

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

JONAH

The book of Jonah is unlike any other of the Minor Prophets or any other of the Bible. In its style and contents it is strictly a historical narrative. It is not so much an oracle or prediction as a type. The interest centers not so much in the message of the prophet as in the prophet himself. More than any other book of the Bible it has been assailed, ridiculed, tortured and wrested from its simple, straightforward record of facts, and pronounced a fiction, an allegory, a parable, or a vision. It needs scarcely to be said that the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ forever settles the question of its authenticity and genuineness for every Christian.

1. *Jonah was a native of Gath-hepher, a town of Lower Galilee, II Kings 14:25.*

He was of the tribe of Zebulun, and a subject of the Northern Kingdom. From the passage of II Kings 14:23-25, we learn that Jonah lived and testified during some portion of the reign of Jeroboam II., which, according to Neteler, extended from 789 to 749 B. C. But according to Home, Angus, Usher, and others, his reign antedates this by some fifty years. Somewhere between B. C., 850-750 Jonah flourished, probably nearer the former than the latter date. More than eight centuries before the advent of the Saviour he lived and prophesied and passed through his marvelous experience. He was a child when Homer, old and blind, was singing his rhapsodies on the shores of the Aegean sea; a contemporary with Lycurgus the Spartan legislator; a hundred years older than Romulus, and four hundred years older than Herodotus the historian.

Nothing of his early life, parentage (save that he was the son of Amittai) or personal history, except what is found in his book, is given us. Like Elijah the Tishbite, Amos of Tekoa, John the Baptist, he is abruptly introduced into the pages of revelation. God gathers out of the lives of His servants that which suits His purposes, and is precious in His sight, and records it in His book; over all the rest He draws His pen.

2. The book contains two well defined parts, viz,

- I. The historical narrative.
- II. The typical teaching of the narrative.

Let us note some of the features of the history,

(1) *Jonah's mission*. It was to denounce the wrath of God against the wicked city of Nineveh, 1:1, 2; 3:1-3. The call of God took him out of his own land and beyond the sphere of the prophetic testimony as generally rendered. To the capital of Assyria he was sent. The reason for such an extraordinary mission of a Jew was, that the place was given over to sin, that its wickedness proceeded largely from ignorance, and that there was a multitude of persons, particularly children, who were not responsible for the state of the city, 4:11, cf. 1:2.

That Nineveh was as large and as densely populated as the book indicates is attested by trustworthy witnesses. Diodorus Siculus says it was sixty miles in circuit; Herodotus somewhat less. This would correspond to the statement that it was “**three days' journey**” in extent.

Perhaps the view entertained by many is well grounded, viz., that Nineveh consisted of a group or aggregation of cities, separated from one another by parks, gardens, walls and fortifications. If we take the parallelogram in Central Assyria covered with remains of buildings we shall have an extent equal to all that is affirmed as to its magnitude. Koyunjik is about eighteen miles from Nimroud; Khorsabad about the same from Karamless; Khorsabad about fourteen from Koyunjik; and Karamless about the same from Nimroud; so that the entire circuit would be about sixty miles.

Jonah (4:11) mentions the children who were unable to discern between their right and left hands as 120,000, which would give the whole population as somewhere between 700,000 and 1,000,000. To this city, with its teeming population, its imposing temples and stupendous palaces, its idolatry and wickedness, Jonah was sent.

(2) *His flight*, 1:15. The mission was very distasteful to the prophet; so much so that he determined not to obey the divine command; and he “**rose up to flee to Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord.**” Of course it is not to be imagined that Jonah was ignorant of the divine omnipresence, for David had already set forth this truth in sublime language in Psalm 139:7-9. He fled that he might get away from his duty as the Lord's prophet, cf. Exodus 3:4.

No doubt a variety of motives combined to prompt a course at once wicked and foolish. Fear for his personal safety may have had something to do with his flight. The Assyrians were already recognized as the enemies of Israel and were feared as the most dangerous of their foes. How could Jonah go to that hostile race and preach to them?

