Jonah: A Background Study

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The book of Jonah is so named because of the primary human character in the story. His name in Hebrew is *Yonah*, meaning "dove." In the Greek Septuagint, the book is called *Ionas*, while it bears the name *Jonas* in the Latin Vulgate. The prophet featured in the book is certainly the same one mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, as indicated by the repetition of the name of his father Ammitai. The sudden introduction of Jonah in the book that bears his name seems to indicate that the original audience would have been familiar with him. According to 2 Kings 14:25, some of Jonah's prophecies were fulfilled during Jeroboam II's reign. Jeroboam II was king in the Northern Kingdom of Israel from c.786-746 BC, some 150 years following the death of Solomon.[1] Jonah may have been a contemporary of Jeroboam, or may have preceded him by some time. As Estelle writes, "We do not know how long our protagonist lived, yet his life, or at least his influence, seems to have overlapped with Jeroboam II's reign."[2] Given this broad window of time for Jonah's life, he was likely an immediate successor of Elijah and Elisha. The book of Jonah should be read with the understanding that these are the times in which the events occurred.

A number of rabbinic traditions surround the life of Jonah, but none of them have any historical evidence to validate them. One of these suggests that Jonah may have been a disciple of Elisha.[3] Others have speculated that Jonah was the son of the widow at Zarephath who was restored to life by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24). There are also unreliable traditions stating that he was buried in Meshad of Galilee or in Nineveh.[4] Many other creative theories have been put forth in the rabbinic literature, however Scripture is silent on all of these details therefore it is best to ignore them for the purpose of historical reconstruction.

In the final account the only accurate biographical information we have about the prophet comes from the book that bears his name and the brief mention of him in 2 Kings 14:25. In summary, this amounts to his name, that of his father (Amittai), that he was a prophet, and that he was from Gath Hepher. From Joshua 19:10-13, we know that Gath Hepher was located in the territory of Zebulun in the Northern Kingdom. Aside from these basic facts, the rest of Jonah's story must unfold from the details we find within the book of Jonah itself. As Stuart has noted, "The book … is self-contained. It is not necessary to know much of anything about Jonah's life otherwise to appreciate the story."[5]

Author

The book of Jonah has traditionally been attributed to the prophet whose name it bears. Within the book itself, there is no explicit reference to an author. Therefore, when the title was assigned to it, it may have intended that the book was written by Jonah or that the book is about Jonah. If it is assumed that Jonah intends to be a historical account, then certainly much of its content must

[1] Scholars vary on the specific dates. Some have his dates a bit earlier (793-753) and others a bit later (783-743).
[2] Bryan D. Estelle, *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy* (The Gospel According to the Old Testament; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005), p. 19.
[3] Richard D. Phillips, *Jonah & Micah* (Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010), p. 4. Phillips offers this as a legitimate possibility but offers no argumentation or supporting evidence. This seems to have been an oral tradition that found its way into Rabbinic literature at some point in Israel's history.
[4] Frank Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (New American Commentary 19B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 204, footnote 3.
[5] Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Word Biblical Commentary 31; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 431

come from Jonah, either directly (as the author) or indirectly (as a source consulted by the anonymous author). Those who hold that it is not a historical account do not put forth any effort to connect it to Jonah as an author or source. Yet there is much agreement that the book is not a piecemeal collection of multiple sources (with the possible exception of Chapter 2, discussed below), but the work of a single writer. As Stuart has pointed out, "The book … is short and sufficiently united in theme and style … so as to be rather clearly the work of a single author."[6]

Might this single writer have been the prophet Jonah himself? Even among those who argue for the historicity of the book, there is not a consensus on this question. Stuart, for instance, suggests that it is unlikely that Jonah wrote the book given that it is "so consistently critical" of him. He points to the writer's portrayal of Jonah's "hypocrisy and inconsistency," culminating in "his almost childish stubbornness." While recognizing that much later in his life, "a contrite Jonah … might have chosen magnanimously to characterize himself this vividly and embarrassingly," Stuart asks, "Where else in the Scriptures (or any ancient literature, for that matter) does an author of a narrative so thoroughly deprecate himself or herself?"[7] One counter example comes to mind immediately from the New Testament. It is nearly unanimously agreed that Peter was the source behind the Gospel According to Mark, and this Gospel paints a truer picture of Peter ("warts and all" we might say) than perhaps any other. Likewise, Moses is widely defended as the substantial author of the Pentateuch, yet therein we see glimpses of Moses in which his faith and conduct are deficient. So the phenomenon of self-deprecation is surprising in the book of Jonah, but it is not entirely without parallel in Scripture. It certainly does not eliminate Jonah as a candidate for the author or primary source behind the book that bears his name.

Much of the debate concerning "source material" behind Jonah seems to discount the phenomenon of divine revelation. It is entirely possible for the Holy Spirit to reveal information that could have been otherwise unknown to a human author. Yet, as Stuart observes, "virtually all the data from which the story is constructed could have been supplied by two sources: Jonah and the sailors."[8] While the sailors could have informed a narrator of incidents on board the ship that occurred while Jonah was asleep and after he was thrown overboard, Jonah himself could have supplied every other detail.

When all is said and done, we affirm the truthfulness of all Scripture (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16). This leads us to affirm the historicity of the events described in this book (a discussion that will be developed below). Since the book does not specify that Jonah wrote it, it is no issue of inerrancy or biblical integrity to question whether or not he wrote it. It does seem to entail that the book, if not written by Jonah, was written *at least* by someone who knew him or was sufficiently close to the events to know such vivid details, many of which would have only been known to Jonah. Otherwise, it could have also been written by someone who received this information as a direct result of divine inspiration. The issue of Jonah's authorship seems to bear most directly on the psalm of Chapter 2. If this psalm does not come directly from Jonah, then it seems that much literary license has been taken by a writer to put words into his mouth. Such license in this case may exceed the bounds of biblical integrity. Therefore, we would conclude that at a minimum, the psalm of Chapter 2 and other direct quotations from Jonah were likely

[6] Stuart, p. 431.
[7] Stuart, p. 432.
[8] Stuart, p. 442.

composed by the prophet himself. Having concluded this, it is not a far reach to suggest that he could have written the entire document. On the other hand, it is no sin to leave the identity of the substantial author (or editor, or narrator) a mystery.

Date

As we have indicated already, the issues of authorship and date are closely intertwined. If Jonah is the author, then, on the basis of his mention in 2 Kings 14:25, the date of writing could be no later than the first half of the eighth century B. C. (799-750). Similarly, if it can be demonstrated that the writing took place after this timeframe, then Jonah is eliminated from consideration as a possible author. As Walton points out, even a late date of composition would not lead to the conclusion that the information is historically inaccurate.[9] However, seldom does the proposal of a late date accompany a historical interpretation. Frank Page may be excessively generalizing when he says, "A parabolic or allegorical interpretation invariably accompanies the view that the book was a late anonymous composition," yet evidence to the contrary is not easily found.[10]

The book could not have come into existence later than 200 B. C. Around that time, the apocryphal book *Sirach* (also called *Ecclesiasticus*) was written, and it makes reference to "the twelve prophets." This statement would include Jonah among that number.[11] This presents a broad set of boundaries for placing the book of Jonah chronologically between the eighth and third centuries B. C. Many scholars attempt to close the window significantly to a range between the sixth and fourth centuries B. C., thus placing the book during or immediately following the Babylonian exile. There are four lines of reasoning offered to validate this time period: linguistic data; divergent views on Jewish nationalism and exlusivism; alleged historical inaccuracies; verbal and thematic parallels with other, later biblical writings.

Concerning linguistic data, it is suggested that several words and phrases found in Jonah are of late origin, being found only during and following the period of exile. Some of these include "Aramaisms," words that were absorbed into the Hebrew vernacular from Aramaic. If this is so, then a late date (post-586 B.C.) must be demanded, for pre-exilic Jews would not likely make use of Aramaic expressions. Of the seven so-called Aramaisms in Jonah, none decisively fit the criteria "necessary to constitute a 'genuine' Aramaism according to O. Loretz."[12] It remains a possibility that the expressions in question do not come from Aramaic but from the influence of Canaanite and Phoenician languages which influenced both Hebrew and Aramaic. This Canaanite-Phoenician influence would have been particularly strong in the northern territories of Israel from whence Jonah hailed. G. M. Landes examined the alleged Aramaisms of Jonah in detail and discovered that many of them are actually found in preexilic texts.[13] Other research has demonstrated that Aramaic was in use during the reign of Sennacherib (705-682 B.C.) as a language of correspondence.[14] Texts discovered at Ras Shamra dating to 1400 B.C. or earlier

[9] Cited in Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 486, n. 33.3.
[10] Page, p. 206.
[11] Page, p. 206.
[12] Stuart, p. 433.
[13] Page, p. 207.
[14] C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), p. 52.

also contain some Aramaic influence.[15] Landes notes that there is other linguistic data within Jonah to suggest an early date, which the evidence of these so-called Aramaisms is not persuasive enough to overrule. Landes' conclusion, therefore, is that the linguistic data is not sufficient to date Jonah any later than the sixth century B. C. (500s).[16] Further, T. D. Alexander concluded that, given a northern Israelite origin, "It is, therefore, not inconceivable that the book of Jonah could have been written prior to the sixth century, possibly even in the eighth century B. C."[17] Therefore, while linguistic data may not be able to conclusively establish the book within the timeframe of Jonah's lifespan, neither does it demand a significantly later time. As Bryan Estelle says, "dating books on linguistic criteria alone is a risky endeavor and the results of such studies are often debated for a number of other reasons."[18]

