

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 36

Jonah

Hebrew review *Aleph - Qoph*

Let me be real clear: I have a serious phobia about teaching on Jonah.

One summer as a young man, I had the amazing opportunity to work for a church south of Houston, Texas. Part of my responsibilities that summer included preaching on alternating Sunday nights. The sermon preparation was fun, but even more enjoyable was getting to deliver the sermon.

Of course like most every public speaker, I had an acute inability to fairly assess whether my sermons were going well. In my own mind were ideas that I thought worthy of preaching, but whether I was right on the worthiness, and whether I was adequately delivering the sermon was determined by the congregation, not me.

I remember well the Sunday I decided to preach on Jonah. I had prepared by reading the book, both in English and at least partially in Hebrew (at the time I had taken only two years of Hebrew, so my reading was likely not too thorough!) I had also read through a few commentaries on the book. I had written a good three-point sermon, with what I had hoped was an attention-getting introduction as well as a poignant, thought-provoking conclusion. I thought, “I am ready to go!”

After the singing, and after a prayer, I stood up to deliver my thirty-minute sermon. I began by telling the story. The word of the Lord came to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to the Assyrians. Jonah rebelled and left by ship to Tarsus. God brought a life-threatening storm upon the ship, and the crew figured out Jonah was to blame. They threw Jonah overboard, and were moved to faith as the storm quieted down. A large fish consumed Jonah holding Jonah in the fish’s belly for three days and nights. Jonah repented, and the fish vomited Jonah up. God re-instructed Jonah to go to Nineveh, and this time he obeyed. Jonah preached repentance and the Ninevites repented, much to Jonah’s chagrin. Jonah then went east of the city and pouted. God caused a plant to grow up over Jonah giving him shade, but God then sent a worm to destroy the plant and teach a lesson.

The story was already known by most everyone, and I had hoped to have conveyed it well before moving on to the next sermon points, discussing and then applying the lessons from the story. Afterwards, I was trying to figure out whether I had successfully communicated anything of worth when the encouragers of the

congregation came up to me. I visited with lots of folks, but basically heard the same comment over and over:

“You did real good except for one thing – YOU NEVER SAID ‘JONAH’. THE WHOLE SERMON YOU CALLED HIM NOAH! YOU JUST PREACHED ON NOAH AND THE BIG FISH!”

I developed a complex. In 30 years I only once taught on Jonah. In fact, in typing this lesson, so far I have typed “Noah” twice and had to edit it! The odds of me making it through an oral presentation of this material without at least one “noah” are nil! Yet, the story is before us, and so we try...

HISTORY

One of the first questions often posed in a discussion on Jonah is, “Was it real?” People debate whether the story is a factual account of a large fish gobbling and then regurgitating Jonah or whether it is more akin to a C.S. Lewis story that has true lessons to teach, using a story medium to convey them (think *Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Great Divorce*). That is a subject that is almost moot to discuss. God certainly has the ability to make a fish grand enough to accomplish the task. He similarly has the ability to sustain life for three days and nights under water with no breathing apparatus. He is God. But we also know that he has chosen to communicate his truth in a wide variety of ways, both symbolic, in stories and parables, and through illustrations. Regardless of the actual events that occurred, most everyone can agree that the story of Jonah is not a lesson in ichthyology (“the study of fish”). Our goal needs to be to understand the narrative for *its purposes* rather than to debate the feasibility of the events.

