

SESSION TWENTY-ONE

JONAH

Jonah Learns God's Lesson

I. DATING THE BOOK OF JONAH

Outside the book of Jonah itself, we know very little about the prophet Jonah. We do have the NT reference to Jonah in Matthew 12:41, in which Christ referred to these events as *historical*. This includes both the matter of Jonah being in the “fish” as well as Nineveh’s repentance.

Also a prophet named Jonah is referred to in 2 Kings 14:25, “. . . according to the word of the LORD, . . . , which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.”¹ Since we have no knowledge of any other prophet of this same name, we can safely presume that this is the prophet Jonah who is mentioned in the book of Jonah.

The same paragraph in 2 Kings links this Jonah with the reign of Jeroboam II the son of Joash, king of Israel, who reigned for 41 years.² According to Leslie McFall, Jeroboam II became coregent in Apr of 793 BC and served as king from Spr 782/Apr 781 to Aug/Sept 753. Of course Jonah’s years of ministry could have begun before Jeroboam’s reign or continued afterwards (or both). If we assume that Jonah had a lengthy period of ministry (say 50 years), then we could estimate that his ministry must have fallen sometime in the general period between 843-703 BC (i.e., 50 years on either side of Jeroboam’s reign). But since the Assyrians deported Israel in 722 BC, we could revise this to 843-722 BC, though it is more likely that the events recorded in the book of Jonah were during Jeroboam’s reign, i.e., during 793-753 BC. During this period, there was increasing pressure being put upon Israel (and other western lands) by the mighty kingdom of Assyria.

Archer thinks the time of composition of the book is around 760 BC (p 289), though liberal critics often date the composition around 430 BC “on the supposition that it was composed as an allegory of a piece of quasi-historical fiction to oppose the ‘narrow nationalism’ of Jewish leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, at a time when the Samaritans were being excluded from all participation in the worship of Yahweh at Jerusalem, and all the foreign wives were being divorced under the pressure of bigoted exclusivism.”³

¹ According to W. C. Williams (“Jonah” in *ISBE*, 2:1112), Gath-hepher was located in the territory of Zebulun (Josh 19:13). It is commonly identified with Khirbet ez-Zurrâ’, near Mashhad, about 5 km NE of Nazareth.

² Joash became coregent in Apr 799, and reigned Spr 798/Apr 797 until Spr 782/Apr 781.

³ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Moody, 2007), 289.

II. ASSYRIAN PRESSURE UPON ISRAEL

Although Assyria is not mentioned in the records of 2 Kings until the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC), we do have information from extra-biblical sources that documents a build-up of conflict and confrontation between Israel and Assyria from as early as 853 BC.

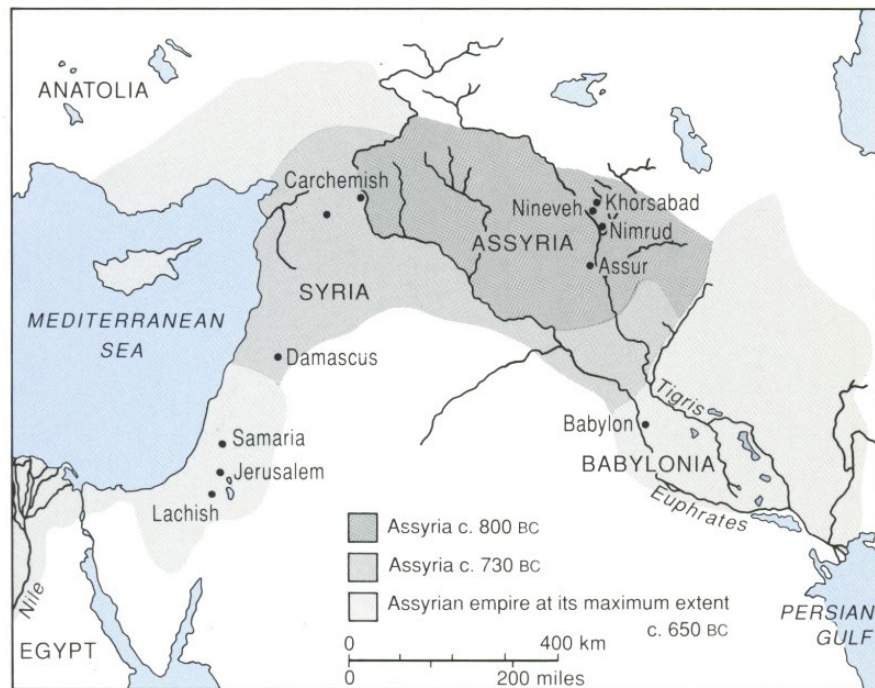
As early as the reign of Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC), we see Assyria beginning to assert itself against the western lands, especially in Syria (Aram) to the north of Israel. “Thirty-one years were spent in campaigning to extend Assyrian rule to Cilicia, Palestine, and the Persian Gulf. His first three campaigns were directed to the capture of Carchemish (857). . . .”⁴ Following this, Shalmaneser III returned to the west in 853, though the alarmed Syrian states were ready to oppose his return. Wiseman writes,

