

Jonah

Fall 2008 Adult Bible Classes, Sunday Morning

prepared by Bob Young

Introduction

Living messages of the OT prophets

Background of text, social setting, and prophet provides parallels in our day

Points of interest

Jonah, “dove”

Different from other Minor prophets, narrative of events rather than collection of prophetic oracles or sayings. In fact, the recorded preaching of Jonah is only eight words (3.4)

Is Jonah a symbolic name, is the book parable or allegory? Jesus treated Jonah as a historical character, cf. Matt. 12.39,41.

Prominence of miraculous events in the book (unique among writing prophets)

Historical setting

Mentioned also in 2 Kings 14:25

Date determined by reference to Jeroboam II (782-753 B.C.) We should place the events of the book early in that period.

Biblical backgrounds, Israel in prosperity and ease (cf. Amos, other 8th c. prophets). Other dominant power was Assyria, with capital city of Nineveh.

Nineveh today represented by two mounds in Iraq, across the Tigris from Mosul. Circumference of outer defensive wall is 7 ½ miles, journey of 1 ½ miles takes one to center of enclosed areas.

What is city of “three days journey”? Suggestions: takes three days to see principal sites in city; include larger area. Still a puzzling phrase.

Assyria was idolatrous with heathen defiance, ruthless, brutal, militant. Hated by Israelites, attitude shared by Jonah. *“He is pictured in the book...as a narrow-minded, fiercely zealous patriot; he is jealous for Jehovah and desirous of seeing the enemies of His people destroyed. The expression of divine love for a heathen nation and of God’s desire to spare it is magnified as it is shown in contrast to the spirit of the prophet. The prophet’s disposition may be somewhat defended (at least excused) when one realizes that he knew of the suffering which had been inflicted by the Assyrians on the people of the world of that day and knew that this suffering would be imposed eventually on his own people by that great ruthless power.”* (Homer Hailey)

Jonah had been accepted into the book of the twelve by the time of Sirach (Sir. 49:10). Small sections found in cave 2 at Qumran are the oldest text fragments of the book in existence. It is also represented in the leather Greek text found near the Dead Sea.

The Jonah story is referenced in Tobit 14:4 (but textual problem in Sinaiticus reads Nahum rather than Jonah) when the destruction of Jerusalem is considered an unfulfilled prophecy yet to be fulfilled. In 3 Macc. 6.8, Jonah’s deliverance is a great act of mercy by God mentioned in prayer of Eleazar. Josephus (Antiquities 9.10.2) identifies the minor prophet with the prophet of 2 Kings 14:25.

Overall theme of book is repentance.

Textual considerations

Various subdivisions within the sections, but the general overview is as follows:

- a. Call and disobedience
- b. Call and obedience

First, call and fleeing, with divine judgment, deliverance

Second, thanksgiving, deliverance

Third, call renewed and obedience, results in deliverance and mercy for Nineveh

Fourth, Jonah's displeasure, God's rebuke

Contemporary lessons

Our lessons/principles

- a. Universality of God's presence. Contrast with localized deities often seen in OT. One cannot run away from God or escape his presence (nor our duties), cf. Ps. 139. Better to obey than to risk destruction.
- b. Universality of God's concern. God is interested in all peoples, cf. Acts 10:34-35.
- c. Spiritual depression and uncertainty (as in Nineveh) create receptive audiences for God's message of hope.
- d. Conditional nature of prophecy, cf. Jer. 18:7ff (potter and clay)

Questions

- a. Have we completely escaped the idea of a localized God?
- b. Where do we find parallels to Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh and similar attitudes today?
- c. Based on a reading of Jonah, in what areas does the contemporary church especially need to consider the call to repentance?
- d. In what aspects of our lives do we reflect Jonah's desire to run away from the call and commission of God?