A second argument for a late date involves what is perceived to be a shift in tone on the matter of Jewish exclusiveness and nationalism. It is argued that even as late as Ezra and Nehemiah (following the exile), there was a narrow view of Israel alone being the privileged recipients of God's favor, while other nations were noticeably outside of both His covenant and His concern. One frequently cited text is Nehemiah 13 in which the Ammonites and Moabites are forbidden from entering the assembly and mixed marriages are prohibited and annulled. It is questionable whether or not this is an "apples to apples" comparison. The situation with the Ammonites and Moabites in Nehemiah is restricted and qualified by an explicit cause and set of circumstances. A ban on two nations does not equal a ban on all Gentiles. Further, the issue with the mixed marriages seems to center upon the Jews being led astray into idolatry (like Solomon was) by their unequal yokes with pagan peoples. The issue was idolatry, not ethnicity. To the contrary, throughout the Old Testament we find emphasis on God reaching out to bless all peoples (nations) and to bring them into His covenant. This was stipulated in God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). The Great Commission to reach all nations with the good news of the grace of the one true God does not have its beginnings in the Gospel According to Matthew. We see it unfolding from the very first book of Scripture. Therefore, Young can write, "As to the universalistic ideas of the book, they are in perfect keeping with the universalistic emphasis which appears throughout the Old Testament. … There is no objective warrant for regarding such teaching as characteristic of post-exilic times alone."[19] Therefore, this argument for a late date of Jonah seems misguided. Rather than suggesting that the book must be late because early books did not look on the nations in this way, perhaps we should say that Jonah may well be one of several early books that do, in fact, look upon the nations in this way. Because of the many flaws with this line of reasoning, Page writes, "This argument … is generally rejected today."[20]

Though the arguments involving linguistic data and Jewish exclusivism may be inconclusive and easily set aside, the allegation of historical inaccuracy is vital. If there are historical inaccuracies within the book of Jonah, then we have bigger issues at stake than just who wrote it and when.

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[15] Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 279.
[16] Cited in Page, p. 207.
[17] Cited in Page, p. 207.
[18] Estelle, pp. 11-12.
[19] Young, p. 279. It should be clarified that Young's use of the word "universalistic" is in no way related to the doctrine of "universalism" that teaches that all people will be saved ultimately regardless of their response to the gospel. In the context of Young's statement, "universalistic" clearly means that the purposes of God have the whole world and all the nations in view.
[20] Page, p. 207.

Verifiable historical flaws would be a smoking gun in the case against biblical inerrancy and authority. If Jonah is a false witness on matters of history, then we are left with a Bible that is at best partly-true, leaving us with the daunting task of deciding which parts are and are not, not to mention the task of determining who is qualified to make those decisions. Left with a partially true Bible, we may as well walk away from the whole of it, for the parts which lay out our salvation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ would be just as likely to be false as the parts about Jonah and the fish. The issues are that significant!

Critics say that Jonah must be a late writing (which actually becomes a very small concern in light of the bigger issues at stake) because it contains errors of history and geography. Several of the alleged historical inaccuracies involve the city of Nineveh. It is suggested by critics that Nineveh appears in the narrative as the capital of Assyria, which it was not officially until the reign of Sennacherib (705-682 B.C.). It should be noted that even if this is assumed to be the case, the book could still originate far closer to the lifetime of Jonah than the exilic or post-exilic periods. It is, however, far from certain that such an assumption is warranted. Upon looking carefully at the text one discovers that Nineveh is never referred to as "the capital." Apparently the expression that gives rise to this notion is the phrase "king of Nineveh" in 3:6. It is noted by some that this exact phrase never occurs in the Assyrian annals, indicating that it is a mistaken title. The unusual phrase may well be a case of synecdoche, in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole thing. This occurs twice (1 Kings 21:1; 2 Kings 1:3) in reference to Ahab as "king of Samaria," where the implication is clearly "king of Israel." Whether or not Nineveh was an official capital of Assyria at the time of Jonah's ministry, it is known that several of Assyria's kings maintained a royal residence there both before and after the lifetime of Jonah. These include Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076), Ashurnasirpal II (883-859), and Sargon II (722-705).[21] The phrase "king of Nineveh" may also refer to a period of time in which there were numerous internal revolts in Assyria (763-746 B.C.). Hallo writes of this period that, "even the central provinces maintained only a tenuous loyalty to Assyria, for the various governors ruled in virtual independence."[22] Thus, the "king of Nineveh" may have been a provincial ruler rather than the king over the entire Assyrian empire, or Nineveh may have been the extent of the true king's unquestioned authority. In light of these various possible explanations, it seems entirely plausible that the narrator could speak factually of a "king of Nineveh" though it may not have been the actual capital. Though the title "king of Nineveh" is unattested in Assyria's historical records, it is not necessarily inaccurate, nor is it inappropriate for a Hebrew prophet (or his chronicler) to speak of the Assyrian king or a more local regent as such.

Another concern regarding Nineveh relates to its size. In 3:3, we read that "Jonah arose and went to Nineveh … a three days' walk," or "a journey of three days." It is suggested that this expression refers to the size of Nineveh, that is, that it would take a person three days to traverse or circumnavigate it on foot. If this is the intended meaning, then Nineveh would have been some forty to sixty miles in either diameter or circumference. As Page admits, "All agree, however, that cities in ancient Mesopotamia were not this large" during the time in which Jonah lived.[23] The walls of the ancient city of Nineveh encompassed two mounds, separated by the Khoser River which flows into the Tigris. Archaeological digs have revealed that Nineveh's

[21] Page, p. 209.
[22] cited in Page, p. 205.
[23] Page, p. 208.

somewhat rectangular ancient walls measured only about eight miles in length and enclosed approximately 1,800 acres.[24] It is likely that these walls represent an enlargement made later by Sennacherib, so in Jonah's day the city would have been even smaller. It should also be noted that great cities of that region were also not forty to sixty miles in diameter or circumference even by the third century B.C. So, on either view of dating the book, if "three days' walk" is a reference to the time it would take one to walk through or around the city, it would be either an intentional or accidental exaggeration. If accidental, this would mean that errors had crept into the Bible. Worse, if intentional, it would mean that the biblical writer is being deceptive, unless the exaggeration is chalked up to hyperbole. Edward J. Young seems to hint at this without affirming that it is hyperbole when he says of the phrase, "possibly it is nothing more than a rough expression to indicate that the city was a large one."[25] If this is hyperbole, then the figurative use of language should be evident to all who encounter it as an indication of the city's "inestimable" size. However, this figurative sense is not so plain on the surface and therefore hyperbole seems unlikely. Therefore, either the description is an error or it has been commonly misunderstood.

Perhaps the notion of "a three days' walk" being a reference to the enormous size of the city is not the best understanding of the phrase. Some have suggested that "three days walk" refers not to the size of the city, but rather to the duration of the mission. On this view, "three days' walk" may indicate Jonah's itinerary: a day of arrival (3:4), followed by a day of preaching, then a day of departure. The phrase could also be understood to mean that Jonah's mission in Nineveh would require three days in order to get the message to the entire population. Presumably, he would have needed to speak to a sizeable portion of the city's inhabitants and perhaps make an official visit to the royal residence in order to have the effect that is described in the book. This task would have likely required several days to complete. So, when 3:4 says that Jonah "began to go through the city one day's walk," Young writes, "This does not mean that he walked as far as it is possible to walk in one day. It merely means that he entered the city and went about, doubtless here and there, preaching his message."[26] And he did this, on foot, for a whole day. And he did it again for two more days. As Bullock writes, "It is conceivable that he could have delivered the bad news to all of Nineveh's citizens in a period of three days, stopping at the main gates (Nineveh had over a dozen), the temple courts, and perhaps the king's palace."[27] Walton points out that when a distance requiring three days to travel is intended in other passages, a different Hebrew phrase is used than that which is found here.[28]

Furthermore, the "three days' walk" could refer to what we might call "Greater Nineveh" as opposed to "Nineveh Proper", comprising the area including Nineveh, Asshur, Calah, and Dur-Sharrukin. Bullock notes that "three of those were occupied within the period between 850 and

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[24] LaMoine F. DeVries, *Cities of the Biblical World* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997, p.31).
[25] Young, p. 279.
[26] Young, p. 279.
[27] Bullock, p. 47.
[28] Cited in Bullock, p. 47, n. 19. The Hebrew word rendered "walk" in Jonah 3:3 and 3:4 is *mahalak*, also found in Nehemiah 2:6 (where it may well allude to the duration of the task rather than the distance of the journey), Ezekiel 42:4 (where it describes a "walk", as in a "walkway" or "corridor"), and Zechariah 3:7 (where the plural *mahlkim* is used in a sense that is difficult to pinpoint with precision). In Genesis 30:36, Exodus 3:18, 5:3, and Numbers 10:33, where the sense is plainly a distance requiring three days to travel, the Hebrew word *derek* (a word commonly denoting "road" or "way") is used.

614 BC, and all were within one to three days' walk of each other."[29] This suggestion could find validation in the repeated phrase, "the great city of Nineveh" (1:2; 3:2; 4:11, cf Gen 10:11-12).

A related concern has to with the population of Nineveh, which 4:11 specifies to include "more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand." There are varying interpretations on the exact meaning of this phrase (particularly the qualifying description of not knowing right from left), but it certainly indicates that Nineveh was home to more than 120,000 people. While we do not have a census to validate this information, it is called into question by some who suggest that the city was too small to accommodate that population in that day. A text discovered at Calah stating that King Ashur-nasir-apli entertained 69,574 guests, undoubtedly from several surrounding cities, at a major dedication event in 865 BC.[30] This being so, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Greater Nineveh area, if not Nineveh Proper, could have had well over 120,000 residents.

