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth³'.

So are we supposed to take this book literally or symbolically? According to New Bible commentary Jonah was an historical figure, 'a prophet of God' , but most importantly it suggests that Christ believed that the repentance of Nineveh was a real occurrence⁴. The more general statement, however, according to this commentary, is that 'Three days and three nights seem to be a Semitic idiom and not supposed to contradict the resurrection in the third day⁵

Could it also be that Christ wanted to show that He was the light to the Nations, as Jonah was called to be a light to Nineveh, but disobeyed God's command, just as Israel was disobeying God. God could have wiped Nineveh out, but instead chose to save it.

In spite of Jonah's disobedience God still provided a means of safety, because the calling He had for this reluctant prophet was not going to be stopped. And we see here that even animals will obey God as God is shown to be the creator of every living being. God asks him a second time to go to Nineveh to proclaim that if they don't repent in forty more days they will be over-turned. The Ninevites believe God and declare a fast. The king wraps sackcloth about his loins and joins the fast of penitence. The animals also join the fast, being covered with sackcloth and kept from food and water. Elizabeth Achemeier suggests that the natural world is affected by human sin, that nature falls as we fall, that God is sovereign over the world of nature as well over the realm of man and that the nature of the world needs redemption from 'its corrupted state'. ⁶

Verse 10 of chap 3 of Jonah tells us:

'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened⁷

So is the core message to do with repentance and God's sovereignty and unfailing love for mankind? He caused a people who were pagan to be saved. And although we see Nineveh repent in chapter 3,

³The Gospel according to Matthew, 'New International version'2001:978

⁴ New Bible Commentary, 1970:747

⁵ ibid

⁶ Achtemeier Elizabeth, New International Commentary," minor prophets, 1996:277

⁷ New International version,1984:928

we don't know if Jonah repents. We see the consequences of his sin and disobedience to God, but it is uncertain if there is a complete change of heart which comes through true repentance.

It displeases Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry⁸... (chap 4)

If he truly repented he would perhaps have showed true compassion to Nineveh. He goes out of the city and sits under the shade to see what becomes of it. God prepares a plant to give shade and in the morning causes it to wither. He also prepares what the Bible recalls 'a vehement east wind'.

...and the sun beat on Jonah's head so he grew faint...⁹

Then God says:

'You have had pity on the plant for which you have not laboured, ... And should I not pity Ninevah that great city...who cannot discern between their right hand and their left' ...¹⁰

According to T. Desmond Alexander:

'...God's sovereignty is not restricted to acts of compassion. As the one who gives life, he also has the right to bring it to an end.'¹¹

This writer suggests the destruction of the gourd by the worm symbolises the future destruction of Israel by the Assyrians. God is still willing to save a people because of his compassion. Jonah is forced to acknowledge the absolute sovereignty of God. Perhaps for the reader of the time it was to show that God was supreme over all as and his compassion is never failing.

Turning to historical accuracy, McConville argues that:

'Unlike Hosea and Amos, Jonah does not give definite clues either to its dating or to its intended audience'¹²

McConville argues that this is because of nature of the book. In its 4 chapters the prophet speaks only one line of prophecy. (Jonah 3: 4b) Other prophetic books, for example the book of Daniel, give the historian something to go on from the situations addressed. In Jonah the prophetic word plays only a small role in the narrative. Many of the other books give dates when the prophets are said to have worked. But the book of Jonah is silent about this. Jonah was, according to this writer,

⁸ ibid

⁹ Ibid 2001:1929

¹⁰ Ibid929

¹¹ T. Desmond Alexander, 'Jonah, An introduction and Commentary'.1988:130

¹² Gordon McConville, 'Exploring the old Testament', volume 4,2002:185

included in the later prophets because, 'Jonah son of Ammittai', is also named in 2 Kings 14:25. He was from Gath, in the territory of Zebulun near the sea of Galilee. (see Josh. 9:13) So he was known as a prophet in the reign of Jeroboam II (786 – 746BC). This puts him close in the time of Amos and Hosea. Although we are told nothing about a mission to Nineveh, McConville argues:

'...the allusion to Jonah in Kings means that a historical setting can be imagined for the events reported'¹³

On dating and authorship, T. Desmond Alexander claims:

'...Jonah contains no precise statement as to when the events recorded actually occurred.'¹⁴

An important clue to the timing is the name 'Jonah son of Amittai' (see 2 Kings 14:25) Alexander suggests that it is 'reasonable' to suppose that these two passages refer to the same person. He argues that because of this we *may* date the events in the book to 8th BC¹⁵.