Irḫuleni of Hamath and Adad-’idri (Hadadezer, possibly the Ben-hadad II of 1 K. 20) massed a coalition of ‘twelve kings of the sea-coast’ with 62,900 infantry, 1,900 cavalry, 3,900 chariots, and 1,200 Arabian fighting camels at Karkara (Qarqar). ‘Ahab the Israelite’ (Akk. A-ḫa-ab-bu mat-Sir-’i-la-a-a) supplied 10,000 men and 2,000 chariots according to the first reference to Israel in Assyrian annals (see *ANET*, pp. 278f.). The clash was so fierce that the Assyrians did not return for three years (1 K. 16:29; 20:20; 22:1).

Obviously Israel felt threatened enough by Assyria that they willingly joined the coalition to oppose them. Though the Assyrians may not have been victorious in this encounter, their incursions westward were beginning to seriously threaten these lands and put the dread of Assyria in them.

So from at least as early as 842 BC, we do have evidence of Israel having to pay tribute to Assyria, an act which would surely have infuriated the people of Israel and caused them to hate the Assyrians. Following 842 BC, the fighting continued. Wiseman goes on to explain,

When Hadadezer was assassinated (842), Shalmaneser took the opportunity to march against his successor Hazael, ‘the son of a nobody’ (i.e., a usurper), whose army was routed at Mt. Senir (Hermon). While



⁴ D. J. Wiseman, “Assyria,” in *ISBE*, 1:334.

claiming the defeat of Hazael, the Assyrians failed to capture either him or Damascus, where he had taken refuge. They ravaged the surrounding countryside, plundered the rich Hauran plain, and marched to the Mediterranean coast at Carmel (Ba'li-ra'si), where tribute was received from Tyre, Sidon, and 'Jehu son of Omri' (Yaua mār Humri); the event is not recorded in the OT but was perhaps induced by Israel's need of support against Hazael's raids into their territory (2 K. 10:32). If this was Jehu's plan, it was unsuccessful. The submission of the Israelite is depicted on the Black Obelisk (British Museum). JEHU, or his ambassador, is portrayed kneeling before Shalmaneser while porters bring 'silver, gold, golden bowls, vases, cups, buckets' and other objects as tribute."⁵



Panel of the Black Obelisk from Nimrūd showing Jehu (or his emissary) bowing before Shalmaneser III (859–824 BC). This is the only contemporary representation of an Israelite king (Trustees of the British Museum).

Pictured below are Israelites bringing Jehu's tribute.



Shalmaneser III's reign was followed by three Assyrian kings, all of whom overlapped the reign of Israel's Jeroboam II:

- Adadnirari III (810-783 BC)
- Shalmaneser IV (782-772 BC)
- Aššur-dân III (771-754 BC)

⁵ Ibid.

Gleason Archer believes Jonah's mission occurred during the reign of Adadnirari III.⁶ We do have evidence of Adadnirari III's hostility against Israel and the western lands:

In 806 B.C. the young king undertook an expedition to north Syria, reaching the Mediterranean (Arpad), and another the following year, when he took Hazazu and broke up the powerful coalition developing between Damascus and states as far afield as Malatya. In 804 he struck further southwest to Tyre and Sidon. Joash of Israel, anxious to annul the burdensome treaty imposed on him by Hazael, seems to have taken this opportunity, as had Jehu before him, to obtain Assyrian help. The evidence for this is a royal stele (from Tell ar Rimah, Iraq) in which Adadnirari lists tribute from 'Joash of Samaria' (*Yu'asu* ^{māt}*Samerinā*) before that of Tyre and Sidon.⁷

There is little recorded activity of the kings Shalmaneser IV and Aššur-dân III (both sons of Adadnirari III) in regard to Israel. We do know, however, that Aššur-dân III "campaigned unsuccessfully in Syria, the event being marked by the ominous sign of a solar eclipse on June 15, 763 B.C."⁸ What makes for an interesting question is whether or not this solar eclipse might have had any bearing on Jonah's preaching at Nineveh. The timing of the event in 763 BC is certainly appropriate. There were also distressful events back home in Assyria, both a plague and revolt in the cities of Asshur, Gozan, and Arrapha.

