

Jonah

1. Introduction – Jonah was a prophet, but the book of Jonah is focused more on an episode in the life of Jonah than the prophetic message of Jonah. In fact, only one sentence of Jonah’s message is recorded in the book! The book concerns Jonah’s reaction to the call to preach to a heathen nation, his vain attempt to run from God’s call, and his frustration when God indeed demonstrates mercy to the enemies of Israel. The most memorable event in the book is when Jonah is swallowed by a great fish after being cast into the sea. This book has many implications for our view of God and our attitude toward God’s enemies.
2. Author and date – The book does not indicate either the author or the time frame in which it was written. Jonah himself was a historical figure, a prophet who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II and prophesied the restoration of the borders of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 14:25). Liberal scholars have questioned the historicity of the book because they couldn’t believe a man could survive for three days inside a fish. This attitude betrays an unwillingness to consider the supernatural intervention of God. Such an anti-supernatural presupposition is at odds with the entire testimony of Scripture. Even some conservative scholars have concluded that the book is a form of parable and not historical, not because of an anti-supernatural bias but because of some of the elements of the story itself. They point out the historical vagueness – Jonah is the only person named, even the king of Nineveh isn’t named, and Nineveh was only the capital city of an entire empire over which a king ruled. According to this view, Jesus’ references to Jonah should be taken as a reference to a character in a story, just as one might say “remember the good Samaritan.” While we cannot be dogmatic, these arguments seem unsatisfying. To use a historical character in a fictional work that impugns his character as a prophet would seem to be unethical. Jesus didn’t merely refer to Jonah as an object lesson, but he said that “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:41). That is, real, historical people who repented at the real preaching of Jonah will be at the final judgment to condemn those who refused to repent.
3. Literary character – Even though Jonah is a historical account, it is more than a simple record of action. It is a skillful literary work. A number of themes can be traced through the narrative. For example, the theme of “rising up” is prominent in the story. God calls Jonah to “arise, go to Nineveh.” “...and Jonah rose up to flee...” The sailors call Jonah to “arise, call upon your god!” After being delivered by and from the fish, Jonah again receives the call to “arise, go to Nineveh.” This time Jonah “arose and went.” Many such devices can be identified.
4. Structure (two acts, two scenes in each act):
 - a. Jonah flees from God’s call (1-2)
 - i. On the way to Tarshish (1)
 - ii. In the belly of the fish (2)
 - b. Jonah goes to Nineveh (3-4)
 - i. Jonah warns and Nineveh repents (3)
 - ii. Jonah is displeased by God’s mercy (4)
5. Message:
 - a. We cannot ignore or escape God’s call. Our rebellion may endanger some and deny others the benefits of our labors.
 - b. Discipline can be an act of great mercy. Jonah praises God in the belly of the fish.
 - c. God is concerned about the welfare of the nations, not just the people of Israel. Even though we may be abused and persecuted, we must love our enemies as God loves his.
 - d. Jesus is greater than Jonah (Matt. 12:41); Jonah preached reluctantly, while Jesus gave his life willingly.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.