Some have suggested that the book must have originated at a date later than 612 B.C., for it was at that time that Nineveh fell from its position of prominence in the region. This is based in large part on the description of Nineveh in 3:3: "Now Nineveh *was* an exceedingly great city." The use of the past tense form of "to be" here is said to indicate that, while Nineveh had been an important city in the past, it was no longer at the time of this writing. Young suggests that the past tense "does not describe Nineveh as a city that had existed long ago in the past but simply indicates the condition or size as Jonah found it."[31] Pointing to Luke 24:13, where it is said of Emmaus that it "*was* about seven miles from Jerusalem," Young says that the words "simply describe the location and do not imply that Emmaus was a city which had existed in the distant past but was no longer in existence."[32] We might add that neither does the past tense there suggest that Emmaus was *no longer* seven miles from Jerusalem. Reading the phrase as it occurs in Luke, we understand that Emmaus *was* that distance from Jerusalem, and *still is*, at least at the time of writing. I recently visited a rural village in Nepal and I have told many people that the hotel where I stayed there *was* a terribly uncomfortable place. It is still there (though from the shape it was in I do not care to speculate how much longer it will be there), and undoubtedly it is still uncomfortable. The plain sense of my meaning comes through without explanation using the normal sense of language. And the same is true of the words "Nineveh *was* a great city."

Beyond all of this, we would be wise to not place too much emphasis on a "time sense" of Hebrew verbs, because it has been well argued that Hebrew tenses do not carry the same idea of past, present, and future that is found in the verbs of many other languages. The form of the verb *hayah* ("to be") translated here as a past tense ("was") is Qal perfect (or *qatal*). This form is by far the most common of all verb forms in the Hebrew Bible. Sailhamer notes, "In narration, the *qatal* [perfect] denotes an action lying behind the main sequence of verbal events. It is a part of the background of the narration. … The *qatal* expresses events previous to the moment of narration … and concurrent with … the moment of narration."[33] According to Ross, the perfect

[29] Bullock, p. 47.
[30] Bullock, p. 47.
[31] Young, p. 279.
[32] Young, p. 279.
[33] John Sailhamer, *A Grammar of Biblical (Tanak) Hebrew* (unpublished course material from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary), p. 76.

tense may be translated several ways depending "on the kind of sentence and the meaning of the word itself. The perfect tense is in the indicative mood (which presents the action as an objective fact) and essentially reflects completed action (i.e., 'perfect' action in a linguistic sense)."[34] This is why the Qal perfect is so commonly rendered in English in the "past" tense. However, Ross notes that a Qal perfect verb may be translated as a simple past, a perfect (stressing continuing effects of a past action), a present, or a present in the sense of setting forth a general truth. Use of the present to render a Qal perfect is especially appropriate with verbs "that are stative (i.e., describe a state) or that signify thinking, knowing, or perceiving (rather than an action directly performed on an object)."[35] Therefore, though the past tense makes good literary sense in the reading of 3:3, we must not think that it exclusively means that Nineveh had been great at one time but was not great at the time of writing. It may well mean that it was a great city, and still was when Jonah visited and when the book of Jonah was written. Stuart writes, "the Hebrew narrative style calls for the past tense regardless of proximity to events. Thus the importance of the verb in 3:3 is easily overrated."[36] And here again, its greatness is not necessarily a reference to its size or population, for in the Hebrew text, the phrase reads literally that it was "a great city to God." As Stuart says, "The point is that Nineveh was a city God was concerned for, one that was by no means insignificant to him. Nineveh's physical size may have figured prominently into its importance, as may have its population, but there is no ground for assuming that size per se is the issue" in this verse.[37]

In addition to concerns regarding literary data, Jewish nationalism, and historical accuracy, some have stated that the book of Jonah must have been written much later than the lifetime of Jonah because it shows marks of dependency upon other, later biblical literature. Frequently cited are parallels in both wording and subject matter found in Kings, Jeremiah, and Joel. For example, the parallels which are allegedly found in Jonah and Joel consist of nearly identical words in Jonah 3:9 and 4:2 and Joel 2:13-14. Before even examining the wording of the text, one obvious factor here is that those who would argue that this similarity equals dependency of Jonah upon Joel and therefore a late date are making some bold assumptions. First, there is the assumption that this similarity proves dependence, and further that it proves that Jonah is the book which is doing the borrowing. Second, and related, there is an assumption or reasoned conclusion (which may be based on sound argumentation) that Joel definitely originates from a late, post-exilic date. The various arguments for the dating of Joel are beyond the scope of this study. Scholars of all theological persuasions differ with one another in their conclusions, and many are uncommitted to a position because of the difficulty of nailing down a specific date for Joel. A survey of popular, conservative, evangelical study Bibles demonstrates the slipperiness of this issue. The NIV Study Bible says, "a good case can be made for its being written in the ninth century BC,"[38] while the ESV Study Bible provides a five-point argument for dating Joel after the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.[39] This alone should warn us against being dogmatic about date claims for Joel. After all, if Joel dates to the ninth century B. C. as some suggest, then it could both precede and inform Jonah without requiring Jonah to be postexilic. Additionally, since there

[34] Allen P. Ross, *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 89.
[35] Ross, p. 90.
[36] Stuart, p. 432.
[37] Stuart, p. 487.
[38] *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 1330.
[39] *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), p. 1643.

is some measure of elasticity in the dating of both of these books, and the author of Jonah remains anonymous, Stuart has gone so far as to suggest, "It could even be the case, after all, that the prophet Joel was the anonymous narrator of the book of Jonah."[40] Beyond this, when we actually examine the text we find that the similar wording includes a description of God as "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil." This description of God is one of the most frequently recurring statements about His nature in all Scripture. God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6 with these very words. Therefore, is it not entirely possible, if not plausible, that both Jonah and Joel are repeating frequently stated words about the nature of God without one of them borrowing from the other?

As Page well writes, "Arguments based on literary dependency, however, are seldom convincing because of the difficulty of proving the direction of dependency."[41] What this means is that when two writings bear similarities, it is very difficult to determine which one borrowed from the other. This is particularly true when it comes to Holy Scripture, for we believe that the Bible is the product of divine inspiration. The ultimate author of Scripture is God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it must not be a shocking thing for us to find similar statements and content from book to book. It should be expected. Given the divine inspiration of Scripture, we should be shocked if there is significant variance between the ideas expressed in biblical literature. It is this very line of reasoning that Stuart applies to the allegations of the dependency of Jonah upon Jeremiah (the evidence of which he calls "both minimal and ambiguous"), saying, "sharing of concepts is not the same as a dependency of concepts. … The similarity of Jonah and Jeremiah is far more cogently attributable to the univocal nature of divine revelation throughout the Scripture than to a borrowing from Jeremiah on the part of the book of Jonah."[42]

As Page has written, "Perhaps the most convincing argument for the probability of a preexilic date is to recognize that Jonah's ministry was clearly in the vein of preclassical prophecy. His writings and prophecy preserved the tensions present in the prophetic community of the eighth century B.C."[43] The events of the book are narrated as if they occurred in that time, and contain details that would only be known to the prophet himself or someone very close to him. Since, as Richard Phillips has written, "there is no compelling reason to doubt that this book of Scripture dates from the time frame it describes, the eighth century B.C.,"[44] it may be best to leave the date of origin at that early period unless further evidence and information comes to light to persuade us otherwise. However, academic integrity and Christian humility should prevent us from making the dating of this book a litmus test for orthodoxy, unless one's conclusion required one to depart from a commitment to biblical inerrancy and authority or to compromise core Christian doctrines.

Historical Circumstances

As mentioned above, the ministry of the prophet Jonah can be dated roughly to the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. The reference to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 indicates that his prophecy came

[40] Stuart, p. 433.
[41] Page, p. 209.
[42] Stuart, p. 433.
[43] Page, p. 209.
[44] Phillips, p. 4.

to pass while Jeroboam II was king in Israel, so he may have lived and ministered at some time prior to the reign of Jeroboam II, which is dated approximately 790 – 740 B.C. It was immediately following the death of Solomon some 150 years earlier that the Kingdom of Israel experienced upheaval. The northern tribes began to chase after false gods (1 Kings 12-14) and the Kingdom was divided in two. The northern ten tribes came to be called Israel, and the two tribes of the south were called Judah. Because of God's fatherly love for His people, He disciplined them whenever they became unfaithful, often using foreign powers as His agents of judgment.

Assyrian threats toward Israel were in full swing by the time of the reigns of Shalmaneser in Assyria and Jehu in Israel (842-815 B.C.) when the Assyrian king demanded payment of a tribute from Israel. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser bears an inscription that reads in Akadian, "I [Shalmaneser] received the tribute of the inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon, and of Jehu, son of Omri."[45]

Jonah had prophesied good news for Israel which came to fruition under Jeroboam II. In 2 Kings 14, we read:

> He [Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, *according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah* the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher. **26** For the LORD saw the affliction of Israel, which was very bitter; for there was neither bond nor free, nor was there any helper for Israel. **27** The LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash. (2 Kings 14:25-27).

That this reprieve of Assyrian dominance and restoration of Israel's territory was all a gift of divine mercy and grace is evident in the preceding context of those verses. Second Kings 14:24 makes clear that Jeroboam II "did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin."

