

Robert Vannoy, Foundations Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 21a

IV. Jonah

C. The Contents of Jonah

We were in the book of Jonah, which is Roman numeral IV. In the second section, we looked at the expression of the character of the book. Is this historical writing or not? So we come to C., “The content of the book,” and I have two sub-points. I’m not going to work through all four chapters. But I want to talk about the historical background because I think that has a relation to the message of the book. Then secondly I want to look at the purpose of the book.

1. Historical Background

a. External

Ascendance of Assyria

So first “The historical background.” First, a., “External,” what is the situation internationally outside of Israel at the time of Jonah. I’d like to push through this so I’m not going to read it all but will summarize it. You notice about the time of Omri, Assyria begins to regain strength. Ashur-nasir-pal (883-859 B.C.) is one of the Assyrian figures that reestablishes Assyrian power. The Assyrians militarily were ruthless fighters; I have there in your handouts a description of the ruthless types of strategies and tactics that the Assyrians used. But I say that because Assyria began to affect Israel. You notice Israel had a series of encounters with Assyria. In the time of Ahab (853 B.C.), Ahab joined forces to fight the Assyrians in the battle at Qarqar on the Orontes River. That is not mentioned in the Bible. Secondly, by 841 under Shalmaneser III after that standoff on the Orontes River, Assyria returned, and the kings of the north, Jehu in particular, were forced to pay tribute to the Assyrian king. There’s a famous Black Obelisk in which Jehu was pictured kneeling paying homage to the Assyrians in 841 B.C. So Assyria begins to assert real threats to the continued independence of the Northern Kingdom. In 833 B.C. Jehoahaz paid tribute to a succeeding

Assyrian king. So in the 800s Assyria began to put pressure on Israel.

Jonah and Urartu—Weakening of Assyria

How does this affect Jonah? Jonah is a little bit later, down around 782-780 B.C. I mentioned that Assyria was involved in a struggle with Urartu to the North. They were people who came down from mountains from the northern part of Mesopotamia. They pushed within a hundred miles of Nineveh. Some feel Assyria's very existence was threatened by these mountain warriors. This is the time of Assyrian weakness in which we don't have a great deal of information, so there is a fair amount of dispute. But some think this is the time when Jonah was in Nineveh, and if that is the case, Assyria itself is being threatened by these people from the north. That may explain the readiness of the Assyrians to listen to the message of Jonah when he said, "In 40 days, Nineveh was to be destroyed." Maybe that wasn't just a lame threat; maybe it was a real threat to Assyria.

In an article that's in your bibliography by D. J. Wiseman, he suggests that there was a solar eclipse in 763 B. C., a famine in 765, and an earthquake that were all in that general timeframe, and therefore those kinds of signs may also have contributed to Assyria's willingness to listen to the message of Jonah. If you come back to Israel, nothing would have been better for Israel than the defeat of Assyria. Prior to the time of Jonah, they had been threatened not only by Syria, but also by Assyria. Syria had ceased to be a threat and Assyria had become more of a threat.

In that context Jonah is sent to this nation that constitutes a serious threat to Israel. I think that helps us understand Jonah's reluctance to go to that city, as well as the openness of Assyrians to listen to the message of Jonah. So that is a brief summary of the external historical background context.

b. Internal:

Prosperity under Jeroboam II

Now “Internal.” Many of the ideas here on the situation internally are taken from John Stek’s article, “The Message of the Book of Jonah,” in which he points out that both Israel and Assyria were in a period of economic resurgence. The time of Jeroboam II was much like the time of David and Solomon; Israel’s borders were extended and there was economic prosperity. And you wonder what’s going wrong, because Israel is not faithful to the Lord. The prophets are speaking of judgment to come because of adultery and immorality in Israel. So you can’t say the prosperity is God’s reward for a repentant and now faithful people. But rather it seems to be God’s gracious granting of relief to a nation he had recently chastised with great severity because of their sin.

Look at 2 Kings 14:26. You read there, “The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.” Now, what that verse is referring to is Jeroboam’s success in gaining prosperity through Israel by extending their borders, in contrast to what had previously been the case of oppression by the Syrians—not the Assyrians but the Syrians—who had pressed down on Israel. So what I note on your outline there is that the people still remember how God had dealt with Israel in the time of Elijah and Elisha, in the time of Ahab and Jehoahaz, in which there was not only government by foreign nation on Israel, the words of rebuke by the prophets, but also indications of God’s blessing on the neighboring Gentiles.