With the coming to the throne of the Assyrian king Pul, also known as Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC), the conflict between Assyria and Israel significantly increased. This was after the days of Jeroboam II, but conceivably still in the days of Jonah. The first mention we have of him in the Bible (and the first reference to Assyria in 2 Kings) is in 2 Kings 15:19-20. Verse 19 says, "Pul, king of Assyria, came against the land, and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver." [Menahem was coregent in late Apr of 752 and died in the Spr 742/Apr 741]. The text goes on to say, "Then Menahem exacted the money from Israel, even from all the mighty men of wealth, from each man fifty shekels of silver to pay the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria returned and did not remain there in the land."

The second mention of Tiglath-Pileser III is in 2 Kings 15:29 in regard to his campaign of ca. 740 BC: "In the days of Pekah king of Israel [*coregent late Apr 752; king Sp 740/Apr 739 – Sp 732/Apr 731*], Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon and Abel-beth-maacah and Janoah and Kedesh and Hazor and Gilead and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria." Assyria's incursions into Israel increased from this point onward, until finally Samaria was destroyed and the nation deported in 722 BC.

III. THE CITY OF NINEVEH

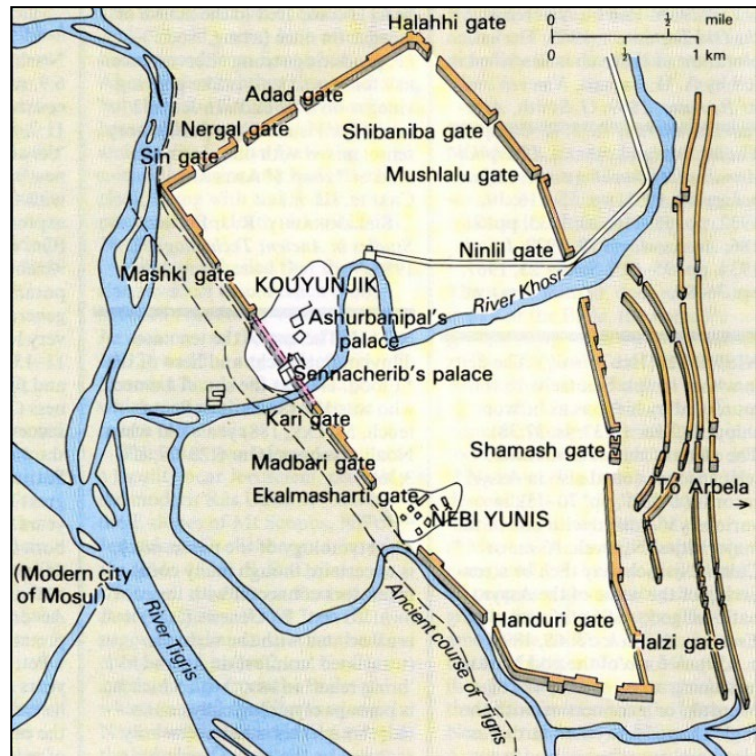
The city of Nineveh was certainly one of the most significant cities of the ANE, mentioned as early as Genesis 10:11 as a city of Nimrod. It was finally sacked in 612 BC by the combined forces of the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians.

⁶ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 291.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:335.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The ruins of ancient Nineveh are located opposite the modern city of Mosul in northern Iraq. The outline of the city walls are about 12-13 km. (8 mi.) in circumference and enclose an area of 730 ha. (1800 acres). The two primary mounds are Kuyunjik (which was excavated on numerous occasions between 1842 and 1932) and Tell Nebi Yûnus. “The exploration of the site of Nineveh began in 1820 with C. J. Rich, Resident of the British East India Company at Baghdad.”⁹ “A. H. Layard, the English archaeologist and ‘father of Assyriology,’ discovered the great palace of Sennacherib king of Assyria (705-681 B.C.) in the southern corner of Kuyunjik in 1847.”¹⁰ Then in 1853, H. Rassam (Christian of Mosul) uncovered another great palace in the northern part of the tell that belonged to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (669-633 B.C.) This discovery was to yield the Royal Library with thousands of clay tablets.