When Israel was advancing to reclaim the territories of their ancient boundaries, Assyria seemed to be preoccupied with other, more pressing concerns. New skirmishes with the Arameans and Urartians, a severe famine (from 765-759 B.C., or perhaps separate famines within that timeframe), and various internal revolts (763-760 B.C., and 746 B.C.) contributed to a state of affairs in which, "for 36 years (781-745 B.C.) Assyria was practically paralyzed."[46] At roughly the half-way point of this period, the *Eponym Chronicle* records that total solar eclipse occurred (763 B.C.). A major earthquake also occurred in the region during this time. These events would have undoubtedly have been considered ominous, and may have increased the spiritual receptivity of the people of Nineveh.

Perhaps it was during the period of Assyria's diminished power that Jonah was called to go and prophesy there. For its entire history, Israel had not only been called to be the privileged recipients of divine favor, but also the specially commissioned messengers of God's truth and

[45] Estelle, p. 14.
[46] Page, pp. 204-205.

grace to the nations. Though God had, at least temporarily, spared Israel from destruction at the hands of the Assyrians, there was still a proclamation of repentance and redemption to be announced to the pagan peoples of Nineveh and its surrounding regions. Old Testament scholar Samuel Schultz writes, "From the human standpoint, Assyria was the last place any Israeli would choose for a missionary venture."[47] Just as Elisha, Jonah's predecessor, knew that anointing Hazael as king in Aram would mean destruction for Israel (2 Kings 8:7-13), so Jonah must have known that announcing judgment to Nineveh may provoke them to repentance, thus sparing them from disaster and preserving them to bring destruction upon Israel.

Though the threat of Assyrian domination over Israel was temporarily diminished, it did not disappear. Assyria would remain a potential force to be used as agents of divine judgment if God's will should demand it in His appointed time. Jonah's prophetic successors, Hosea and Amos, foretold of this very judgment upon Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. Beginning with Tiglath-Pileser III (744 B.C.), who reasserted Assyrian power and once again subjugated Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15-16), and continuing through the reigns of Shalmaneser V (726 B.C.) and Sargon II (721 B.C.) Assyria would reassert itself and ultimately conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.[48] But this took place under the sovereign hand of God, who had raised Assyria up to bring judgment on the idolatry and unfaithfulness of Israel. Israel had spurned repeated prophetic warnings. Assyria had heeded the only prophetic warning it ever received, and though they did not necessarily turn to orthodox monotheistic faith on a national scale, that temporary revival spared them from certain judgment and preserved them for the use of God to bring judgment upon Israel.

Style and Genre

The issue of Jonah's literary style and genre is wrapped up in the question of its author and dating. If the book was written as a narrative of historical events, then a stronger case can be made for Jonah or one of his close contemporaries as the author, and the date being close to the eighth century B.C. However, if the genre is parable, allegory, or some other non-historical form, then the date and authorship of the book become much more elastic.

The book of Jonah is short, with only four chapters and forty-eight verses. Yet, nearly every scholar who examines the book discusses the sophisticated style and superb skill of the writer. Estelle writes, "The prophecy of Jonah is an extremely subtle and complex piece of work," and remarks that it's writer is a "very thoughtful and skilled author."[49] Bullock says, "His Hebrew is smooth and simple, and his literary ability to tell a story is unsurpassed by any other author in the Old Testament."[50] Page comments on what he finds to be a "high degree of literary excellence" by citing Allen, who calls Jonah "model of literary artistry, marked by symmetry and balance." Further, Page quotes Brichto as saying that it is "a masterpiece of rhetoric."[51] Stuart says, "Jonah is *sensational* literature. That is, the book is clearly composed with a high concentration of

[47] Samuel Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 380.
[48] Estelle, p. 14.
[49] Estelle, p. 2.
[50] Bullock, p. 52.
[51] Page, p. 219.

elements designed to arouse the imagination and emotion of the audience (the storm at sea, the fish story, the plant story, etc.)."[52]

Many scholars assume that the literary sophistication of the book stands as evidence against a simple historical interpretation of it. According to Page, this assumption involves "a false dichotomy between history and literature or history and prophecy, as if a work cannot relate historical events in a rhetorically sophisticated fashion for didactic purposes." Yet, "the Bible is full of literature that does this very thing."[53] Stuart notes that, in spite of the stylistic richness of Jonah, a "relatively simple vocabulary prevails throughout the book, something to be expected if the inspired narrator did not wish the didactic impact of the story to be missed at any point by reason of the intrusion of an overly complex style."[54] In other words, the simple, historical interpretation yields itself easily to the reader through a straightforward vocabulary. Yet many scholars remain convinced, for various reasons, that the historical position must be jettisoned in our day. Once the historical genre is assumed to be without merit, there seem to be few limits placed on the possible kind of literature before us in Jonah.

To assign Jonah to the category of a parable or allegory is to immediately alleviate many questions and concerns about the book. Brevard Childs has said, "By determining that the book of Jonah functions in its canonical context as a parable-like story, the older impasse regarding the historicity of the story is by-passed as a theological issue." Childs does not dismiss the presence of some "historical features" in the story, but he concludes that it is "theologically irrelevant" whether the events occurred.[55] From his comments, one can easily see the pragmatic expediency of relegating Jonah to the status of parable or allegory.

An allegory is, as Stuart defines it, "a kind of extended analogy, sometimes including extended metaphors, in which the meaning of the story is not to be found in the concepts and actions presented, but in concepts and actions outside the story, to which the story points analogically."[56] There are several examples of allegory within the Old Testament, including Ecclesiastes 12:3-5, Jeremiah 25:15-29, Ezekiel 17:3-10, 19:2-9, 24:3-5, and Zechariah 11:4-17. It is evident that Jonah is considerably lengthier than these other biblical allegories. Allegories do not *have to* be short, but in the Bible they are typically much shorter than Jonah.

In order to qualify as an allegory, the various elements of the story within Jonah must represent certain aspects in the life of Israel. Those who hold to an allegorical interpretation often point to Jonah's name, which means "dove," as one of the story's symbolic elements. Based on references to Israel as a dove in Psalm 74:19, Hosea 7:11 and 11:11, Jonah is thought by many to be a symbol of Israel. The fish is sometimes likened to Babylon, who swallowed up Judah in the captivity of 586 B.C. This exile is said, on this view, to have taken place in part because of the failure the Hebrews to take the good news of God to the nations. This failure is represented in the story by Jonah's decision to flee to Tarshish rather than accept God's call to Nineveh. The regurgitation of the prophet onto dry land is seen to be indicative of the restoration of the

[52] Stuart, p. 435.
[53] Page, p. 210.
[54] Stuart, p. 437.
[55] cited in Page, p. 210.
[56] Stuart, p. 436.

Israelites from Babylon. At first glance, this proposal seems to "work"; it successfully incorporates authentic biblical teaching from the latter Old Testament era without denying the historicity of any of them (albeit, while denying the historicity of Jonah). However, the theory is not without its difficulties.

Because figurative literature requires a "suspension of the rules" of normal interpretation, the presence of an allegory must be clearly recognizable, to the extent that any ordinary reader would detect that literal, historical meaning is not intended. A writer of allegory has failed to communicate well if a sizeable portion of his readership leaves the story under the impression that historical events have been factually described therein. But this is precisely what has happened over the centuries with the book of Jonah. Time and time again, the readers of this book have come away from it believing that it intends to relate a historical, factual account. If this was not the writer's intention, then he (or she) is a tremendous failure at the task of writing allegory, which is, interestingly, precisely the opposite point that defenders of non-literal interpretations want to make. They insist that the literary greatness of the book demands a non-literal interpretation, but, to quote Stuart, "style is largely irrelevant to factuality."[57] As Bullock states, "no Old Testament allegory is written so straightforwardly as historical narrative as is Jonah." He cites Perowne who comments that Jonah's setting "is too exact, too detailed, too closely in accordance with facts, to be in keeping with the allegory itself."[58]

Further, in an allegory, nearly every element of the story has a symbolic reference to something other than itself. Defenders of the allegorical position go to great lengths to demonstrate how Jonah refers to Israel and the fish refers to Babylon (though not all are agreed), etc., but the system breaks down in two crucial areas. The part of the pagan nation is played in this allegory by a pagan nation. Nineveh cannot stand, allegorically, for the pagan world because Nineveh is part of that pagan world. It might be argued that Nineveh is later depicted in the story by the plant, but this only further complicates the interpretation. On this reading, the plant symbolizes Nineveh, which in turn symbolizes itself and the larger collection of nations of which it is a part. That is stretching the bounds of allegorical interpretation. Similarly, in the story, the element that is said to symbolize God is none other than God Himself. As Page says, "The point of a biblical allegory or parable is to clarify a spiritual or heavenly truth on the basis of analogy with common earthly experience. Having God as a main character in such a story would be counterproductive."[59]

Related, if the allegorical genre is so plainly present in this book, then we might expect for the symbols to reveal themselves in an easily recognizable way. Yet, when one surveys the allegorical treatments of Jonah, there is seldom agreement on the symbols and referents contained therein. For example, though many argue that Jonah, the "dove" is a picture of Israel, Page notes, "One work associates the 'dove' with Nineveh, the chief sanctuary of the goddess 'Ishtar,' whose sacred bird was the dove."[60] If Jonah was written as an allegory, it would be more fitting for Jonah to represent Nineveh (but then what would Nineveh represent?) rather than Israel, for both are shown mercy by a compassionate God instead of the wrath they deserve

[57] Stuart, p. 440.
[58] Bullock, pp. 44-45.
[59] Page, p. 212.
[60] Page, p. 212.

