

Jonah

Jonah was a prophet in Israel in the days of Jeroboam II, about the first half of the 8th century BC. See 2 Kings 14:25. Israel was enjoying a period of renewed growth and prosperity, accompanied by the all too typical greed, injustice, and ungodliness.

All we know of Jonah's prophecies are in the brief mention in 2 Kings and Jonah 3:4. In the short book named for the prophet we see him as a deeply conflicted individual, whose distaste for taking God's message to a powerful foreign adversary of his people led him to not only disobey God but also absurdly attempt to flee from the presence of the LORD, despite knowing God is creator of all things and Master of all places.

In Jonah the pagans who sailed the ship and even more remarkably the wicked people of Ninevah, a culture that cherished power through oppression and violence, come off looking better than the prophet of God who disapproves of God's methods and God's mercy.

We have odd glimpses of Christ in Jonah's shadow, as for example he sleeps through a storm that terrifies the sailors and then brings calm to the sea when his words are heeded.

Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving in chapter 2 is after he's been saved from drowning in the depths, but before he is vomited onto land by the fish. The prayer has numerous messianic elements anticipating the work and deliverance from death of Jesus (notice 2:3-4, 6, 9). Jesus references Jonah as a foreshadow in Matthew 12:28ff, 16:4 and Luke 11:29-32. We tend to focus on Jesus' mention of 3 days and nights, but Jesus also emphasized the effect of the preaching of Jonah, and preaching was central to Jesus' work and that of his apostles. Jesus is "something greater than Jonah."

God's mercy and desire to save is highlighted in the book, anticipating core themes of the gospel for all nations in the New Testament. It is noteworthy that Joppa was the starting point for Jonah to go (unwillingly) to the gentiles at Ninevah, and Joppa was also the starting point for Peter to go (willingly but hesitantly) to the gentiles in Caesarea (Acts 10). It's also one of those tidbits of divine connection that Peter's given name was "Simon son of Jonah". That comes up in Matthew 16:17, just after Jesus mentioned the sign of Jonah in 16:4, when Peter affirms Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God and receives the promise of the keys of the kingdom. Peter is also mentioned as Simon Bar Jonah (son of Jonah) in John 1:42 and 21:15, 16, 17 (see KJV, NKJV, WEB). These are bookends in John where Jesus uses this appellation, the first when Peter is initially called to follow Jesus and the last when Jesus 3 times renews Peter's confession and instructs him to feed Jesus' sheep and follow him. Peter was called to do in earnest what Jonah had deplored, to take the word of God to not just the gentiles but to the overarching power of the day. While Jonah was sent to the center of the Assyrian empire, Peter was sent to a Roman centurion, commander of Roman forces occupying Israel. Gentiles (nations) all, and representative of the great powers of the age. Simon son of Jonah preached the death, burial and resurrection (3 days), and repentance was granted to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18). Despite the distinct contrasts in their stories, both Jonah and Peter were commanded to "arise and go" (Jonah 1:2, Acts 10:20) and both "arose and went" (Jonah 3:3, Acts 10:23). For Jonah, there were 3 days and nights in the belly of the appointed fish, for Peter it was immediately after 3 repetitions of

the vision of the sheet loaded with unclean animals, which must have connected for him to the 3 times on the beach by the charcoal fire when Jesus said, “Simon bar Jonah, do you love me?”

The fundamental message of Jonah about God is in 4:2:b, and a fundamental warning to the followers of God is in 4:4, 4:9. We don't have the privilege of 2nd guessing God or choosing who should receive mercy, and our tendency to get angry about trivial things reflects our all too real limitations in wisdom and understanding.