Source: *Illustrated Bible Dict*,
2:1091 [IVP]

The primary temple of Nineveh seems to have been a temple of Ishtar, first erected at least by the middle of the 2nd century B.C. This was rebuilt and renovated many times over the years. Nineveh was not always the capital of the empire. During the Middle Assyrian Kingdom of the 14th-12th centuries BC, Nineveh served as the palace-city of several kings. Nineveh, along with Asshur, Nimrûd (Calah) and Khorsabad, served as one of the royal cities of the empire, But it was not until the days of Sennacherib (705-681 BC) that Nineveh became the capital of the land. Thus it was not necessarily the capital at the time of Jonah’s visitation. Finally Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC in an attack by the combined forces of the Babylonians led by Nabopolassar and the Medes under Cyaxares.

⁹ C. T. Fritsch, “Nineveh,” in *ISBE*, 3:538.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:539.

One of the curious statements about Nineveh is that found in Jonah 3:3 describing Nineveh as “an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk.” There are two possible solutions to this: (1) Archer regards this remark as indicating his preaching activities. To stop and preach repentance from time to time would have taken possibly this long. (2) A second solution is that it “may refer to the larger environs of the city known as the ‘Assyrian Triangle,’ which stretched from Khorsabad, about 23 km. (14 mi.) NE of Nineveh, to Nimrūd, about 37 km. (23 mi.) SE of Nineveh.”¹¹



Looking west along the restored northern outer wall of Nineveh toward the Nergal Gate in the distance. The circuit of the walls of Nineveh is about 12 km. [source: *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia* by Michael Roaf].

IV. THE THEME OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

Archer has expressed the theme this way:

The theme . . . is that God’s mercy and compassion extend even to the heathen nations on condition of their repentance. It is therefore Israel’s obligation to bear witness to them of the true faith; and a neglect of this task may bring the nation, like Jonah himself, to the deep waters of affliction and chastisement.¹²

V. REFLECTIONS ON JONAH CHAPTER FOUR

God delights to give opportunity for repentance . . . He is the God of mercy. But what about Jonah? Is he zealous to see others experience God's mercy, or is he stingy about God's mercy? The repentance of Nineveh is not the climax of the book. Yes, the evangelistic campaign was accomplished and the statistics were reported, but there is a greater climax to the book yet coming. The book which began with Jonah and God has now returned to Jonah and God. Nineveh must fade out of the picture—indeed, the repentance of Nineveh in Jonah's day gave a very lengthy extension of life to this Assyrian stronghold. In fact, Nineveh would last well over a hundred years, for it was not until 612 BC that Nineveh finally fell. For the meantime, the business at Nineveh was finished . . . but not God's work in His prophet!

A. *Jonah's Displeasure over God's Mercy (4:1-4)*

As we come to Jonah chapter four, we may be shocked to find that the mighty prophet of old is still very human. Now his true feelings come out: “But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry” (vs 2). The Hebrew text says something like “and it was hot to him” which I suppose is their way of saying that Jonah became a little bit hot under the collar. Does this seem strange to you that this man in the ministry of our Lord was actually repulsed by the results of Nineveh? Why would this be? The answer is seen in Jonah's prayer in vv 2-3:

¹¹ C. T. Fritsch, “Nineveh,” in *ISBE*, 3:538.

¹² Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 289.

² He prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity." ³ "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."

Listen to these revealing words: he knows that this God is gracious and compassionate, but this knowledge of his has not yet been absorbed by his own heart. Frank Gaebelin once said, "he had not yet learned to look beyond the horizon of his own people to the wideness of God's mercy."

Applicational Thoughts

Yes, there is a wideness in God's mercy. It extends beyond ourselves, beyond our families, beyond our own race . . . beyond our own countrymen. There is a wider brotherhood of men on earth that not all have eyes to see. God's mercy must not be bounded. There is a statement in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus that certainly is a truth: "As is His majesty, so is His mercy!" All of creation testifies to the majesty of God, but He is just as merciful as He is majestic! God's mercy is for all, and when we come "just as we are" to the cross and find forgiveness in Jesus we become part of God's family to which none are barred. With our new life, we find that our citizenship is in heaven. Who I am by birth is now secondary to the fact that I am first and foremost a Christian.

There is a wideness in God's mercy that binds us one in Him. Our stinginess of God's mercy must give way to His unbounded compassion for the lost! This stinginess can run very deep; it certainly did for Jonah, for it even brought him to a point of wanting God to take his life rather than having to yield to the way God Himself was. This is not a very pretty picture of Jonah but at least he took his complaint to God and God heard that prayer. Notice carefully how God answers: "Do you have good reason to be angry? (vs 4). God is saying to Jonah, "I hear your prayer, but is your complaint really legitimate?" Notice that God does not grant his request for death. Many are the foolish prayers of the saints of God which we are fortunate God in His grace does not answer! God knows us so well . . . every thought and motive of the heart is intimately known by Him. God is not fooled by Jonah's haphazard request to die. God knows that is just a cover-up for Jonah's real problem (anger), and thus God puts His finger ever so gently on Jonah's sin: "Jonah, be honest now, do you really have a reasonable ground for this 'anger' of yours?"

