

## **The Church of the Servant King**

### **Prophecy Series**

(Proph14H\_Prophecy in the Prophets\_Jonah\_Introduction)

#### **Introduction**

Unlike many of the other prophetic books from the Old Testament that we will study in this series, the book of Jonah contains no messianic or eschatological prophecies. It is entirely narrative. Nevertheless, the overview of the book of Jonah is included in this series in order to accomplish the secondary purpose of this series – a survey of selected Old Testament books.

**Is Jonah Just a Fish Tale?** Of all of the supernatural accounts of miracles in the Bible, few have been met with as much ridicule and derision by skeptics and doubters as the book of Jonah. To this group, the book represents a nice children's story, but falls short as a book for serious minded thinkers. However, apart from the events recorded in this book, there is other documentation of men being swallowed by whales and living to tell about their experience.<sup>1</sup> We are not told that the fish that swallowed Jonah was specifically a whale. All we know is that it was a giant sea creature.

Furthermore, other evidence points to its authenticity. Jesus used the story as an analogy of His own impending death and resurrection (Matt 12:39-41). Jesus' analogy depends upon His recognition of two historical realities: 1) the historical experience of Jonah in the belly of the great fish, and 2) the historical experience of the repentance of the people of Nineveh based upon the preaching of Jonah (cf. Luke 11:29-32).<sup>2</sup> Jesus accepted these events as realities; otherwise, His analogy to His Own resurrection would be foolish. The phrase "the sign of the prophet Jonah" must have been a regularly recurring phrase in the teaching of Jesus since it is also found on occasions other than the passage in Matthew 12 just cited (e.g. Matt 16:4). Any attempt to explain away the book's authenticity must also attempt to explain away the seemingly clear words of Jesus to the contrary.

**The Meaning of Jonah's Name – "Dove"** – Jonah's name means "dove."<sup>3</sup> Typically, the dove is associated with peace and purity. However, in the Bible, the dove is sometimes a symbol of silliness (see Hos 7:11-12).

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<sup>1</sup> Gleason Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1994), 350 cited in Bruce Scott, "Running from God – Jonah 1," *Israel My Glory* Volume 61: Number 3 (Bellmawr, New Jersey: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc; May/June, 2003), 11. Other documentation exists to substantiate this phenomenon. For instance, see the following link on the internet - <http://www.christiancourier.com/archives/fishStory.htm> It cites R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1969), 907 which includes a reference to a seaman in the 1920's who survived being swallowed by a sperm whale near the Falkland Islands and who was recovered after three days although his skin was damaged.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald B. Allen, "Notes on the Book of Jonah" (Unpublished class notes prepared by Dr. Willem VanGemeran and revised by Dr. Ronald B. Allen for 304N, Old Testament Prophets. Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1996), 10. See also the introduction to the book of Jonah in Earl D. Radmacher, gen. editor, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1493-4 which contains much of the same information. Ronald B. Allen is the Old Testament editor of this study Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Each of the previously cited sources mention this as well as virtually every commentary and study Bible I've checked.

Ephraim also is like a silly dove, without sense – they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria. Wherever they go, I will spread My net on them; I will bring them down like birds of the air; I will chastise them according to what their congregation has heard. (Hos 7:11-12)

As a symbol of silliness, the dove does depict the tragic/comic life of this prophet. Although the book does not state who its author was, the traditional view is that it is Jonah's own report of his own foolishness in struggling against God's sovereign plan and purpose for His life.

***Date and Historical Setting*** – The prophet Jonah lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (700's B.C.). Earlier in Jonah's life and ministry, Yahweh had sent him to announce the restoration of some lost territory to King Jeroboam II of Israel (793 – 753 B.C., 2 Ki 14:25). The first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. was a period of prosperity and strength for the northern and southern kingdoms. Jeroboam II extended Israel's influence from the entrance of Hamath down the eastern side of the Jordan to the southern end of the Dead Sea. The northern and southern kingdoms had begun to live in a somewhat harmonious relationship. Like all of the other kings of Israel (the northern kingdom), Jeroboam II was considered a wicked king ("did evil" – 2 Ki 14:24). Wicked Jeroboam II did not deserve such a gift, but the Lord had compassion on Israel (2 Ki 14:26-27) just as He shows mercy to us today.

