

BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 49

Minor Prophets – Part Three

NAHUM and JONAH

I. BACKGROUND

Why Jonah and Nahum together?

Both Jonah and Nahum are distinct from the other Minor Prophets in their subject matter; therefore, they are dealt with together. The central aspect involved in both parties is Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria.

When were they written?

The date of authorship is dependant, to some extent, upon the approach to understanding the books. If one sees Jonah as a literal occurrence, then the book would have been composed during Jonah's lifetime or shortly thereafter. That view would place the authorship around the 700's B.C. Even with a literal interpretation of the book, however, that date of authorship is not necessarily correct. Jonah is not written in the first person, and the events recorded there could have been written by someone after his lifetime. Nineveh itself fell as the Assyrian capital to the Babylonian advances in 612 B.C. Some scholars believe that Jonah 3:3 implies that Nineveh had already fallen at the time of composition. These scholars date the book after 612 B.C.

If Jonah is interpreted as an allegory or parable, then when it was written and who wrote it is a more involved question. These scholars espouse dates of composition ranging from 600 B.C. to as late as 200 B.C. (although a date this late seems preposterous in light of the reference in Ecclesiasticus to the "book of twelve." That reference means that the book of Jonah was one of the twelve Minor Prophets considered on equal par with the others by 180 B.C. It is hard to believe that a scroll composed just 20 years earlier could achieve such distinction and recognition.

Nahum is a bit easier to date. The book's central message is the threat of Yahweh's retribution against Nineveh. This sets 612 B.C., the fall of Nineveh, as an outside boundary of composition. We have another boundary for composition in Nahum 3:8 where the reference to the Assyrians' capture of Thebes, Egypt, is made. History tells us this capture

occurred in 664 and 663 B.C. This gives us a good period in which to see this prophecy's composition.

Who were Jonah and Nahum?

Jonah was most likely the Jonah son of Amittai described in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet from Gath-hepher (near Nazareth). This would be the same Jonah who prophesied that Jeroboam II would recover from Damascus a good bit of land the Syrians had previously taken from Israel.

Little is known about Nahum outside of the book of Nahum itself. Nahum's name means "comfort" or "compassion."

II. NAHUM

The text begins with a psalm written about God's goodness and character and God's vengeance upon his foes (1:1-14). Verses 1:15 – 3:7 prophesy the coming downfall of Nineveh. Verses 3:8-10 compare the fall of Nineveh to the fall of Thebes.

A. *God's Goodness and Vengeance*

Nahum 1:1 – 14 are written in the Hebrew in a poetic fashion. They set up the character of God in a way that shows both his goodness and his justice. Yahweh God is "slow to anger," "great in power," "jealous and avenging," "good," and "a refuge in times of trouble."

While God "cares for those who trust in him," he also "will not leave the guilty unpunished" for "Yahweh takes vengeance and is filled with wrath."

This vengeance is directed at Nineveh who "plots evil against Yahweh and counsels wickedness."

B. *Coming Downfall*

Nineveh is warned that "an attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, and marshal all your strength" (2:1). This scene will not be pretty for Nineveh. Along with the "crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots" will be "charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears." There will also be "many casualties,

piles of dead, bodies without number” and “people stumbling over corpses” (3:2-3).

This will come about by the hand of Yahweh, who will “show the nations [Nineveh’s] nakedness.” Yahweh does this because of the sin and culture of the Ninevites/Assyrians (3:4).

C. *Thebes Comparison*

History shows us that in 664 and 663 B.C. Assyria conquered Thebes (No-Amun) in Egypt. Assyria was reaching the zenith of its power under its king, Ashurbanipal. Ashurbanipal’s death in 627 B.C. saw the Assyrian empire begin its crumble toward eventual overthrow at the end of the century. Assyria’s overthrow of Thebes is given as the comparison of what will happen to Nineveh/Assyria itself. We see here the question, “Are you any better than Thebes?” Although Thebes was a stronghold of the mighty Egyptian empire, Thebes itself saw, at the hands of the Assyrians, “her infants dashed to pieces at the head of every street” as her nobles were sold into slavery and she was taken captive and sent in to exile (3:10).

The prophecy ends with a final word:

*Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal.
Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands
at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?
3:19*

III. JONAH

A. *The Story*

Yahweh told Jonah the Prophet to go to Nineveh and preach against the city because of its wickedness (1:1). Jonah decides against following God’s instructions and instead catches the quickest boat to Tarshish (the exact OPPOSITE direction!). While on the boat, a great storm rages threatening to capsize the boat and kill all on board. Jonah is sleeping through the storm but the scared captain awakened him. The sailors begin debating and seeking the reason for this horrible storm when Jonah confesses that God has brought the storm because of Jonah’s disobedience. Jonah explains that the folks ought to go-ahead and throw him overboard. Although they seem reluctant at first, the sailors eventually do so.

Once Jonah is thrown over, Yahweh appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah. For three days and nights, Jonah remains in the belly of the fish.