because of their sin. Page also notes that there are erroneous biblical references in some allegorical handlings of Jonah. One of these involves Jonah's flight to Tarshish, which is supposed to depict the sin of Israel that precipitated the Babylonian captivity, namely their failure to spread the truth of God to the nations. However, in Scripture, the reason revealed for the judgment of the Babylonian captivity is Israel's failure to uphold the covenant by committing idolatry and immorality. Additionally, the Babylonian captivity was primarily a judgment against the Southern Kingdom of Judah. However, Judah does not figure into the story of Jonah at all. The prophet hails from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. This tension could be alleviated by arguing that the fish represents the Assyrian domination of Israel in 722 B.C., but then one would be hard-pressed to identify symbolically the regurgitation of the prophet, for Israel never "bounced back" from the Assyrian conquest. Similarly, the fish cannot represent God's judgment of His people, whether at the hands of Bablyon or Assyria, for in the story the fish is clearly seen as a means of deliverance rather than punishment. Beyond this, Jonah actually asked to be thrown into the sea for the sake of the other sailors, and nothing in any biblical narrative concerning the destruction of Israel or Judah can be shown to reflect this scenario.[61]

In the end, Burrows is correct when he says that the "greatest weakness of this kind of exposition [that is, allegorical] is that it is only to a small degree controlled by the text."[62] Indeed it is inappropriate to call anything not rooted in the text an exposition at all. It is a good general rule that our understanding of the text must be drawn from the text itself, and where this is not the case, any proposed interpretation can be considered invalid. For these reasons, it seems that an attempt to identify Jonah as an allegory fails.

Others have claimed that Jonah is not an allegory, but rather a parable. Parables and allegories are similar, both having a figurative interpretation that signifies a truth beyond the events, characters, and actions of the story itself. However, there are significant differences between the two genres as well. Parables are typically shorter than allegories, and normally consist of a single scene.[63] In an allegory, nearly every detail can carry symbolic meaning, while in a parable there may be few symbolic elements. It is the story as a whole that carries the symbolic meaning. An allegory may have many "points" or "lessons" to teach, but a parable typically only seeks to reinforce one primary truth. In a parable, there is typically some unexpected twist, what Stuart calls a "shock" or "punch line," which has the effect of drawing "the hearer up short as it teaches a lesson," and causes the reader to see "himself or herself in the story."[64] Additionally, characters in a parable tend to be anonymous, and are certainly not well-known figures from history. The fact that Jesus names a character in Luke 16 (Lazarus) has caused some to ponder if that pericope can be rightly called a parable. If so, it is one of the only known parables in which one of the primary characters is not anonymous. In Jonah, not only is the main character named, he is identified as a well known prophet from Israel's history. This would be a highly unusual feature in a parable. Stuart also notes that a significant feature of a parable is that it is "obviously fictional."[65] Thus, regardless of whether one believes that Jonah is factual or fictional, the very

[61] Page, pp. 212-213.
[62] Cited in Page, p. 213.
[63] Stuart, p. 436. Stuart notes that in some cases a parable may have two or three scenes, such as the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15.These would be rare exceptions, as evidenced by a survey of Jesus' parables.
[64] Stuart, p. 436.
[65] Stuart, p. 436.

fact that there is a debate on the question at all suggests that it is not "obviously fictional." Page has concluded that "its multiple elements and the complexity of its themes are not characteristic of the parabolic form."[66]

Perhaps because of the difficulty posed by the appearance of a notable historical figure in the story, other scholars have abandoned the parabolic or allegorical interpretation in favor of a more nuanced view. It is the opinion of some that Jonah represents an example of midrashic literature (or simply a midrash). As Trible explains, "a midrash is a commentary on a portion of ancient Scripture whose purpose was to adapt it to an immediate situation." In a midrash, a story takes the form of a legend, "a narrative with a historical core embellished by imagination."[67] Trible claims that Jonah is a midrash on Exodus 34:6, as seen by the repeated concepts in Jonah 4:2, in which the merciful character of God which was declared in Exodus is illustrated through this non-historical, embellished account concerning the prophet. On her view, the historical core includes Jonah and "the geographical locations referred to," but this core has been "embellished considerably by mythological and folk-tale motifs." In Trible's argument for this position, she states that the text which is being expounded by the midrash should be "evident in the midrash itself."[68] However, among those who claim that Jonah is a midrash, there is little agreement on which text is being expounded. Some have argued that it is a midrash of 2 Kings 14:25, Jeremiah 18:8, Joel 2:13-14, Amos 7:9-11, or other portions of the Old Testament. This lack of agreement should cause us to question whether Jonah could rightly be identified as a midrash. Stuart notes that, in order for Jonah to be "convincingly identified as a midrash, it would need to be demonstrated that the story was composed to serve as an illustrative explanation of something taught elsewhere in the Old Testament." He asserts that Jonah "appears far more likely to be not the midrash but the primary material, so that any midrash would be secondary, i.e., a discussion of the truth contained in Jonah."[69] Additionally, even if one dates Jonah to a post-exilic period, it would be one of the earliest examples of midrash known to exist, for the form did not develop until significantly later.[70] Though the word *midrash* occurs in the Hebrew Old Testament in 2 Chronicles 13:22 and 24:27, its meaning there is hard to determine and does not seem to have much similarity to the later known form of midrash. For these reasons, it seems improbable to identify Jonah as a midrash.

While others have proposed additional other kinds of non-historical literature as the genre for Jonah, a common element in nearly every non-historical approach is a suspicion of the supernatural features of Jonah. Brewer can be cited as an example of this kind of approach, as he admits that this is the primary reason to treat Jonah as unhistorical. The miracles of Jonah, including his three day and three night sojourn in the belly of the great fish, are more than can be considered within "the limits of credibility," according to Brewer.[71] However, this approach may be due to an anti-supernatural bias rather than an objective examination of the text. After all, the miraculous elements of Jonah are not without parallel in numerous other texts of the Old and New Testaments. As Stuart notes, "one can reject these on the basis of a systematic anti-

[66] Page, p. 214.
[67] Cited in Page, p. 211.
[68] Page, p. 211.
[69] Stuart, p. 436.
[70] Page (p. 211) notes that Trible even acknowledges this in her defense of the position.
[71] Cited in Page, p. 214.

supernatural bias, but one cannot single out Jonah in this regard. The argument that 'miracles can't happen, therefore they don't' is a subjective, not an objective, basis for discounting the factuality of the miracle narratives in Jonah."[72]

Walton's eloquent observation is worthy of full quotation:

> If these be miracles, it is useless to discuss the gullet sizes and geographical habitats of dozens of species of whales, or the chemical content of mammalian digestive juices and their projected effect on human epidermis over prolonged periods. If we wanted to discuss this sort of thing, we would have to begin with first things first, and ask whether or not God could talk to man, as he did in Jonah 1:1.[73]

So, Bullock is correct when he says,

> It comes down to the simple question of whether or not miracles are possible. Yet if one wishes to pursue the matter further, the secondary literature on Jonah provides evidence that a few people in modern times have been swallowed by the sperm whale and survived. Moreover, the nocturnal growth of the plant (4:6), sometimes identified as the castor-oil plant, is another miracle that need not be explained by naturalistic means. Both are introduced by "the Lord appointed," a formula that signals divine action. They are presented as miracles, and any amount of explaining will fail to convince the skeptical that God could and would do them.[74]

If we approach the miraculous from a biblically- and theologically-informed vantage point, we recognize that there are periods of redemptive history in which miracles occurred with greater frequency and intensity. These periods seem to involve new revelation from God, transitions from one source of revelation to another, and periods in which the revealed truth of God is made known in new places and to new peoples. So, we find the epochs of creation, the giving of the Law, the institution of the ministry of the prophets, the ministry of Jesus Christ and His apostles, and the spread of the Gospel into pioneer territories as eras in which the miraculous occurred with somewhat extraordinary frequency and intensity. If Jonah is among the earliest of the prophets, perhaps being an immediate successor to Elijah and Elisha, and if the truth about God is being revealed for the first time to the pagans of Assyria through Jonah's ministry, then it would not be unusual, unprecedented, or entirely unexpected, for miracles to dominate this story. Keil has noted that "the book of Jonah is similar in content and form to the history of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 2:4-6)," and surely the inclusion of the miraculous is one evident way in which it is.[75]

Dillard and Longman are careful to point out that we must not categorize "all people who argue for a parabolic interpretation as deniers of the miraculous. Clearly some are driven to a non-historical reading of the book because they do not believe the fish incident is possible. But others, such as Allen, are convinced that the inspired author intended his book to be read as a

[72] Stuart, p. 440.
[73] Cited in Page, p. 215.
[74] Bullock, p. 48.
[75] Cited in Bullock, p. 45.

parable, not as a historical report."[76] Further, they add that there are other characteristics within Jonah "that may further signal that the author did not intend his readers to understand his account to be historical." They cite as an example, "a level of vagueness in the world of the story," noting that "Jonah is the only character with a name."[77] Yet, it seems that this argument could also be advanced as evidence of the opposite point. After all, someone composing a fantastical narrative would have no objection to manufacturing names and other details to eliminate some of the vagueness. If there is a vagueness about the story, it could just as easily demonstrate historical accuracy as unhistorical authorial intent. Still, it does seem that a lion's share of those who reject a literal, historical reading of Jonah do so on the basis of an anti-supernatural bias. Though a small number of witnesses may be called forth who reject a historical interpretation on a strictly literary basis, their cases for a figurative genre are not without problems, as indicated above.