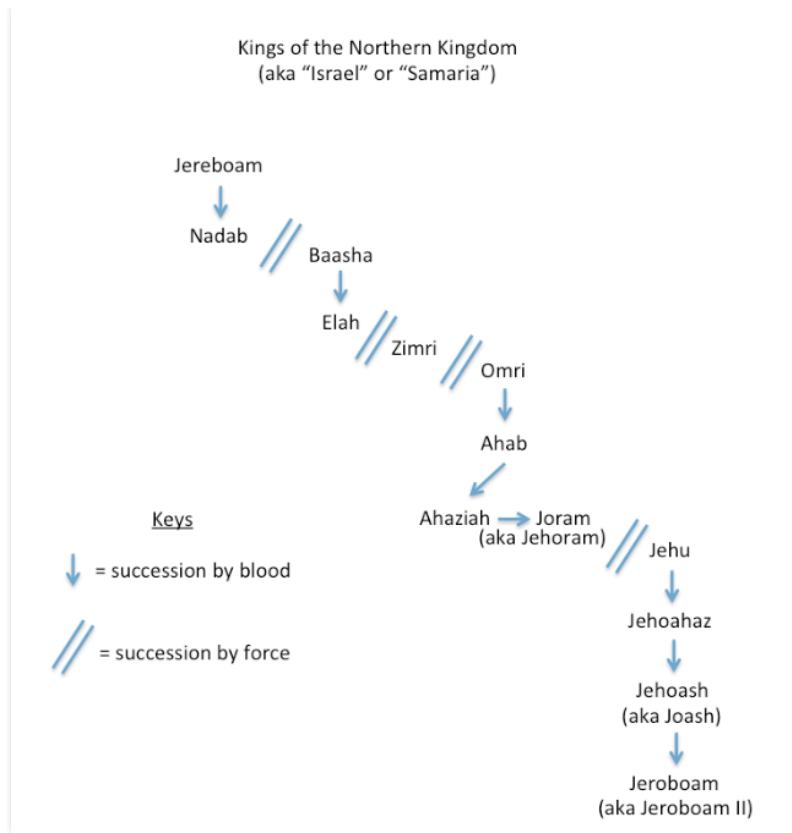
This is especially important as we consider the book of Jonah. This book has some incredible Hebrew word play, some very important messages both for Israel in its day and for the church in perpetuity, and it asks questions on an individual level that challenge people who wish to live right before God. In four short chapters, just 48 verses, we have so much more than simply a fascinating narrative. This is what we will focus on in two lessons.

So as we now consider the history of the story, we are not looking to verify the events as unfolded. We are trying to understand the historical time and place of the story to help clarify the messages of the book. Jonah begins identifying his place in Israel’s history with the first phrase,

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1).

Jonah the son of Amittai was a prophet from Gath-hepher who spoke the word of the LORD during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel, according to 2 Kings 14:25.

To place this in the chronology of our lessons thus far, we last studied Jehu, the king in Israel who assassinated the prior king of Israel (Joram). Jehu then reigned in Israel for 28 years (2 Kings 10:36). Following Jehu's death, his son Jehoahaz (who "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD"¹ 2 Kings 13:2) reigned for 17 years. Following Jehoahaz to the throne was his son Jehoash who reigned for 16 years and also "was evil in the sight of the LORD (2 Kings 13:11). Jehoash, grandson to Jehu, is the father to the king who reigned during the time of Jonah.



Jeroboam² the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign... He did evil in the sight of the LORD... He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant³ Jonah the son of Amittai⁴, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher (2 Kings 14:23-25).

¹ Although at one point in his reign, we should note that he "sought the favor of the LORD and the LORD listened to him" (2 Kings 13:4). This was only a temporary reprieve for Israel.

² Scholars call him "Jeroboam II" to distinguish him from the Jeroboam who was the first king of Israel in the divided monarchy.

³ In the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament by Jewish scholars in the last few centuries before Christ, abbreviated "LXX"), the translators work to make sure the identification of the prophet Jonah in the book of Jonah with this reference to Jonah in 2 Kings 14. In the LXX, when Jonah identifies himself to the sailors while the ship is in storm conditions, the translators added a self-identifying phrase not found in the Hebrew text, "servant of the Lord." By adding this reference, the translators are tying Jonah back into the identification of the

This places events surrounding Jonah in the reign of Jeroboam II which different scholars place as early as 793-753 BC or as late as 786-746 BC. For centuries, the major world power to the north of Israel was Assyria. During the reign of Jeroboam II, however, Assyria was experiencing significant internal weakness. Without the active force of a strong Assyria, there was a “power vacuum” in the region. Jeroboam II was able to expand his kingdom northward and establish significant material prosperity.⁵

As a result, during the active time of Jonah as a prophet, even though Israel and their king “did evil in the sight of the LORD,” God in his mercy stabilized Israel’s borders and enlarged their territory. Jonah, no doubt to the appreciation of the king, prophesied this very expansion. Jonah was one of the few prophets who did not bring to the Israelite king doom and gloom over the idolatry and evils of his day. Somehow Jonah was able to prophesy success to the king, in spite of the evil.