While in the fish, Jonah confesses his sin in prayer to Yahweh. Yahweh then commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto the land.

Once Jonah finds himself back on land, the word of Yahweh comes to him a second time instructing Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. This second time, Jonah obeys.

As Jonah preaches to Nineveh, Jonah proclaims that the city will be overthrown in 40 days should the city fail to repent of its atrocious sins. The citizens hear Jonah, declare a fast, and repent in mass. Even the King himself repents from his evil ways.

God sees this repentance and relents from the prophesied disaster. God's turn around angers Jonah. Jonah complains to God that this is the very reason Jonah felt secure going to Tarshish. Jonah knew God to be "gracious and compassionate," "slow to anger and abounding in love," and "a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2).

Jonah starts pouting and tells God to go ahead and take Jonah's life. As Jonah sits and broods, God causes a vine to grow over Jonah's head and shade him from the hot sun. Jonah finds the vine pleasing, but the very next day, God has a worm eat into it and the vine shrivels up. Jonah is really upset now, but God gives the moral lesson from it.

God explains that Jonah has more concern over a vine that he neither planted nor tended than Jonah sees fit for God to have over a city of 120,000 people that God made.

B. The interpretation

Scholars over history have taken three different approaches to understanding Jonah: (1) Historical, (2) Allegorical, and (3) Parabolic. Regardless of the approach taken, the impact and message of Jonah remains the same. Before exploring the message of Jonah, a brief understanding of the three approaches is useful.

(1) Historical

This approach sees the events in Jonah as historical fact. Jonah fled from God, a storm threatened the ship, Jonah was thrown overboard, a fish swallowed Jonah, three days later Jonah was regurgitated, Jonah went and preached to Nineveh, Nineveh repented, Jonah pouted, the vine grew, the vine shriveled, and God explained his concern to Jonah for the people. This viewpoint notes that the Hebrew for “great fish” does not necessitate any type of fish (whale, for example). How Jonah breathed for three days, what kind of fish could pull this off, and how Jonah could exist three days later are recognized to be feasible by the Creator God of the universe. That marine biology and human physiology would not typically “allow” such events are irrelevant should Yahweh God decide to have such happen. The same would be true of plant biology questions about what gourd would grow so quickly that it would shade Jonah while sitting watching the city and then shrivel overnight to make the point God wanted. God is certainly able to do so should he chose.

(2) Allegorical

This approach is by its very nature subjective on what it suggests. Israel is often symbolized as a dove (*cf.* Ps 74:19; Hos. 11:11). “Dove” is the meaning of the name “Jonah” in Hebrew. Some folks interpret the book as an allegory suggesting that Jonah (*a/k/a* Israel) failed in its mission to teach pagan nations about the truth of Yahweh and his kingdom. As a result, Israel (Jonah) would incur a time-out in terms of life and prosperity, but Israel would subsequently repent and be restored to its mission. There are other allegories in the Old Testament Prophets, especially in Ezekiel. These prophecies, however, are brief compared to the book of Jonah.¹

¹ See also the avengers of blood narrated by the widow of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:6f); the parable of Jotham to the Shechemites (Judg. 9:8ff), and Jehoash to King Amaziah of Judah (2 Kings 14:9).

(3) Parabolic

Many modern scholars consider Jonah much like the parables Jesus told (for example, the Good Samaritan). This view means that Jonah is to be understood for the lessons it teaches but is not to be construed as a historical narrative. This belief would fall in line with the story the prophet Nathan told King David about a man losing his sheep in order to convict David of his sin with Bathsheba. There are multiple other examples in the Old Testament of stories being told to convey and teach a truth. One major difference, however, is the length of Jonah compared to the parables. Jonah is much longer and more detailed.

C. *The Message*

A primary message we get from the New Testament references to the story is that Jonah was a type of Christ. Jesus notes in Matthew 12:38-42 and Luke 11:29-32 that as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, so Jesus would be entombed and dead for the same period. Some scholars take this a step further by adding that ultimately Jonah's "death" was because of the sins of the Ninevites. In other words, but for the Ninevite's sin, Jonah never would have been sent on the mission. These scholars then add that this is another Christ event in that Jesus' death was because of the sins of others also. One must be cautious making these types of comparisons because Jonah's predicament was also a result of Jonah's disobedience. The same is NOT true of Jesus.

The overarching message of Jonah is found in the fourth chapter. There, we read that God is concerned with ALL people of the world, even those that do not know him. We know that holiness is a concern of God. We know that haughtiness has no place in the heart of God's servant. We also learn that God's call and evangelism is to be answered and honored by God's chosen, even IF GOD IS GOING TO SAVE FOLKS ANYWAY. Like so much else God calls us to, we are to answer and obey, whether it seems a big deal to us or not.

IV. POINTS FOR HOME

1. God reigns over all peoples
2. God cares for all people.
3. We are to care for all people.
4. We are to treat people as God would.
5. Obey God, even in the small things.