If, as Trible says, the book of Jonah is so "clearly non-historical," then Page is right to note that "it only became so in the nineteenth century," for "prior to that virtually every biblical scholar and reader of the book assumed that it at least claimed to recount actual events."[78] T. D. Alexander appropriately asks, "Were these earlier generations completely blind to features which we are asked to believe are immediately apparent?"[79] The first century Jewish historian Josephus included the events of the book of Jonah in his account of Hebrew history, saying "Now I have given this account about him as I found it written in our books."[80] The book of Jonah deals with known historical figures and geographical locations. It bears no internal indicators of a non-historical intent. Therefore, internal evidence suggests that the book's writer intended for it to be understood as a historical narrative. The question of its historicity, then, becomes a theological one rather than a literary one.

Jesus pointed to the story of Jonah as a picture of His resurrection in Matthew 12:38-42 and Luke 11:29-32. Some have suggested that the story does not have to be historically accurate in order to be used by Jesus in this way, however, the context indicates that Jesus was speaking of the story in a historical way. He identifies both the men of Nineveh (from the story of Jonah) and the Queen of the South (or Queen of Sheba, whose historical identity is nowhere under serious question) as those who will rise up and testify against the unbelieving generation of Jesus' own day. Bullock writes, "If the reference to the Ninevites is taken to be merely illustrative and not historical, then we have a confusing mixture of non-historical and historical material in the same analogy. Further, the condemnation of Jesus' generation is far less effective if the repentance of the Ninevites is non-historical."[81] On the basis of Christ's reference to Jonah, the church fathers understood Jonah to be historical. Cyril of Jerusalem, writing around 370 A.D., exemplifies this as he writes, "If that [the story of Jonah and the fish] is credible, this [the resurrection of Jesus] is credible also; if this [the resurrection] is incredible, that [Jonah and the fish] also is incredible. For to me both are alike worthy of credence. I believe that Jonas was preserved,

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[76] Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 392. Allen, in their quotation, refers to L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).
[77] Dillard and Longman, p. 392.
[78] Page, p. 217.
[79] Cited in Page, p. 218.
[80] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews,* 9.10.
[81] Bullock, p. 46.

for all things are possible with God; I believe that Christ also was raised from the dead."[82] Writing around the turn of the twentieth century, J. W. McGarvey stated, "It is really a question as to whether Jesus is to be received as a competent witness respecting historical and literary matters of the ages which preceded His own."[83]

In the final analysis, it seems advisable to conclude that the book does not neatly fit into any unhistorical genre of literature and appears to intend to be understood as a historical narrative. Objections against this line of interpretation have reasonable answers. As Stuart writes, "There is ample evidence to support the historicity of the book, and surprisingly little to undermine it."[84] It seems to be something of a cop-out to suggest that the historicity of the events have no bearing on the didactic importance of the book. Dillard and Longman lean toward this when they say with regret that "the debate that surrounds the historicity of this story has obscured its literary beauty and theological significance."[85] They further say "that the question is irrelevant to the interpretation of the book. This is not to say that the issue is unimportant. If the book intends to be historical, but makes a historical error, that is theologically significant. But the question of the intention of historicity is totally without effect on the interpretation of the book's theological message or even the exegesis of individual passages."[86] However, Stuart rightly asserts,

> … the issue of historicity has implications beyond the formal didactic function of the narrative. If the events described in the book actually happened, the audience's existential identification with the characters and circumstances is invariably heightened. People act more surely upon what they believe to be true in fact, than merely what they consider likely in theory. If it really happened, it is really serious. … it is not simply a narrator's desire, it is God's enforceable revelation.[87]

Some scholars have advanced nuanced positions on the style and genre that maintain its historical accuracy while further seeking to delineate a specific literary form. Suggestions have included simple prose, poetry (and some who advance the poetic argument reject historicity), tragedy, comedy, didactic prophetic narrative, and satire. Since each of these has strengths and

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[82] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture XIV, On the Words, And Rose Again from the Dead on the Third Day, and Ascended into the Heavens, and Sat on the Right Hand of the Father.* Accessed online: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.ii.xviii.html. April 5, 2011.

[83] Cited in Page, p. 218.

[84] Stuart, p. 440.

[85] Dillard and Longman, p. 391.

[86] Dillard and Longman, p. 393. Their statement here is nearly nonsensical. They seem to want to have their cake and eat it too. While admitting that a historical error in a historical work is theologically significant, they seek to push that question from the table by asserting that it is insignificant for the theological understanding of the book to determine if it is historical or not. This line of reasoning is akin to the phenomenon of "theological doublespeak" that once plagued Southern Baptist seminaries. During a previous era, SBC seminary professors understood that the views which they felt they must hold to be "academically credible" would not be considered "biblically faithful" by the rank and file Christians whose offerings supported their salaries. Therefore, they spoke one way in the classroom and another way in the pulpit. Dillard and Longman seem to tip their hand with this statement, suggesting that they are between the Scylla of "academic credibility" and the Charibdis of "biblical faithfulness" as understood by the average Christian pastor and layperson. Many times, the narrow strait between the two can be navigated safely, but often the ship must run aground on one bank or another. One could wish that more scholars were willing to run aground on the shores of biblical faithfulness rather than steering toward the acceptability of an academic culture which has no regard for biblical faithfulness.

[87] Stuart, p. 440.

weaknesses and involve issues that are more complex than is necessary to engage herein, we will conclude here that the events of the story are told as if they actually happened. Given a commitment to biblical inerrancy and the reality of miracles, we conclude further that the events actually did happen just as the narrator records. Further specificity of genre beyond this can be attempted so long as these matters are not compromised, and room for disagreement can be allowed within the camp among those who agree on historical accuracy.

We can concur with one point made by Dillard and Longman in their conclusion on style and genre. They say, "it is impossible to be dogmatic either way."[88] This is certainly true, and it is wise counsel. To be dogmatic is to insist, without argumentation or sound reasoning on an unsupported claim. However, to confidently rest one's argument on logical principles of hermeneutics and careful analysis is not to be dogmatic. It is not dogmatic to set forth one's position and supporting argumentation, having carefully examined contrary opinions and dismissed them on the basis of evidence. It would be dogmatic to say that there are no other plausible explanations. It is not dogmatic to say that those which have been set forth are not convincing or without serious challenges. If there is dogmatism in the contemporary debate, it would seem to be on the part of those who reject a historical interpretation of the book without interacting with arguments for that position and against their own. While we can affirm Dillard and Longman's insistence that this is "an area where room for disagreement must be allowed to exist,"[89] we must insist that all disagreeable positions be articulated carefully and thoroughly defended. As Feinberg has warned, we must not "mistake a case of bad hermeneutics (e.g., genre misidentification or ignoring altogether the genre of a passage) for a theological defection (rejection of biblical inerrancy). That is, we must be careful not to call an unusual interpretation of a passage a rejection of the passage's inerrancy."[90] And this is certainly true. However, many "unusual interpretations" are based on a faulty foundation that calls into question the inerrancy of Scripture and the power of God to work in human affairs in miraculous ways. Where those assumptions underlie an interpretation, we must not assume that we are dealing merely with bad hermeneutics. It is theological defection of the highest order.

The Psalm (Jonah 2): A Genre Within A Genre

D. L. Christensen has said, "At the very point in the narrative where Jonah makes his final descent to the depths of hell itself, the language soars to lyrical heights."[91] He is, of course, referring to the brilliant psalm of praise found in chapter two of Jonah. Yet, some consider the psalm of Jonah 2 to be a strong piece of evidence against the unity and integrity of the book. Dillard and Longman claim, "The only serious issue surrounding the literary unity of the book of Jonah arises with the psalm in the second chapter."[92] Critics of the book of Jonah have asserted that the psalm does not fit with the rest of the book and is therefore likely an interpolation of independent piece of literature that has been inserted into the midst of Jonah's context. They argue that the section could be removed from the story without harming the flow of the narrative.

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[88] Dillard and Longman, p. 392.
[89] Dillard and Longman, p. 393.
[90] John Feinberg, "Literary Forms and Inspiration", in D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 64.
[91] Cited in Page, p. 222.
[92] Dillard and Longman, p. 393.

They also suggest that a psalm of praise and thanksgiving is inappropriate at this juncture when a lament or plea for deliverance would be more naturally expected. Additionally, it is claimed that the psalm does not connect smoothly with the remainder of the book, bearing unusual style, vocabulary, and theology. Upon closer examination of the book as a whole, however, we find that these objections can be easily overruled.

Regarding the "excisability" of the psalm, the ability to remove it without disrupting the story, several responses have been offered by those who maintain the unity and integrity of Jonah. In most literary works, there are certain portions that could be removed without affecting the flow of the story. Therefore, as Stuart insists, "excisability is never a legitimate indication of lack of integrity in a literary work."[93] On further consideration, the psalm may in fact not be so easily removed as some suggest. Stuart suggests that this is only possible "when the story is actually misunderstood to some degree," and therefore may be "genuinely integral … within the overall message of the book."[94] Rather than disrupting the story, the psalm actually serves to reinforce the central theme of divine deliverance in the book. Not only will God spare Nineveh from certain destruction, He will also deliver His prophet from the judgment that he deserves for his defection from the divine call. The Psalm acknowledges this is happening and expresses Jonah's gratitude to God for His merciful salvation. Jonah's heartfelt song of worship for God's saving mercy then helps us to see how hypocritical his resentment toward God for sparing Nineveh is. Without this psalm, that ironic contrast would disappear from the text.