Interestingly, this is the same Jonah who was called to preach repentance in the face of coming judgment to Nineveh, a great city in the empire of Israel’s historic (and future) enemy to the north, the super-power Assyria. (Not to be confused with “Syria,” the minor kingdom in the Damascus region that was a continual thorn in the side of the Israelites). By the end of Jeroboam II’s reign, Israel was just a generation away from the Assyrian conquest, which fulfilled an earlier prophecy to the first king Jeroboam,

The LORD will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water, and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers and scatter them beyond the Euphrates [the land of Assyria] (1 Kings 14:15).

In trying to figure out Jonah’s historical frame of reference, we should add two more insights from Scripture. First, when Jehu took over as king of Israel, having assassinated Joram, the LORD told Jehu his sons would sit on the throne of Israel, but only to the fourth generation (2 Kings 10:30). Jonah’s king Jeroboam II was the third generation son of Jehu. There was only one more son to sit on the throne from that lineage. Second, God had used earlier prophets to aid and assist foreigners, showing his concern beyond the borders of Israel. Elijah had assisted the widow of Zarephath (belonging to the Sidonian kingdom) in 1 Kings 17.

prophet in 2 Kings 14 who is not simply “Jonah the son of Amittai,” but is also the Lord’s “servant.”

⁴ “Jonah” means “dove” and Amittai means “truth.” Although we should always use care in reading too much into names, a number of scholars consider the implications of Jonah as the dove who is the son of truth within the context of the story and Messianic projections.

⁵ These terms and ideas are credited to noted Assyriologist and Old Testament scholar Lawson Younger, in private correspondence dated June 10, 2011.

Elisha healed the Syrian commander Na'aman of leprosy (2 Kings 5) and ventured to the Syrian capital of Damascus where he prophesied the reign of the usurper Hazael as king to the Syrian throne (2 Kings 8:7ff). So Jonah was not the first prophet to venture forth from Israel and aid non-Israelites.

To more thoroughly study the historical information relevant to Jonah, we should also consider Nineveh. Beyond the history given in the Bible, we have volumes of historical information from written sources recovered by archaeologists and explorers. Nineveh was one of several great cities in the Assyrian Empire. The empire had reached great strength under earlier kings discussed in earlier lessons. In particular, during the reign of Jehu, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III noted significant tribute from Israel. Shalmaneser's grandson Adad-nirari III (805-782 BC) also claimed to have taken tribute from Israel.⁶ But after Adad-nirari III, the Assyrian empire suffered even more decline, as mentioned earlier. During the reign of Israel's Jeroboam II, Assyria was "rather weak" and the "king's authority fluctuated according to the amount of power the provisional governors usurped."⁷

Near-eastern archaeologist Seton Lloyd considered the reigns of Assyrian kings during the time of Jeroboam II to be a "period of comparative inertia."⁸ Michael Roaf, a former director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, calls this time, "a phase of relative weakness" when provisional governors were acting as kings.⁹

This would change in 745 BC with the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III, but during the time of Jeroboam II, Assyria was beset with a number of unusual difficulties. In

⁶ Like several other Assyrian inscriptions, Israel was known as "the land of Omri" the well known founder of an earlier dynasty of Israelite kings. See generally, Parrot, Andre, *Nineveh and the Old Testament*, (Philosophical Library 1955) at 38. Younger translates a Stela with an inscription of Adad-nirari III which he dates at 797 BC or later as, "I received the tribute of Joash the Samarian." Samaria was the capital city of king Joash of Israel. Hallo, William and Younger, Lawson, *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions From the Biblical World* (Brill 2003), at 276.

⁷ Nemet-Nejat, Karen, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Hendrickson 2008), at 37.

⁸ Lloyd, Seton, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia, From the Old Stone Age to the Persian Conquest* (Thames and Hudson 1978), at 188.