Elijah and Elisha’s Benefits to Syria

For example, in the time of Elijah there were many widows in Israel, but it was through the widow of Zerahaph that the Lord sent Elijah in the time of famine to sustain her. Now Jesus refers to that. There were many lepers in the time of Elisha, but only, Naaman, the Syrian officer, was healed. That mercy was

shown to him even though, in that time, it was his nation, Syria, that was dominating Israel. In fact, in this general time, from Ahab to Jehoahaz, you find that Syria had been shown particular favor by God through prosperity. Elijah had been commissioned to anoint Hazael in Syria, Elisha prophesied that he would be evil for Israel. Elisha miraculously saved Syrian forces who were attacking Israel. So you wonder, what's going on here?

Deut. 32:21 God Provokes Israel to Jealousy by Blessing Foreign Nations

What Stek points out is the principle at work seems to be that which Moses explained to Israel on the plains of Moab in Deuteronomy 32:21. It reads, "They made me jealous by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols. I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding." Meredith Kline comments on that in his work on Deuteronomy, *Treaty of a Great King*, and says, "The covenant curses threatened Israel with extinction if she played the harlot with the no-gods of Canaan. Applying the *lex talionis* principle," that is, the law of retaliation, "God would incite jealousy in Israel by a means of a no-people." They made me jealous by those who are no god, I will make them envious by those who are no people. "He would reject the chosen people which had rejected him, remove his covenantal protection from them and grant to a people who had not known his covenant favor to triumph over his children." So it seems like that principle of retaliation, or principle of replacement, you might call it, is at work in Israel, just prior to the time of Jonah, in God's dealings with Israel and Syria. He is blessing Syria in a certain way and oppressing Israel. So that's just prior to the time of Jonah. Now, Syria is in decline because of its defeat by Assyria. And the word of the Lord spoken by Jonah concerning Jeroboam was going to be fulfilled. You remember it had been prophesied that Jeroboam's borders would extend all the way up to Euphrates. That is coming to pass at the expense of Syria. Israel was extending as far north as Hamath.

Amos & Hosea Denounce Israel's Sin

Yet, while that is happening all is not well in Israel. Amos was denouncing or was about to denounce the sin of Israel. We'll look at some of those texts when we get into Amos. He was prophesying that Israel is going to go in captivity beyond Damascus, that's Assyria. Israel is to be brought low. The instrument of this judgment would be a nation from the Mesopotamian region. Hosea was preaching the same message in 4:1, 10:6, and 11:5. Hosea mentions Assyria. So, Israel is characterized by a spirit of pride and complacency, persistence in religious apostasy, and moral corruption. She really forfeited her special position that was hers by virtue of being God's chosen people, but in fact what's going on is that Israel viewed her election as an election to privilege, but it was a misconception, and she was blind to the fact that it was an election to service.

Replacement: Return to God or He will Work Elsewhere

So that's the situation. God tells Jonah to go to Assyria. He is to present a heathen nation with the obligations and privileges of the covenant that Israel is rejecting. And it seems that this idea of replacement is referred to by Jesus in Luke 4:25-26 with respect to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman; that principle that had already demonstrated itself by this time with respect to the Syrians. If God's people reject this message when they do, the heathen would be called to the obligations and privileges of the covenant. Now that's Stek's suggestion for what's going on internally and what the theological significance is of this mission of Jonah going to Nineveh. It's replacement; if you don't turn to the Lord, the Lord will work elsewhere. God's people must always be conscious of this truth. "Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall." We do not own God's word. If we are not faithful and obedient, God may take his work elsewhere and place us under its curse and judgment.

It should be interesting to see what plays out in the next 25 to 50 years with respect to Christianity in the West. And what happens to Christianity, say in China, which has been a closed country, but from what I am reading, Christianity is flourishing remarkably there. Is this another example of this principle of replacement? Is God turning from the people who have all the privileges, and working and moving on elsewhere?

To get back to Jonah, the significance of his mission to Nineveh is not limited to just the Ninevites, it also involves Israel and their own relationship to God. Was not God pressing his claims on His own wayward people by means of this prophetic message to the Assyrians after the similar pattern of Elijah and Elisha? So those are my comments on the historical background.