The chief motive is given us by the prophet himself, chap, 4:2:

“I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled unto Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”

Jonah thus seems to prefer judgment to mercy, fire to consume the Ninevites, rather than grace to lead them to repentance and forgiveness.

Perhaps, likewise, he thought of the dishonor that might come to the Lord if He appeared to be changeful and inconsistent; perhaps, too, of the charge that might be laid against himself as a false prophet, who predicted an overthrow which never took place.

Poor man! Yet not unlike the majority of God's servants in every age. How weak, pusillanimous, peevish and cowardly the most of them are. His flight was to Tarshish, either Tarassus in Spain or the Tarshish near Cilicia, a seaport of considerable commercial importance. Providence seemed actually to favor his disobedience; but facilities for doing wrong are not to be construed as indications of divine permission. If we flee from duty and go to the west when we are bidden go to the east, it will be found at length that the very easiness of the road only leads into more mischief and the terrors of death.

“Jonah took his measures, but God took His also. He let the willful man have his way to a certain point, till quite committed to his folly; then He began to work and to restore His servant by terrible things in righteousness.”

A storm suddenly arose, and the ship was in great peril. The seamen threw the cargo overboard to lighten the laboring vessel. They rowed hard to bring her to the land, but all in vain. The angry sea grew more furious, and the helpless prophet, well knowing the cause of all suggested the only expedient to secure the safety of the ship. The hands of the sailors cast him forth. Jonah went down out of sight into the abyss, and the sea was calm.

(2) *Jonah's miraculous preservation*, 1:17; 2:1-10.

It is a marvelous account, but in no degree absurd or incredible. It is quite fashionable to sneer at it, and treat it as a fable, a myth, too gross and monstrous to be for a moment believed. Even some professing Christians smile incredulously when “Jonah and the whale” are mentioned: they cannot well conceal their contempt for the story.

The early Christians believed it, for they painted the prophet and the fish in the rough frescoes they made in the catacombs at Rome.

Our Lord Jesus Christ believed it, and has set the seal of His almighty approbation and confirmation on it once and again, Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29, 30, 32. Christ declares that Jonah was a type of His own death and resurrection, that as the prophet was a “sign” to Nineveh, so was He a “Sign” to the people of Israel. The Lord prepared, or appointed (LXX), a fish which swallowed down the recreant prophet. It is not said He created it at the moment; He ordained that it should be in readiness to receive Jonah into its capacious maw. In all likelihood, it was a species of shark (*pesce-cane*, the dog fish, Italian sailors call it), which is common in the Mediterranean, which has an enormous throat, and which sometimes attains a length of twenty-five feet or more, with space in its bulk ample enough to contain the prophet's body. The miraculous element lies, not in his being swallowed alive, but in his being kept alive in his moving grave for three days.

Great, indeed, too great for mere nature, but not too great for Him who is above nature, the Almighty.

(3) *His preaching and its results*, chap. 3. Jonah's message was appalling; his one piercing cry from street to street was, "**Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.**" The probation was short, narrowed into one month and ten days. God sometimes speaks to a nation or to an individual but once. If His voice is not then heard, it is heard no more except in the thundertones of judgment. The results were wonderful. Nineveh heard and repented. One sermon did the work; one trumpet blast shook the city out of its sin and carnal security. The repentance was immediate, profound, universal and acceptable. Noah preached one hundred and twenty years in vain; two angels visited Sodom and announced its doom, in vain; three years Jesus with solemn voice cried to Israel, "Repent," but few heeded the call. Under one sermon by one prophet a vast heathen city repented in ashes and sackcloth. King and noble, with diadem and spangle laid by, down in the dust with the meanest subject and slave, the dumb brutes sharing the universal humiliation. It was a world spectacle worth seeing.

(4) *What explanation are we to give as regards the remarkable success of Jonah's mission?* It certainly seems strange and unusual that such an effect should follow the preaching of a solitary and unknown man. What credentials had he to show? What proofs that his message was from God? He wrought no miracle to attest his authority or the truthfulness of his message. His own bare word as against the voice of a million was all he had. Yes, he had more.