⁹ Roaf, Michael, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, (Andromeda Oxford 1990), at 175. A number of scholars consider Jonah's text anachronistic when it indicates the king was in Nineveh at a time when Nineveh was not the ruling capital of Assyria. The Hebrew idea of "king" could just as easily be the ruling governor of Nineveh. This need not be an anachronism. Near Eastern scholar A. R. Millard suggested that the ruling governors might have been members of the local princely houses. Millard, A. R., "Assyrians and Arameans," *Iraq* 45 (1983) 106. Younger uses Millard's idea and points to the Tell Fakhariya Stela as illustrating that the Assyrian "governor" (*saknu* in Akkadian) could be labeled a king (*mlk*) in Aramiac/Hebrew.

just a seven-year period, between 765 and 759 BC, Assyria suffered multiple internal revolts and saw two severe outbreaks of the plague, with undoubtedly devastating results on the population.¹⁰ Another very rare occurrence in Nineveh happened during the reign of Jeroboam II. On June 15, 763 BC, a near total eclipse of the sun occurred from 9:33 a.m. to 12:19 p.m.¹¹ This eclipse was a significant event recorded in lists of the day. No doubt, it was highly disturbing to the people!

A final note on this time in Assyrian history concerns an external threat by the nation of Urartu. Urartu was the nation to the north of Assyria and it had been threatening to invade Assyria. This would undoubtedly give a level of great concern when someone like Jonah came preaching that “in 40 days Nineveh will be overturned!”

So in the time of Jonah, we have the following historical notes:

1. God had used prophets to reach outside the nation of Israel. (Since the exodus, Israel was responsible for modeling truth to the outside nations.)
2. Israel was stuck in moral decay.
3. Israel’s line of kings was soon coming to an end.
4. At some point a power likely from the land of Assyria/Nineveh (north of the Euphrates) was going to conquer Israel.
5. During the reign of Jeroboam II, Assyria was in a state of turmoil and internal strife. Undoubtedly this was a part of the reason Jeroboam II was able to reassert full territorial rights over some previously lost lands.

¹⁰ Boardman, John, *et al.*, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, (Cambridge 1991), 2d ed., Vol. III, Pt 2, at 23; Roaf, at 175. The plagues are noted in the “*limmu* lists,” which were ancient records kept by a designated *limmu* or official record keeper in Assyria. The *limmu* list at the British Museum notes the following problems in the area during this time period: (1) In 765 BC, “a plague.” (2) In 763, a “revolt in the city of Assur” and “an eclipse of the sun.” (3) In 762, a “revolt in the city of Assur.” (4) In 761, a “revolt in the city of Arrapha.” (4) In 760, another “revolt in the city of Arrapha.” (5) In 759, a “revolt in the city of Guzana” as well as “a plague.” As transl’d by Luckenbill, Daniel, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, (Greenwood Press 1968), Vol. 2 at 435.

¹¹ See, *limmu* list in footnote 8. Astronomers are able to date this with precision using current knowledge. See, N.A.S.A. at website, <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEhistory/SEhistory.html>. This has become the keystone for dating the chronology of Assyrian kings. Roaf, *Ibid*. In private correspondence noted in footnote 5, Younger gives the statistic that the eclipse was 97% in Nineveh.

6. Jonah had the luxury of prophesying these pro-Israel conquests of Jeroboam II.
7. During the life of Jonah, God was extending mercy to Israel, in spite of Israel's idolatry and sin (2 Kings 14:24-27).
8. Revolts, plagues, a full solar eclipse, and undoubtedly other unexplainable events no doubt left the Ninevites concerned about what was going on with the gods and the heavens!
9. Nineveh was facing a military threat from the Urartu nation in the north.

With this historical perspective in mind, we consider now certain aspects of the Jonah story in more detail. Rather than parsing through the text verse by verse, a job we leave to the many wonderful commentaries and books on Jonah, we will focus these two lessons on certain themes and ideas that are found in the text, as well as the New Testament references to Jonah.

THEMES

God's mercy and concern extends to the nations.

There is something comforting in thinking of God as "ours" rather than "theirs." The idea that we might have some special connection with the Almighty that ensures us special status in his eyes, lends us confidence and security. Have you ever heard someone before a sporting event pray for victory? It is as if God will hear one side's prayer over against the other side.

Jonah was an Israelite. God had defined the nation in removing them from Egypt and uprooting the native Canaanites to give their land to Israel. God had "chosen" Israel to be "his people." God entered into a special covenant with Israel, revealing himself in ways he had not revealed himself to other nations. Israel was God's "treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Dt. 7:6; 14:2, etc.).

Jonah lived at a time when he could see and prophesy God's blessings on his people, even in the midst of their own sin. That was not a bad gig! Then God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against the evil there. Jonah suspected this might lead to a turn in Nineveh's behavior as we read afterwards, in anger Jonah said,

O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in *my country*? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster (Jonah 4:2).