2. The Key Purposes for the Book

a. Jonah's Rebuke to Sin Laden Israel

After that is, "The key purposes for the book." Under "Purposes," I've listed four points. First, I think the ministry of Jonah served to highlight, by means of contrast, the rebellious character of the Israelites. There had been many prophets but they had not repented. But when Nineveh hears the word, it does repent!

Look at page 44 in your citations, Stek comments on this, "The events of Jonah's prophetic mission to Nineveh serve also as rebuke to sin-laden and stubborn Israel. Even the pagan mariners are surprised that Jonah, who serves the 'God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land,' would attempt to flee from such a God, and their words of surprise register at the same time a rebuke (The question *What have you done* ?[1:10]) seems always to imply both surprise and accusation. Moreover, the seamen's concern for Jonah's welfare stands in meaningful contrast to Jonah's callous attitude toward the Ninevites. It is also evident that the repentance of the Ninevites at the one-sign ministry of Jonah serves as a standing rebuke to the sin of Israel who stubbornly refused to listen to the warnings of the prophets, even when these warnings had been accompanied by

mighty signs as in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. Once again, Yahweh seeks to ‘move them to jealousy with those that are not a people.’” So by way of contrast, the message of Jonah also provides a warning for the rebelliousness of Israel.

b. Israel did not Have Exclusive Rights to the Lord’s Salvation

Second, I think the mission of Jonah serves to impress upon Israel that she did not have exclusive rights to the Lord’s salvation. You get that at the end of the book because of the repentance of the Ninevites. Any idea of religious exclusivism based on national pride and a wrong concept of election is rejected here. Israel’s election was at God’s grace and mercy, and it can be extended wherever God wishes to extend it; it was not exclusively for them. And Jonah even became offended when God extended it beyond the bounds of Israel.

c. Jonah was Intended to Play a Representative Role

Thirdly, it’s likely that Jonah was intended to play a representative role of some sort and that the book would be perceived in this way by those who read it. I think if you look at commentaries and interpreters, many will comment on it, but there’s not great evidence for exactly what the representative role is. Here are three suggestions for that. First, representative of mankind in general. The narrative says something about God’s ways with man and human beings and their relations with God. Secondly, representative of those to whom God has committed a prophetic ministry. Jonah is an object lesson for those who would turn away from their calling. The focus there is specifically on Jonah and his call. Thirdly, and probably the most valid hypothesis, is that Jonah is representative of Israel, the people of God. Stek comments, “There is no reason to doubt that in Jonah’s attitude toward the Assyrians all Israel would identify itself with him and would know itself to be rebuked in him. And there is equally no reason to doubt that this is exactly what the writer intended.” Beyond this Jonah may also typify something

of Israel's future history. Jonah, an Israelite, was cast into the sea and then delivered in order that he might fulfill his mission. So, the nation of Israel would pass through the affliction of exile because of her disobedience until a remnant might return to accomplish her mission in the world. To this extent the symbolic school may be right. Jonah may well represent Israel. But at the same time Jonah is a real historical figure.

d. Israel's Unfaithfulness Will Not Thwart God's Purposes

The message for Israel is that no matter how much Israel rebels and fails—God will reach his purposes in and through Israel. As Stek says, "...the present unfaithfulness of Israel will not thwart these historical purposes of Yahweh. Although this had been made evident before at various critical periods in Israel's history, it is here demonstrated in a highly dramatic fashion. Jonah, embodying in one person the office of prophet—one of the primary charismatic gifts of God to Israel—and the perverted narrowness of spirit of the 'elect' people, is constrained by God, contrary to his will, to fulfill a mission of mercy to Nineveh. The sin of the Israelite prophet cannot thwart the gracious purpose of God for the Assyrian city. God is even able to use that sin to further His will. When Jonah finally goes to Nineveh, he goes not merely as a prophet from Israel, but he goes also, according to our Lord (Luke 11:30), as a striking, God-wrought sign to the Ninevites which would have profound impact on them. The imperfection, weakness, and brokenness of his people's response to him does not hinder the sovereign Lord of history in carrying out his saving purposes. 'Salvation is of Yahweh.' Yahweh will do his saving work in Israel in spite of her, not because of her."

e. Dominate Theme: The Sovereignty of God who Accomplishes His Purposes in spite of Human Rebellion