Though he wrought no miracle himself, a stupendous sign had been wrought in his own person. He was like a dead and risen man, and he came to the Ninevites as a messenger from the unseen world. The sailors had doubtless spread abroad the report of the storm, and how the sea had become calm.

The people of Nineveh heard and believed the report; and when Jonah appeared in their streets, they virtually said: "*Behold, here is the man who was entombed in the sea monster for three days and nights. He has been in the very region of death and of Hades; behold him. And he has returned to earth and to us with this frightful message.*"

Hence their repentance.

3. *Turn we now to the prophetic or typical features of the book.* It is here that Jonah differs widely from all the other prophetic books of Scripture, viz., not the prophecy, but the prophet, is the main subject. There is nothing in the book that speaks of the future. The testimony Jonah rendered Nineveh was a present testimony, designed for the generation that then lived.

Manifestly, the great aim of it is to present the prophet himself as a prediction or type of Christ. It is to this feature our Lord refers in the passages above cited; this it is which gives the book its supreme value, and makes it the book for all time. Some of the features of his typical character may be pointed out:

(1) *Jonah in the body of the fish was a type of Christ under the power of death.* The prophet while in his strange sepulchre made use of certain Psalms with which no doubt he was familiar, and which expressed exactly his experience and dark forebodings. He quotes more or less literally Psalm 18:4-6 (cf. 2:2, 3, 4, 5, 7); Psalm 31:6, 7, 22 (cf. 2:4, 8); Psalm 13:7 (cf. 2:3); etc.

But there are allusions in the prayer of Jonah to the great Messianic Psalms, Psalm 22; 59; 16.

Some of the words our Lord employed to express His feelings when death was fast closing in upon Him were used also by Jonah, for he, too, seemed to be sinking into the depths of sheol and passing into the realm of the unseen world; the rivers of the ocean whirled him round in their vast eddies; the rocky roots of the mountains seemed closing in the gates of the world against his return; **“the billows and waves”** of God passed over him. A striking picture of what Jesus endured, Psalm 49:1, 2. Jonah calls the belly of the fish **“the belly of hell,”** or *sheol*. To this entombment Jesus refers in Matthew 12:39, 40; and He translates it, **“the heart of the earth.”**

Herein is Jonah a sign; as he was three days and nights in the fish, so Jesus was to be three days and nights in the heart of the earth—under the power of death. The sign had its fulfillment in those awful days when the body of the Son of God lay in Joseph’s tomb, and His human soul entered the world of disembodied spirits.

(2) *He is a type of Christ’s resurrection.* At the bidding of the Lord, the fish vomited out upon dry land the prophet alive. Jonah spake to the Lord; the Lord spake to the obedient fish. After God had spoken it was impossible he should longer be held in his prison. In 2:6, Jonah says, **“The earth with her bars was about me forever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption (or the pit), O Lord my God.”** It is almost the identical language of Psalm 16:10; **“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (*sheol*); neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.”** Peter quotes the words, applying them to the resurrection of Christ, saying, **“Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death; because it was impossible that he should be holden of it,”** Acts 2:22-27. Matchless “sign,” indeed, was this of the prophet Jonah.

On the horizon of the Old Testament there always blazed this sign of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus—the sign of the prophet Jonah.

(3) *The prophet was also a type after his recovery from the sea.* It was after his figurative death and resurrection that Jonah was sent to the Gentiles. It is evident from II Kings 14:25 that Jonah prophesied in Israel and to Israel. But he is sent away from the chosen people to proclaim the word of the Lord to a great heathen city. God turned away from Israel to show mercy to the Gentiles. Now this was the sign which the Lord Jesus put before the Pharisees. Such was the moral state of the people that He would be rejected by them and be put to death. But raised from the dead, He would go forth in the power of resurrection life to proclaim salvation to the Gentiles. In obedience to His command the disciples went everywhere preaching repentance and remission of sins in His name. Thus, the Greater than Jonah was a sign to the Jews of His day, a Saviour to everyone who believes.

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