Of course Jonah knew God was that way in Israel. Jonah had prophesied that God would execute mercy on Israel in his days rather than the judgment deserved. Yet the idea of God extending such mercy to others really galled Jonah, and he wanted no part of it. Jonah would sooner disobey God, than see God's mercy set out on those outside his group!

Are we surprised to read of Jonah sleeping in the midst of a tremendous storm that threatened to break up the ship, a storm of such force that the sailors were throwing cargo overboard and beseeching their own gods for aid? The story says that Jonah,

Had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep (Jonah 1:6).

The Hebrew is written to emphasize that Jonah was in a deep sleep (hence the translation "fast asleep." The Jewish translators of the Septuagint emphasized this point by saying Jonah was snoring!¹² Jonah knew the solution to the storm was to throw him overboard (Jonah 1:11-12), but until the crew directly asked him about it, he seemed content to sleep and let them all die with him!

Jonah may have been a prophet of God, but Jonah certainly did not share God's heart for others! In the midst of Jonah's self-centered and Israel-centered focus, God worked in compassion and concern for the lost and un-chosen.

Perhaps this is best illustrated by the uses of various terms for God in the text. There are three different terms we should focus on:

1. *Yahweh*. This is the name of God as revealed to Moses and reflected in the worship of the Israelites.
2. *Elohim*. This is the generic Hebrew term for "god" and can be used in reference to Yahweh as the one true God or in reference to the many gods that are falsely thought to exist in the theology of the pantheists.
3. *Ha-elohim*. This is the Hebrew term "*elohim*" or "god" with a Hebrew *hay* (ה) added to the front. The added Hebrew letter makes the word more specific, like adding the English definite article "the" before a noun. It takes "god" and turns it into "*THE God*."

With these terms in hand, we consider again the story. It was **Yahweh's** word that told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah sought to flee the presence of **Yahweh**. **Yahweh** hurled the storm at the ship. Each sailor then cried out to their own

¹² Ἰωνᾶς δὲ κατέβη εἰς τὴν κοίλην τοῦ πλοίου καὶ ἐκάθευδεν καὶ ἔρρηγγεν. "But Jonah climbed down into the hollow of the ship and he was sleeping and snoring."

elohim, not knowing **Yahweh**. The captain awoke Jonah and told Jonah to cry out to Jonah's **elohim**, again not knowing **Yahweh**, but hoping that *the god (ha-elohim)* would help.

After casting lots, the crew determined that Jonah was at fault and peppered him with questions. Jonah answered that **Yahweh** was in fact God ("**Elohim**") of heaven and the God who made the sea. Jonah had already told the men he was running from **Yahweh**. The sailors tried desperately to save the ship and themselves without resorting to heaving Jonah overboard. As a last resort, they decided to throw Jonah from the boat, but before they did so, they prayed to **Yahweh** asking him to save them, and to forgive them for casting Jonah overboard. Once Jonah was discharged from the vessel, the sea stilled and the men feared **Yahweh** and offered sacrifices to him.

We see in the first chapter, even through Jonah's disobedience, God hears the prayers of the non-Israelite sailors and rescues them, bringing them to faith. There is an irony that on land, the apostate Israel continued to rely on God's gracious mercy in spite of worshipping idols, while the idol-worshipping pagan sailors are moved to faith!

The names used in the story continue into the second chapter as **Yahweh** appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah, holding him three days and nights. Jonah prays to **Yahweh** a beautiful psalm. **Yahweh** then causes the fish to vomit Jonah out upon the dry land.

Here we merge into chapter three as the word of **Yahweh** again comes to Jonah telling him to take **Yahweh**'s message to Nineveh. The Ninevites believed **Elohim** ("God") was going to overthrow their city for their sins, yet they did not know him as **Yahweh**. The king called on the people to cry out to **elohim** in hopes *the God (ha-Elohim)* would "turn from his fierce anger". The king's prayer is answered, and God (**Elohim**) relented of the disaster.

Here the king and the people do not know Yahweh as God, but they believe that a God is going to punish them. Unlike the sailors, they are never moved to a Yahweh faith¹³, but God as God hears their prayers, sees their convicted change, and relents from his punishment.

