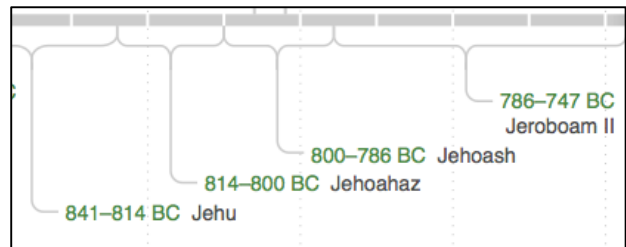


# SPENDING TIME WITH THE PROPHETS

the book of Jonah

## Setting of the book:

While the prophet Jonah is best known to us because of the book bearing his name, that is not his first mention in the Scriptures. We read in 2Kings 14.25 that the Israelite king 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.” (2 Kings 14:25) This verse provides two pieces of background information for Jonah. First, he was from the town of Gath-hepher, located in the territory of Zebulun. Second, we can date his work to the reign of Jeroboam II (786-747 B.C.).



Before the reign of Jeroboam II, Israel had suffered greatly at the hands of Syria, their neighbor to the north. The Scriptures relate Israel’s decline was because Jehu, who had eradicated the family of Ahab and Baal worship from Israel, continued in the sins of Jeroboam (2Kings 10.28-33). Matters became so dire in the reign of Jehu’s son, Jehoahaz, that Israel was left with a skeletal army of 50 horsemen, 10 chariots and 10,000 soldiers (2Kings 13.2-7). However, Israel received help from an unlikely source when Assyria attacked the Syrian capital of Damascus in 804 B.C. (this was the “deliverer” mentioned in 2Kings 13.5). With Syria weakened and Assyria not yet strong enough to extend her influence, Israel was able to expand her borders during the reign of Jeroboam II (great-grandson of Jehu). According to 2Kings 14.25, this was all according to the prophecy of Jonah.

Given that Jonah’s prophecy concerns the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, some background on the Assyrian nation will also be helpful. Assyria had been powerful during the days of Jehu.



Jehu offers tribute to Shalmaneser III

According to the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III exacted tribute from the Israelite king. Assyria would remain strong through the reign of Adad-nirari III, the king which attacked Damascus in 804 B.C., weakening Syria. But with the death Adad-nirari III, Assyria entered a period of decline. Jonah prophesied during this period of Assyrian weakness, but it may be that he knew God would use the Assyrian people to punish Israel in the not too distant future (720 B.C., 2Kings 17), which

would help explain the prophet's reluctance to proclaim the Lord's message of repentance to Nineveh (Jonah 4.2).



**Outline of the book:**

- I. The salvation of Jonah (Jonah 1-2)
  - a. Jonah rejects the will of the Lord and is punished (chapter 1)
  - b. Jonah repents and is saved (chapter 2)
- II. The salvation of Nineveh (Jonah 3-4)
  - a. Nineveh repents for rejecting the will of the Lord and is saved (chapter 3)
  - b. Jonah learns a lesson about compassion (chapter 4)

**Theme of the book:**

This is not the story of a man who was swallowed by a great fish! Yes, that's in the story, but that is not the point of this book. Rather, the emphasis of the book is on the nature of God and man's relationship to Him. Consider these three points from the book:

- 1. The Lord is God of the nations. This fact is emphasized from the first verse of the book. Jonah was to "cry against" Nineveh because "their wickedness" had come up before God. The Lord had a right to judge Nineveh, because He is their God too. The Lord's

sovereignty is further emphasized in Jonah 1.9 when Jonah confesses that he had fled from “the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” There was no place where Jonah could escape from the Lord. Furthermore, since the Lord is God of the nations, His compassion and mercy can be extended to them too (see Jonah 4.2). You will note that Jonah refers to God’s own self-description found in Exodus 34.6. The compassionate nature of God wasn't reserved for Israel, but was available for all creation.

2. The Lord is a God who saves the repentant. As we see in Jonah 1-2, the Lord saved Jonah when he repented. (note: based on Jonah's prayer in chapter 2, it would seem that the great fish was not the punishment, but the means of rescue) And in Jonah 3-4 we see God’s willingness to save Nineveh when it repented. God's willingness to save the heathen was already indicated in chapter 1. The heathen sailors were spared because in this instance only Jonah was guilty of rejecting the Lord's will. They would worship the true God (1.16). But the saving of Nineveh is more surprising. The language used in Jonah 1.2 is reminiscent of Sodom in Genesis 18.20-21. Yet, Nineveh would repent at the preaching of Jonah, and thus be spared.
3. Man is to mold his conduct to conform to God’s will. Thus, the emphasis on repentance in the book, first of Jonah and then of Nineveh. And this is the importance of God’s final lesson to Jonah in chapter 4. God was compassionate on the people of Nineveh (4.11), thus Jonah had no right to be angry at their salvation (4.4). Rather, Jonah should be compassionate like his Lord.

#### **Messianic elements in the book:**

- I. The clearest Messianic element is Jesus' reference to His resurrection being like Jonah's time in the belly of the great fish (see Matthew 12.40; Luke 11.29-32).
  - a. Jonah was cast into the sea, presumed dead (1.14-15). Yet, God "resurrected" him by means of the great fish (1.17; 2.10) so that Jonah would fulfill his commission.
  - b. Jesus was buried in the tomb, presumed dead forever. Yet God resurrected Him after 3 days so that He could fulfill His commission!
- II. However, there is another Messianic element in Jonah. Remembering that the main point of the book is God's willingness to save any who will repent, a message also emphasized in the ministry of Jesus (John 10.16; Matthew 28.18-20). Truly, God is willing to save all who will put faith in Him and repent (Acts 10.34-35)!