I think that perspective embodies the most dominant theme in the book: the

sovereignty of God who accomplishes his purposes in spite of human rebellion. It is God who has the first word and last. He wrote the book. Notice it begins in 1:1, and it ends “should I not be concerned about that great city?” See Jonah 4:10 and 11, “But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow... But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people ... Should I not be concerned about that great city?’” So it’s God who has the first and last word. In the body of the narrative he is always forcing the issue. So Stek says, “His judgment threatens Nineveh; he commissions the prophet; he sends the storm at sea; he ‘appoints’ the fish; he spares the repentant city; he provides the gourd; he ‘appoints’ the destructive worm; he ‘appoints’ the oppressive east wind; he rebukes the prophet.” Even Jonah’s prayer testifies, “Salvation is from the LORD,” that is in Jonah 2:9. So the narrative is really a narrative of the acts of Yahweh. Stek says, “Any exposition, therefore, which by explicit affirmation, or by implicit suggestion, places Jonah at the center can only be judged to be a misreading of this prophetic writing.” Jonah is an instrument in God’s hand. God’s sovereignty is at the heart of this book.

d. Jonah as an Illustration of the Messiah’s Death and Resurrection

Point d. Often it is said the purpose of the book is to point to one who is greater than Jonah because of the Matthew reference. E. J. Young says in fact, “The fundamental purpose of the book of Jonah is not found in its missionary or universalistic teaching. It is rather to show that Jonah being cast into the depths of Sheol and yet brought up alive is an illustration of the death of the Messiah for sins not his own and of the Messiah's resurrection.” It seems to me that Young overstates his point when he says this is the fundamental purpose of the book.

Compare Young’s comment with that of J. Barton Payne, who says, “The Lord Jesus later utilized the period of Jonah's sojourn in the fish to illustrate his own three days in the grave; but he thereby neither constitutes the prophet as a type of himself nor suggests that this had been God's original intent in decreeing

Jonah's miraculous experience.”

Stek comments, “Some have handled the entire book of Jonah as though its primary purpose was simply to provide a prophetic type of Christ. But if that is all that can be said, then it must be acknowledged that the type would have remained a complete enigma until the appearance of the anti-type, and the Israel to which the book was initially addressed could not but have misunderstood it. Its true meaning would necessarily have remained a closed mystery to them.” I think Stek is right in that. I think that is a miss-emphasis; I would prefer to say something where he says Jesus used this story to illustrate his three days in the grave rather than make the whole purpose of the book hang on this analogy of Jesus and Jonah in the fish.

V. Amos

A. Author and Background

Let's go on to Amos. I want to be selective in what I highlight in the notes. I wanted to save some the time for the Amos 9 passage. Under A, “Author and background.” One, is “His name.” He is Amos, a herdsman of Tekoa, from 1:1. He's the only Amos in the Old Testament. He comes from Judah and was a herdsman.

2. “The place of his prophetic activity.” He, in contrast to Hosea, was from the Southern Kingdom, but his prophetic activity was directed primarily to Israel, that is, the Northern Kingdom. That appears not only in the introductory sentence in 1:1, but also from chapter 7 where Amos appears at Bethel. That doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to say about Judah, and there is one section on that specifically. He is reminiscent of the man of God out of Judah referred to in 1 Kings 13 in the time of Jeroboam I when they were setting up the golden calves at Bethel.

3. “The time of his prophetic activity.” Amos 1:1 said he prophesied in the time of Uzziah in Judah, you read, “The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of

Tekoa—what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.” So he prophesied in the time of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam the son of Jehoash of Israel, two years before the earthquake. He was a contemporary of Hosea, though Hosea prophesied through later kings. If you look at Hosea 1:1, Hosea adds to Uzziah--Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. So it’s generally thought that Hosea was a younger contemporary and successor to Amos, with some overlap.

Amos 1:1 also mentions this earthquake, he prophesied “two years before that earthquake.” There’s a reference to that earthquake in Zechariah 14:5, where it says, “You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah.” And remember Zechariah was after the exile, so that was quite a bit later, there’s still memory of this earthquake from the time of Uzziah to after the exile. The problem is we don’t know the precise date of that earthquake. So it’s not of great help in terms of specifying the date of the earthquake. Freeman suggests about 760 to 753 B.C. for the time of Amos’ ministry, and that’s based on the silence of the death of Jeroboam in 753 B.C. In other words, the assumption is that had Jeroboam died, that would have been such an important event you would expect a mention of it. So it’s prior to his death, approximately 760 to 753 B.C. So there are end points.

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