At the time of the ministry of Jonah, Assyria was preoccupied with other issues – e.g. the mountain tribes of Urartu. Assyria had not begun her westward campaigns until Tiglath- Pileser III came to power in 745 B.C. This is one of the reasons that Israel continued to enjoy prosperity in spite of her wickedness and in effect, it constituted a period of grace before judgment for the Northern Kingdom. Israel aggressively pursued a defense policy consisting of strengthening the fortified cities, building up the army and developing international connections.

***Literary Form*** – As mentioned above, this book is different among the prophetic books in that it contains no prophecies. Its style might best be described as a prophetic parable.<sup>4</sup> The book is unique in the sense that it draws upon the negative interaction between Yahweh and His prophet. As a parable, it draws attention to the grace of God and the silliness of Jonah. It provides us with a negative example so as to encourage us to respond to God's sovereign plan in human history and to cast aside our false paradigms based upon self-righteous tendencies built upon only a partial understanding and application of God's word.

***Principle Message*** – This book challenges its readers to not become exalted in their own eyes. Otherwise, they will become smug, content, and self-righteous in attitude leading to a racial or cultural elitism that discourages evangelism. This certainly became increasingly true of the Jewish experience and it happens today in churches.

The book of Jonah is critical to our understanding of how God viewed Gentile nations and Israel's responsibility toward them. Such a concern for Gentile nations was the very basis for calling out a people of His Own and is at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant – see Genesis 12:3. Jonah's view of God's plan and purpose for Israel in relation to the other nations had become to restrictive. He restricted God to his paradigm of thinking.

Jonah represents the self-righteous individual. They make the grave mistake of rejoicing in their own deliverance (2:9), and in God's answers to prayer (4:6b). But they miss out when they narrow God's grace and mercy to themselves. Their self-righteousness prevents them from sharing in God's joy over the salvation of those who were formerly enemies. They confess Him as creator, but they restrict His involvement to judgment, justice and retribution. They become hardened of heart in their own self-righteousness.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ronald B. Allen, "Notes" and Radmacher, "The Nelson Study Bible."

The warning of the book to God's people of all dispensations is that they may miss seeing and participating in the blessing of God extended to others simply because they place limits upon God. While Jonah was praying for his own deliverance, the sailors had been experiencing the grace of God for three days! As the people of Nineveh repented and brought joy to heaven and rejoiced that judgment had been stayed, Jonah sat under a vine feeling sorry for himself.

## Chapter 1

Nineveh had not yet become the capitol of the Assyrian empire, but it was one of the royal residences. With its surrounding suburbs, Nineveh's population was approximately 600,000.<sup>5</sup> Fifty years later, Assyria would take the Northern Kingdom captive. The Assyrians were idol worshippers and were known for their brutality.

Instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah headed to Tarshish, a city famous for its gold, silver, iron, tin, lead, ivory, apes, and peacocks (2 Chr 9:21; Ezek 27:12). Tarshish was probably located in the coast of southern Spain. If so, Jonah intended to sail about 2000 miles west instead of going a few hundred miles northeast. He probably hoped that the length of the journey would take longer than the period of grace before destruction (3:4).

The casting of lots was quite common in the ancient near eastern cultures and sometimes God used it to convey His will (see Lev 16:8; Josh 18:10 cf. Prov 16:33). When the lot fell upon Jonah, Jonah's words betray just how far He had strayed. In effect, Jonah indicated that Yahweh was no different than the pagan gods and demanded a human sacrifice. Jonah was willing to try assisted suicide to escape God's sovereign will and purpose for his life. Instead of sleeping in the hull of a ship oblivious to the cries of others, now God had Jonah's undivided attention for three days and nights in the belly of a fish.

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<sup>5</sup> Gleason Archer, 344.