¹³ See the thorough discussion in Magonet, Jonathan, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Almond Press 1983), at 33ff. Younger argues against this view and believes that the structure of the verb as well as the parallelisms in the text indicate that the Ninevites did believe in Yahweh, albeit, not a saving faith. Younger writes in personal correspondence that he disagrees with Magonet's interpretation for three reasons:

In chapter four, Jonah expresses his anger and displeasure to **Yahweh**, noting that he knew **Yahweh** to be a compassionate God (**Elohim**). Jonah was ready for **Yahweh** to just take his life, and be done with the prophet role. **Yahweh** challenged Jonah for his thinking and then, as Jonah set up a booth to watch and see what happened to Nineveh, **Yahweh Elohim**, Yahweh as God, grew a plant to shade Jonah's head. Jonah was thankful for the plant, but had no attitude change and stayed to watch for Nineveh's destruction or deliverance. The text then shifts to God (**Elohim**) as the judgment is executed upon Jonah! God (**Elohim**) has a worm kill the shade plant. God (**Elohim**) has a scorching east wind bring Jonah to near heat stroke, and then God (**Elohim**) again challenges Jonah asking about Jonah's anger over losing the shade plant. The story then ends as **Yahweh** asks the probing question,

You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons

-
- (1) the phrase in verse 5 **וַיִּאֱמַנּוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים**⁵ contains a very particular usage: the verb **אָמַן** (*āman*) in the *Hiphil* stem + the preposition **בְּ** (*b*) or **לְ** (*l*) has especially significant meaning of “trust in” which is used in salvific passages throughout the OT.¹
 - (2) the definite article is used throughout chapters 3 and 4 indicating that, in fact, Yahweh is in view and is the object of the Ninevites' faith (in 3:10, the definite article is on **הָאֱלֹהִים** (*ha-elohim*) is clearly speaking of Yahweh). In other words, the same God (*ha-elohim*) in whom the Ninevites believe/trust is the same God (*ha-elohim*) who relents who is the same God (*ha-elohim*) who prepared/ordained the worm (4:7) who is the same LORD God (*Yahweh Elohim*) who prepared/ordained the plant who is the same LORD (*Yahweh*) who prepared/ordained the fish (2:1).
 - (3) the parallelistic structure of the book indicates that Yahweh is in view and is the object of the Ninevites' faith (see attached pdf).

I realize that there are a number of scholars who hold that the Ninevites did not believe in Yahweh, certainly not a saving faith, but in my opinion, the clear textual allusions in chapters 3-4 to Exodus 32-34 seem to emphasize that this is precisely what is in view.

We add as further support for Younger, that the Assyrians were well known for accepting the gods of foreigners, even sponsoring festivals and offering sacrifices to the foreign gods. It would certainly not be out of character for them to accept Yahweh as a foreign god worthy of appeasement.

A final note here, it is popular to preach Jonah as a likely candidate for people to listen to for he shows up having been regurgitated from a fish after three days interment. The general line is that his cloths must have been half eaten, his eyes bleached from darkness and his odor something unlike what anyone had smelled before. While that makes a nice picture and argument, we should note that Nineveh was over 400 miles from the nearest coastline. Jonah did not walk in fresh out of the fish!

who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?
(Jonah 4:10).¹⁴

We see that Jonah might as well be dealing with an unnamed God for his own perception of what is right and wrong. Yet God is not without a name. He is **Yahweh**, the God of revelation, the God of the exodus, the God who had chosen Israel and had chosen Jonah. And Yahweh's concerns are on a whole different (and holier level) than those of the temperamental and pouty Jonah! God's concerns cover all his creation!

God's omnipresence.

Three times in the first ten verses of Jonah there is a reference to fleeing God's "presence." In Jonah 1:3 we read the first two:

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the **presence** of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the **presence** of the LORD.

In Jonah 1:10 we read the third time:

Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the **presence** of the LORD, because he had told them.

Yet the whole event teaches plainly that God was "present" while Jonah was at sea as well as on dry land. Jonah even told the sailors that Yahweh his God, "made the sea and dry land" (Jonah 1:9). Was Jonah's flight from God's "presence" merely poor thinking on his part? Or perhaps it was a wish and hope, which he learned was not happening! This is worthy of our consideration in a bit more detail as careful study reveals a little more complicated picture on this issue!