B. God's Object Lesson for Jonah (4:5-8)

Verses 1-4 revealed that Jonah did not know God's compassion. Now, verses 5-8 demonstrate Jonah's selfishness.

God responded to Jonah's prayer, but notice that Jonah did not answer God's question. God was right: there was no legitimate or reasonable grounds for Jonah to be angry. But this friend Jonah of ours is a stubborn fellow. He builds himself a shelter to protect himself from the sun and then crawls off to see whether Nineveh will yet receive God's judgment.

Perhaps Jonah was waiting to see how long Nineveh could keep up this change of behavior. Jonah reminds us of someone else that God's Word has introduced us to: the elder brother of the prodigal son. In the parable of the prodigal son, we are given a picture of the heart of God who always rejoices in the return of a son to Himself. But strangely, there is this elder brother who was not big enough to rejoice in the forgiveness of this returning brother. Jonah is just like that—he finds no joy in the repentance of the Ninevites . . . he is unsympathetic. This problem in his attitude displeases the Lord, and God conceives a little object lesson to

shake Jonah out of this. God causes a plant to grow up to give Jonah shade, but then allows it to wither away on account of a worm. Dejected, Jonah again begs to die: "Death is better to me than life" (vs 8). One might think that Jonah had deep psychological problems, for he seems to be suicide prone. He wants to die when he sees the Ninevites repenting, and he wants to die when his little shade tree withers, thus removing his protection from the blistering hot sun.

We also notice that Jonah is never late for God's appointments: God appointed a great fish, God appointed a plant, God appointed a worm, and God appointed a scorching east wind. Of the four, Jonah liked only one—Jonah really appreciated that plant. In fact, Jonah is more happy over that plant than he is over the repentance of the 120,000 Ninevites. That plant is his comfort . . . with it he had protection. Without it, he was miserable. But the reason he has it is because God was compassionate towards him. Jonah didn't deserve the tree . . . he didn't work for the tree . . . he didn't take care of the tree. But God had compassion on Jonah by giving him this shade tree. God was under no obligation to give Jonah this shade tree, and God was just as righteous when He took the shade tree anyway. But it sure upset ole Jonah when God withdrew His compassion on Jonah. Jonah, we see, is stingy. He likes God's compassion, but he doesn't care that others also receive God's compassion. He is stingy . . . he is selfish. One of my professors used to say, "A life that is wrapped up in itself makes a very small package."

C. The Final Dialogue (4:9-11)

Once again, God heard Jonah's prayer . . . his begging for death, and so God comes closer (so to speak) for a little talk with Jonah. God says to him, "You had compassion on that plant." But Jonah did not create the plant . . . he did not nourish it . . . and furthermore, the plant had no eternal value. Jonah only cared for the plant as long as there was some benefit in it for him.

Oh that we would look long and hard at those little words in vs 11: "Should I not have compassion?" God says. This is the real message of the whole book! Listen, and you can sense the heart-throb of God Himself: "Jonah, I would like to say something to you. You didn't create that plant, but I created all these people in Nineveh. You didn't nourish that plant, but day after day I give life to them and care for them. And Jonah, there is one thing more: You felt a sense of loss over that plant which is only a temporary, inanimate object. And how do you think I feel as the Creator over 120,000 individuals who are headed to an eternity without Christ?"

"Should I not have compassion? Should I not have pity?" Those words come thundering from the very heart of God . . . a loving God who desperately wants to pour out His compassion to those who are lost. Yes, this is the heart of the book. In fact, it is the heart of missions . . . God who has compassion and pity on those dead in sin. But it also reveals the heart of a servant of God whose heart was not touched with the passion of God in missions.

I think God would have said something more to Jonah also. "Jonah, furthermore, you said you wished to die. I'm not going to take your life. But there will come a time when I will take a life . . . it will be the life of My own Son. You felt the loss of a plant. But Jonah, I shall have the pain of the loss of My Son, because of the way I love these whom you have had no compassion for." Here, then, is what we need to take away from this book:

Our stinginess of God's mercy must give way to His unbounded compassion for the lost!