The book of Jonah is much more than a prophetic book. It is a narrative. This, according to Gordon McConville:

...'might make us expect information about the time and place, and about the society and politics that usually made prophets speak out'¹⁶

There is nothing to that effect. The focus is the relationship Jonah has with God rather than any event. The great size of Nineveh is mentioned. The king is not named and the writer argues that,

'even the expression, 'king of Nineveh', is not everywhere. What is normally read is the king of Assyria.....So the question about dating turns out to be a question about the kind of literature. If we are reading about historical events, then we might expect the book would have been written fairly close in time to those events'¹⁷

McConville suggests that the book is fiction, because of historical reasons. He asserts that no repentance of Nineveh at the preaching of a Hebrew prophet is known. Also according to this scholar, the fact that Nineveh is the chief city of Assyria at the time is argued that this is out of keeping with what was known of Assyrian history. Further he claims there is inconsistency between the claimed size of the city in the narrative and its dimensions known from archaeology

¹³ T. Desmond, 'Jonah, an introduction and commentary', 1988:51

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Gordon McConville, 'Exploring the Old Testament', 2002:186

¹⁷ Ibid

Should we believe that the God of Israel was the God of the impossible? Does this make a difference to the main point? There must be an element of faith. Unless we believe in the creator we could forfeit the whole Bible, because it is not possible that everything is true.

The book apparently seems uninterested in real events of the time - and the swallowing by a great fish and being vomited out onto dry land can be construed as symbolic rather than literal.

Desmond suggests that although the author of Jonah makes use of literary structures, this doesn't automatically imply that the work is fictional. The author may use various literary devices, but this tells us more of his artistry than about the historicity or non - historicity of the narrative. There is no reason why a skilled writer cannot use certain structures and yet put together a precise account of what actually took place.

The theological importance of the story must be considered.

Robert B. Chisholm claims:

'By extending His grace to Ninevah (and to rebellious Jonah!), God revealed His concern for sinful human beings.¹⁸

and suggests that God has the right to show mercy to whom he wills, no matter how unworthy the object might appear to be. G. McConville suggests that that the sovereignty of God is a theme of the book. God is evidently controlling the events. On the boat to Tarshish, during the storm, the sailors quiz Jonah about his God. The prophet answers with a confession of faith that it is Elohim - the God of Heaven who made the sea and all that inhabits the earth - who comes as a challenge to the sailors who are 'polytheists'. What do they make of the claim, as they are told of a God that they do not know? As Jonah tells them to throw him overboard, we see their fear because they may be in danger from his God and their prayer is not to be held responsible for Jonah's death. (see 1:15)

He argues that this is not to teach us monotheism, but the author and readers may view these events from that viewpoint. It could be that Jonah is working out issues which are interwoven with the Jewish claim about the sovereign God. The question could have been raised, can people of other faiths come to know the God of Abraham and Isaac?

Regarding the claim that the book is a call to mission, Desmond Alexander who suggests that:

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles lies at the heart of two of the most popular interpretations of the book of Jonah¹⁹

¹⁸ Robert B. Chisholm Jr, *Interpreting the minor prophets*, 1990:129

God not only rebukes

‘those who would confine his saving grace to the Jewish people, but he demonstrates his real interest in the salvation of sinful pagans.

Some scholars such as S. Goldman and G. von Rad feel that the book was designed to rebuke the grudging attitude of some Jews concerning God’s willingness to forgive Gentiles. Jonah is therefore condemned because he is reluctant to get the Ninevites to repent. For me these sorts of views could be construed as an excuse to criticise the Jewish people and possibly slightly antisemitic.

Desmond suggests that:

‘While the book provides an example of God’s dealing with some Gentiles, it can hardly be described as a tract designed to motivate missionary involvement and nor can the book be linked with certainty to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah²⁰,

Perhaps the story of Jonah can have a message for mission today. How many people are called by God to obey His voice and yet run away from his calling? God is always there even if we are reluctant to turn to Him. In modern mission there may be times when God asks us to do what we do not want to do. I know I must forgive my father for all the abuse he caused me. I may ask ‘why should I?’ but God’s mercy goes beyond all measure. His love is more than any man can fathom.

For me, the main points of the book of Jonah are God’s unfailing love and compassion for his children. He was still able to use a man reluctant to follow him. God was there knocking at his door. His sovereignty is shown in this story. Even though Jonah disobeyed God, He still used him for His own glory. And we will never know if Jonah repented. Judging from scholarship, there doesn’t seem to be any proof that this story is real. However the message is one of repentance and forgiveness. God was willing to save an ‘enemy’ nation. It shows that even the pagans, animals, sea and the whole of mankind belongs to the creator.

Whether the book is historical or not makes no difference to the main point. To understand it we need to look deeper than its historical meaning. God came to save mankind from destruction. If we go our way and not God’s way we can end up in the depths of despair as Jonah did in the belly of a fish. If we go God’s way his unfailing love will protect and deliver us from destruction. He is to bring us onto dry land as He did with Jonah, because He wants us for Him, the author and creator of mankind. To conclude Thomas Mantom argues that:

¹⁹ Ibid 85

²⁰ Ibid86

'Forgiveness invites us to return to God, obliges us to return to God... inclines us to return to God, and encourages us to live in a state of amity and holy friendship with God, pleasing him and serving him in righteousness all of our days'²¹

²¹ Gordon J Kiddie of Jonah, 1986:

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