There are passages of Scripture that teach that one cannot flee from God's presence, most notably Psalm 139:7-8 which affirms God's presence everywhere:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

Yet there are other passages of Scripture that seem to give a more specific location for the "presence" of God. The Psalms speak of coming into the "presence" of God:

¹⁴ We note that Jonah is one of only two Biblical books to end with a question. The other is Nahum!

Let us come into his **presence** with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (Ps. 95:2).

Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his **presence** with singing! (Ps. 100:2).

In this sense, the Psalmist also asks God to keep him in God's presence:

Cast me not away from your **presence**, and take not your Holy Spirit from me (Ps. 51:11).

Similarly we read in Psalm 41:12,

But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your **presence** forever.

If we are to make sense of this, it helps to consider the Hebrew word translated as "presence." The Hebrew uses the word פָּנִים (pn), which means "face." It conveys the idea of God facing someone as opposed to turning his back on someone. In this sense the Psalmist seeks a blessing in writing,

May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his **face** [פָּנִים] "presence"] to shine upon us (Ps. 67:1).

Thus while we can say that God's sight extends to all corners of the earth, and in this sense, no one can escape his presence, there is another sense where God's face or presence can shine on someone. Jonah could never seek to hide from God. But the lesson of his fleeing God's presence is more personal than such an absurd idea. Jonah was hoping to remove himself from God's plan for his life and be a reject for God.

The lesson then focuses on the fact that God was not going to let Jonah go lightly! God had called Jonah as a prophet, and God had given Jonah instructions. Jonah might seek to live apart from God's face and contact, but God was not going to let Jonah's life apart from God be an easy one!

In 1893, Francis Thompson published a poem entitled, "The Hound of Heaven." As many people see this famous¹⁵ poem, God seeks out the author, even as the author flees down nights and days, down years and through the maze of his own mind. Though the author hid, tried to laugh away God, chased hopes, lived

¹⁵ Aside from paintings and use in songs, passages from the poem have wound their way into the famous U.S. Supreme Court decision on desegregation (*Brown vs. Board of Education* uses the phrase "with all deliberate speed") as well as the peanuts book, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, (Westminster John Knox 2007).

through fears, the author was never successful. For God sought the author deliberately, with God's timing, and with majesty. As the poem draws to an end, the author realizes that God is not his gloom, but the very answer to all that the author was seeking in life.

So it is in Jonah. Jonah seeks to be done with God, but God is not done with Jonah. All was well and good for Jonah as he prophesied the good things from God's hand. But when God set Jonah to a chore that Jonah did not want to do, Jonah sought release from his master. But the master said, "No!" Then through the events, God brought Jonah back, even though Jonah was unhappy about it, pouting like a baby!

WANT MORE?

There is much more to cover in this story of Jonah. In Part two of this lesson we plan to cover some great Hebrew puns and word plays in the text. We will also look at the Psalm in chapter 2. There are two more themes to cover in the story, that of "fear" and the "death" theme or language. Finally, and most importantly, we will consider the New Testament usage of Jonah, and the parallels to Christ portrayed in the story. So, read Jonah this week, and look for these things! Then let us compare notes next week!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "... *my country* ..." (Jonah 4:2).

We need to be careful when we couch God as part of our group and exclude him from others. Heaven forbid we actually believe God is a Republican (or a Democrat), an American (or an anti-American), a capitalist (or a socialist), or any particular race or color. God is a fearsome and mighty being who reveals himself to us in our language and in our history so that we might get a glimpse of him and might understand his love for us. Through his Spirit we are thus enabled to embrace him in faith and love. But that *does not mean* we have figured God out, or that he now exists in a tidy little box for us.

C.S. Lewis was fond of saying in the Chronicles of Narnia that the lion Aslan, the Christ figure, was "not a tame lion!" Indeed, we forget that God's revelation to us is of necessity one we might term "reductionist." We mean that in the sense that God is having to put his revelation into terms we can understand, much like we reduce down ideas when answering questions by a child.

Now that is not to say that God's revelation is wrong or inadequate. It is a divine revelation that conveys everything he chooses to convey. But it does mean that we should be very holy and devout as we understand God, as we proclaim God, and as we worship God. God is holy in ways that should drive us to our knees. His thoughts are beyond our thoughts, and his ways mysterious to us.