The second criticism of the inclusion of the Psalm is well-expressed by B. W. Anderson, who writes, "In the belly of a fish a cry for help (that is, a lament) would be appropriate, but not a thanksgiving for deliverance already experienced!"[95] This would be true if in fact the fish had been sent as an agent of judgment against Jonah. However, this blatantly misses the point of the entire fish episode. The storm was sent as a judgment, and Jonah being tossed into the storm appears to be the final outpouring of wrath against the belligerent prophet. His death by drowning is all but certain as soon as he breaks the surface of the water. The fish enters the scene not "to add insult to injury," but rather as an agent of divine mercy. The fish is the vehicle God has appointed to save and deliver His prophet from certain destruction. If Jonah prayed a prayer of lament (and he may well have), it would have been offered as he splashed around beneath the waves. Once inside the belly of the fish, he is able to recognize that God is saving him in a miraculous and merciful way. "Jonah was not complaining about his predicament inside the fish; rather, he was thanking God for delivering him from death," as Hill and Walton note.[96] Therefore, it seems perfectly fitting for him to offer a prayer just like this one at the time and in the circumstances he finds himself.

Related to this are the arguments that reject the historicity of the book on the basis of expressions within the psalm. Wellhausen, for one, claimed that Jonah erred when he described "weeds" in 2:5. Wellhausen says glibly, "weeds do not grow in a whale's belly." Young's response to this is witty, as he says, "Of course weeds do not grow in whale's bellies. But this is *not* a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from a whale's belly. It is rather a psalm of thanksgiving for

[93] Stuart, p. 439.
[94] Stuart, p. 439.
[95] Stuart, p. 439.
[96] Hill and Walton, p. 500.

deliverance from drowning."[97] The "weeds" Jonah describes entangled him in the depths of the sea before he was ingested by the fish. This is yet another example of how "the school of negative criticism has unjustly imputed to this psalm a meaning which it never was intended to bear."[98]

As for the objection that the psalm diverges from the rest of the book in its style, vocabulary and theology, fairly simple responses can be offered. It has already been demonstrated that there is significant theological harmony between the psalm and the larger context of the book. The book concerns divine deliverance, and that is precisely the theme of the psalm. There seems to be nothing in the psalm which differs from the theological ideas set forth in the rest of the book. There is a difference in style and vocabulary, and this is not a cause for concern. The fact that we have here a Hebrew poem necessitates a shift in style and language. As Stuart accurately points out, differences in language and style are the most evident distinctions between Hebrew prose and Hebrew poetry. "The language is generalized, so as to maximize applicability; the style is formalized so as to fit the meter, tune, and function" of the poetic genre.[99]Many are the books of Scripture which incorporate poetry into the midst of narrative passages, and Jonah is no different from any of the others which do this.

It should not surprise the reader to encounter a highly stylized poem in the midst of a story about a prophet. Many of the prophetic books make heavy use of poetry, and some are entirely poetic. Stuart suggests that the prophets were trained poets, and as such, Jonah may have been drawing from a repertoire of memorized psalms as he expressed his praise to God.[100] There are parallels between a number of Psalms, including 5:7, 18:6, 31:22, 42:7, 120:1, 142:3, and 143:4.[101] Being a student of the Scriptures, including the Psalms, texts such as these may have informed Jonah's psalm directly, in the form of explicit borrowing, or indirectly, in the form of filling his vocabulary with expressions of praise.

While critics suggest that the psalm has been crammed into the book like a large foot in an ill-fitting shoe, it can be demonstrated to serve a significant purpose in the book. This has already been hinted at above in the discussion of its theological consistency and the question of its excisability. But its appropriateness can be demonstrated stylistically as well. Young has said, "If 2:2-9 be removed, the symmetry of the book is destroyed."[102] As it stands, the psalm not only rounds out the opening half of the book, but also provides a needful balance with the second half. It is quite evident in the Hebrew text that 1:1-3a and 3:1-3a are nearly identical in wording and form. Nearly every scholar observes and expounds on this similarity as a key element of the book's structure. However, what is often overlooked is the similarity between 2:2 and 4:2. Both

[97] Young, p. 281.
[98] Young, p. 281.
[99] Stuart, p. 439.
[100] Stuart, p. 439.
[101] Bullock, p. 50. Hill and Walton also mention similarity with Psalm 69 on p. 501, fn. 3. Moeller (cited in Young, p. 282) provides a helpful comparison between Jonah and the Psalms which show similarity between 2:3b and Psalm 18:7 and 120:1; between 2:4b and Psalm 18:6 and 30:4; between 2:5 and Psalm 42:8; between 2:6 and Psalm 31:23 and 5:8; between 2:7 and Psalm 18:8 and 69:2; between 2:8 and Psalm 18:17, 30:4; and 104:4; between 2:9 and Psalm 142:4, 143:3, 18:7, and 5:8; between 2:10 and Psalm 88:3; as well as additional parallels with Psalm 31:7, 26:7, 50:14, 50:23, 42:5, and 116:17.
[102] Young, p. 281.

of these verses mention Jonah praying. In 2:2, Jonah begins to pray a prayer of thanksgiving, while in 4:2 he begins to lodge a complaint against God. Therefore, it is not likely to be a later interpolation, but rather was intentionally incorporated by the original author for reasons of theological and literary significance.

Did Jonah pray this exact prayer inside the fish, or was it composed later to reflect his sentiments while inside the fish? This question only matters in relation to the issues of authorship and date. If Jonah did not pray or compose/compile the psalm himself, then we may have here the work of a later editor putting words into the prophet's mouth. We have already dealt with this objection above and have concluded that the book likely comes from Jonah or one of his contemporaries. Therefore, we may have here the exact words that the prophet prayed, or words that he composed or compiled himself upon later reflection of his experience. These may have been written by him or related to another who recorded them in the form we now have. We would dismiss speculations concerning the psalm's allegorical reference to the Babylonian captivity in similar ways that we dismissed the allegorical treatment of the entire book above.

Message

In John's Gospel, the writer tells us why he wrote the book (John 20:31). Several other books also include clear statements of purpose. Jonah, however, contains no such statement. Therefore, views on purpose have varied greatly among those who have treated this small book academically. Brevard Childs has said that it is the purpose of the book, rather than the issues of authorship, date, or genre, which is "the most crucial and perplexing problem of the book."[103] It is often mistakenly assumed that the message of the book of Jonah has to do primarily with an incident involving a whale. Forgetting for a moment that the book never identifies the sea creature as a whale at all (rather, it is called a "great fish"), this is actually a very minor detail in the story. The great fish only appears in three verses (1:17; 2:1; 2:10), and is one of several objects or phenomenon in the story which are described as being "appointed" by the Lord to accomplish His divine purposes. Therefore, there is a complexity to the story of Jonah that transcends the Sunday School lessons from our childhood memories. As Phillips says, Jonah is "not so much about a great fish, but a gracious God."[104]

Unlike other prophetic books, Jonah does not focus on the message that the prophet proclaimed, but rather on a series of events in the prophet's life. Jonah's message is contained within a single verse, and it does not even mention the name of God. It simply says, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (3:4). Upon reading the book, however, it is evident that God is a primary, if not *the* primary, figure in the story. We come away from it learning less about Jonah, about Israel, about Nineveh, than about God Himself. It seems that Estelle is correct when he writes, "This little book of Jonah is not intended to communicate merely a message, but messages."[105] And each of these messages serves to clarify truth about who God is and what He is doing in the world. As Page writes, "Its purpose is to instruct God's people more fully in the character of their God, particularly his mercy as it operates in relation to repentance. … This

[103] Cited in Bullock, p. 50.
[104] Phillips, p. 4.
[105] Estelle, p. 29.

does not deny that there are many other lessons to be found in the Book of Jonah … concerning such subjects as monotheism, obedience, and motivation."[106]

The attributes of God most clearly evident in the book of Jonah are His holiness, His mercy and His sovereignty. We see the holiness of God demonstrated in His pronouncement of judgment against Nineveh because of it sins (1:2). We see His mercy in that He does not abandon Jonah, though Jonah would have gladly abandoned his obedience to God. His mercy is also seen in withdrawing the promised judgment from Nineveh in response to their repentance. His mercy and holiness are seen to be in balance in the book of Jonah (as in all of Scripture). Hill and Walton observe, "His justice is not negated by the offering of extensions by grace. … Yet God is not obligated to offer extensions endlessly. His just punishment will eventually be carried out (cf. Jeremiah 13:14; Ezekiel 7:1-9)."[107] The key to this balance between a holiness that must issue just judgment and a mercy that wills to forgive sin is found in God's sovereignty. As Hill and Walton say, "God must be granted the freedom to exercise either. … God must be free to act as He sees fit."[108] And this "freedom" of God is a factor of His complete sovereignty.

God's sovereignty is on display throughout the book. Bullock refers to God's sovereignty in terms of His "irresistible will in His world," and suggests that this is the central purpose of the book.[109] God sovereignly chooses Jonah and commissions Him to go to Nineveh, which God has determined to judge in His sovereignty. His sovereignty extends over all nature as He appoints or commands a storm, a fish, a plant, a worm, and a scorching east wind. Of all that God appointed to serve Him, only Jonah is disobedient, but God's sovereign plan to use Jonah prevails in spite of his rebellion. The withdrawal of judgment from Nineveh also demonstrates God's sovereignty, illustrating the biblical truth, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Romans 9:15). Though these divine attributes are found throughout Scripture, the story that unfolds in the pages of Jonah provide rich demonstrations of these and other characteristics of God. Each of these divine attributes is reflected by the questions that God asks of His prophet. In Jonah in 4:4 and 4:9, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" If Jonah could comprehend the holiness of God, then he should understand that his own sin is as vile as that of the Ninevites. If he understood the mercy of God, he would see that he cannot be angry about divine mercy when he owes his very life to it. If he had a healthy concept of the sovereignty of God, then he would realize that God does not need Jonah's approval to do as He wills. But God asks again in 4:11, "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?" This question also gets at the issue of who God is, and expects an answer that affirms His holiness, His mercy, and His sovereignty. So, Stuart says of this question, "Anyone who replies, 'Why is that such an important question?' has not understood the message. Anyone who replies, 'No!' has not believed it."[110]

An additional divine attribute that is evident, though less so than those discussed above, throughout Jonah is the omniscience of God. One's view of omniscience will affect one's interpretation of this entire book, for we have God declaring through His prophet that something

[106] Page, p. 219.
[107] Hill and Walton, p. 501.
[108] Hill and Walton, p. 501.
[109] Bullock, p. 51.
[110] Stuart, p. 435.

is going to happen (without condition, caveat, or exception), only to find a few paragraphs later that God does not bring that promised state of affairs to pass. If one has a view of God's omniscience which has no room for any measure of human freedom at all, then one must appeal to mystery (perhaps as a copout) for how God can relent when Nineveh repents. On the opposite extreme, we find the Open Theists whose extreme adherence to libertarian freedom chips away at God's omniscience. They say that God could not have known when He announced the coming judgment that Nineveh would repent, therefore they took Him by surprise and forced His hand to change His plans. The absurdity of this position can be illustrated by observing Jonah 4:2, in which even Jonah knew what would happen. How then can anyone suggest that God did not know what Jonah knew? But if one's view of God's omniscience allows for Him to have perfect knowledge, not only of what *is* but also of what *may be*, then one can interpret the events of Jonah in a different way. If God has what has been called "middle knowledge," then He knows what choices free creatures will make in any circumstance.[111] Therefore, He could know that Nineveh will only repent (which is His ultimate desire for them) if they are presented with such a stark and devastating warning about the coming judgment. This proclamation will cause them to recognize their sins and their desperation for God's mercy and cause them to turn to Him. Thus, if God has this kind of knowledge, sparing Nineveh is not "Plan B," but "Plan A," which He knew would only come to pass if the message that He commissioned Jonah to preach was delivered to the Ninevites.

Jonah is a book that teaches well the truth that God desires and works to bring salvation to all nations. Israel had been appointed by God, in the words of E. J. Young, "to bring the knowledge of the Lord to the world."[112] This is seen from the beginning of Israel's existence with the calling of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). It may even be argued that this desire of God was expressed in His mandate to Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). In many of the great acts of God in the Old Testament, we see that the motivation and result often included making the nations aware of God and bringing them to faith in Him. Therefore, the Great Commission in the New Testament (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; et al.) was not a new idea, but was a renewing of God's commission for His covenant people. The church which stands on this side of the Cross, therefore, can find in the book of Jonah an illustration of the truth that God finds "no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11). God commissions believers in Christ today, like Jonah, to take the message of salvation (and with it the promise of judgment to come) to a world that may be antagonistic and hostile. Like Jonah, Christians today are called to overcome their prejudices, leave their comfort zones, and share the message of Christ with modern-day Ninevites.

Related, Young states, "the mission of Jonah served to impress upon the Israelites the fact that the Lord's salvation was not to be confined to one nation."[113] Jonah demonstrates that when Israel loses sight of this truth and takes for granted the blessings they have received through

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[111] Middle knowledge refers to a knowledge that God has, prior to His creative decree and creative work that "If person P is in situation S, then P will choose to perform action A." It does not entail that God will create a world in which person P exists, or in which situation S will occur. These factors do not have to be actual for God to have perfect knowledge of what would occur if they were actual. For more on how middle knowledge works within an Arminian framework (Molinism), I would recommend the works of William Lane Craig. For more on how middle knowledge works within a Calvinistic framework, I would recommend the works of Terrance Tiessen.
[112] Young, p. 280.
[113] Young, p. 289.

God's sovereign choice of them among all the nations, God will act in ways that take them by surprise and provoke them to jealousy. This is not a "new thing" that God is doing by extending His grace toward a pagan nation. As already indicated, God has always had a desire to extend His truth and grace beyond Israel to the rest of the world. But God has also declared from the beginning of His covenant with Israel that if they turn away from Him He will harden them and provoke them to jealousy by showering other nations with grace. Deuteronomy 32:21 promised this, saying, "They have made Me jealous with what is not God; They have provoked Me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation." So, Stuart points out that "in ancient Judaism the book served as a bulwark against the narrow particularism that allowed Jews to think they alone were worthy of God's blessing while other peoples were not."[114] It can have the same effect today, for example, on the Christian Church in America which has at times been reluctant to look beyond itself to the needs of the world, and has at times been guilty of "hording" the blessings of God.

This book, like all Scripture, also points clearly to Jesus Christ. R. T. France put it this way, "Jesus understood the Old Testament Christologically: in its essential principles, and even in its details, it foreshadows the Messiah whom it promises. The whole theological system of the Old Testament points forward to His work, and in His coming the whole Old Testament economy finds its perfection and fulfillment."[115] Jesus made this clear throughout His earthly ministry, but nowhere more clearly than in Luke 24:25-27, when He said, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Then, Luke says, "beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in *all the Scriptures*." Luke goes on to record in 24:44-47 how Jesus spoke to His disciples saying, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."[116] Then Luke says that "He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'" Though we have no transcript of that teaching session, we do know that the book of Jonah was used by Jesus on another occasion to provide insight into His death, burial, and resurrection (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29-30), and it is clear that the book of Jonah teaches that repentance for forgiveness of sins must be proclaimed to all nations. So, Estelle is correct when he says, "We must read Jonah through Christocentric glasses."[117]

With that understanding, it is easy to see how Young can conclude, "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."[118] Estelle says

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[114] Stuart, p. 434.
[115] R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament.* Cited in Estelle, p. 3.
[116] In using this tripartite division, the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, Jesus is referring to the entire Old Testament, the *Tanakh*. The term *Tanakh* is actually an acrostic, referring to the *Torah* (Law), the *Nebiim* (Prophets), and the *Writings* (Kethubim, of which the Psalms are the largest part).
[117] Estelle, p. 3.
[118] Young, p. 263.

similarly, "Jonah, first and foremost, plain and simple, has this most important message for the Christian church today: *Christ, the risen One who is greater than Jonah, brings salvation through judgment and mercy to his people, those inside and outside of Israel who call on his name.* What is foreshadowed and illustrated in Jonah becomes a reality in Christ."[119] If Jonah's reluctant obedience to God brings mercy to the nations, then the One who is greater than Jonah (Matthew 12:41; Luke 11:32), who perfectly obeys the will of His Father, brings this all the more. "While Jonah reluctantly preached to save a city against his will, Jesus freely gave up his life to save many."[120]

Textual Tradition

The book of Jonah comes to us with rather strong and univocal manuscript support. As Brichto writes, "As an aesthetic achievement the marvel of its creation is surpassed, if anything, by the marvel of its pristine preservation and transmission over a period of twenty-five centuries and more."[121] Variations among the surviving manuscripts are few and minor. "Even the Targum is only mildly expansionistic, in contrast to its substantial tendency toward commentary and expansion in other books of the Minor Prophets."[122] This assures of at least two things. First, we learn that the book of Jonah was precious to Israel, and was seen as complete and self-sufficient. Therefore, they preserved it with integrity and did not expand, elaborate, edit, or excise any portion of it through its long history of transmission (a history that is long on any theory of dating). It also assures us that we can approach this text with confidence that the Word of God has been purely preserved in the book as we now have it. Relatively little time needs to be spent pouring over the footnotes and critical apparatuses, for there have been few variations at all over the course of many centuries.

[119] Estelle, p. 3. Emphasis original.
[120] Dillard and Longman, p. 395.
[121] Cited in Page, p. 219.
[122] Stuart, p. 443.

Significant Dates

810-743 BC – Reign of Adad-nirari III in Assyria

c.790-745 BC – Reign of Jeroboam II in Israel[123]

781-745 BC – Assyria experiences significant internal turmoil, including famine (765-759), plague (765), eclipse (763), and internal revolt (763-760, 746).

771-754 BC – Reign of Ashur-dan III in Assyria[124]

c.745 - 727 BC – Reign of Tiglath-Pileser III in Assyria

726-722 BC – Reign of Shalmaneser V in Assyria

722 BC – Fall of Israel to Assyria (end of the Northern Kingdom).

Outline

There are many outlines available in the literature on Jonah, but there is little variation among them. The book's dividing lines are evident. Therefore, what follows is the outline suggested by Frank Page in his volume in the New American Commentary Series:

I. God's first call and Jonah's response (1:1-16)
    1. God's instruction and the prophet's flight (1:1-3)
    2. The storm at sea (1:4-6)
    3. Unveiling of responsibility and identity (1:7-10)
    4. Stilling of the storm (1:11-16)
II. God's rescue of the rebellious prophet (1:17-2:10)
    1. God's protection and Jonah's prayer (1:17-2:9)
    2. The prophet's deliverance (2:10)
III. God's second commission and Jonah's obedience (3:1-10)
    1. God's renewal of His commission (3:1-2)
    2. The prophet's preaching and Nineveh's response (3:3-9)
    3. God's response (3:10)
IV. Jonah's displeasure and God's response (4:1-11)
    1. The prophet's displeasure (4:1-3)
    2. God's response (4:4-11)

[123] Dates vary among scholars, with some proposing a span from 786-746, others 793-753, and others 783-743. The differences are relatively insignificant in the bigger picture because of the close proximity of these suggestions.
[124] Others suggest 773-756.