May we pledge ourselves to spending time learning of him in meekness and humility. And as we tell of him and his wonderful ways, may we always do it with the caution that we are telling of One who is more than we understand. This is the beauty of God's revelation in Christ. The Word incarnate brings God's majesty into our world and into our language in a way that words never could!

2. "*Yahweh...elohim...ha-elohim*" (Jonah 1-4).

We can divide people into three groups. There are those who believe in God (theists), those who do not believe in God (atheists), and those who are uncertain about whether there is a God (agnostics). Among those who believe in God, they may believe in many gods (polytheists) or one God (monotheists). They may call him by the term "God" or they may use a foreign equivalent, like *Allah*.

But there is something special in knowing God for his intimate interactions with his people. God revealed himself as Yahweh, to Moses and Israel, and in so doing, revealed himself in a more intimate and personal way, but also in a direct historical way. Paul, when speaking of the advantages of the Jewish people put as first and foremost the Jews being "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). The Holy Scriptures teach that Yahweh is faithful, merciful, kind, and loving. It was Yahweh that gave his only Son for humanity's eternal security.

The uniqueness of life in Christ is that the revelation of Yahweh goes to an even deeper level. In Christ as God's Son, through whom we stand as adopted children, God is an intimate Father. We now know that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament and New, the Father of Christ, the author of life and eternity, can be known to us as more than God, more than even "The God." Yahweh can be known to us as loving Father.

For those of us who know him that way, let us daily pray to him as Father, and seek to live for him and understand him more and more in that personal relationship. For those who do not have the intimacy of Yahweh as Father, we

urge you to find that role as children of God through faith in his only begotten Son, Jesus.

3. “*Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the **presence** of the LORD*” (Jonah 1:3).

Jonah sought to remove himself from God’s plans. On this point, the puns come out! Jonah was “washed up.” What a wreck he made of his life! His plans were fishy at best! Not even a fish could stomach Jonah in that state! Jonah was all wet!

Now bad puns aside, this point for home is quite simple. Do not flee God. It does no good. The prodigal son returned home because servants in the house of God get treated better than the rebellious in the world. My prayer for you and me is from the Psalmist (as put into a wonderful song):

The Lord bless you and keep you,
The Lord lift his countenance upon you,
And give you peace
The Lord make his face to shine upon you.
And be gracious unto you!
Amen.

WANT EVEN MORE?

After last week, I have been asked to share my “heart-healthy” baklava recipe. I do so with thanks to Alton Brown whose recipe served as the inspiration for my modified heart healthy baklava!

HEART-HEALTHY BAKLAVA

Filling:

2 cinnamon sticks (or 2 tspn ground
cinnamon)
20 whole allspice berries
6 ounces blanched almonds
6 ounces raw walnuts

Syrup:

1 ¼ cup honey
1 ¼ cup water
1 ¼ cup sugar
1 cinnamon stick
1 2inch square of orange peel

(Filling Continued)

6 ounces raw pistachios

2/3 cup sugar

1/4th cup water

1 tsp. orange blossom water (buy off internet or at international grocery store)

1 pound phyllo dough, thawed

8 ounces Smart Balance butter substitute

Directions: Before assembling, grind the spices together in a spice grinder. Melt the smart balance. And put the nuts and spice mixture into a food processor for 20 quick bursts of chopping (don't pulverize!). To assemble, paint a sheet pan on the bottom and sides with the melted smart balance. Lay a sheet of phyllo dough across the bottom and then paint it with more SB. Lay a 2nd sheet of dough and paint it with SB. Continue until 10 sheets are laid and painted. Then spread half of the nut/spice mixture over the dough. Take the water and add the orange blossom water and put it into a spray bottle. Mist the top of the nut mixture. Then add 6 layers of phyllo painting each layer with the SB. Add the last half of the nut mixture and mist again with the orange infused water. Then layer 8 sheets of phyllo painting each with melted SB.

Cook at 350 for 30 minutes and pull out to cut into pieces. Then put back into oven for final 30 minutes. Pull out and cool for two hours. During last 30 minutes of cooling, put syrup mixture into a deep pan and bring to a boil. Boil for ten minutes. Recut the baklava along the original lines and then pour the mixture over the cooled baklava. Now the hard part, cover, store at room temperature, and wait 24 hours to start eating. (It lasts 5 days).