
JONAH 1: 1 Now the LORD's word came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

Jonah, the son of Amittai, the fifth of the minor prophets, was a Galilean, a native of Gath-hepher, which is believed to be the same as Jotapata, celebrated for the siege which Josephus the historian there maintained against the Roman army, a little before the destruction of Jerusalem. Gath-hepher was situated in the land of Zebulun, where was the canton of Ophir or Hopher. St. Jerome places it two miles from Sepphoris, in the way towards Tiberias. Some rabbins are of opinion that Jonah was the widow of Sarepta's son, restored to life by Elijah.

What we know with certainty of Jonah is, that God having commanded him to go to Nineveh, and there proclaim that the cry of the inhabitants' sins was come up to heaven, and they were threatened with approaching ruin; instead of obeying these orders, he resolved to flee away, and go to Tarsus in Cilicia. For this purpose he embarked at Joppa; but the Lord having sent a violent tempest while he was upon the sea, the mariners, with great fear, cried each of them to his god. In the meantime Jonah slept in the hold; whereupon the pilot wakened him; and they who were in the ship cast lots to know how this tempest was occasioned. The lot falling upon Jonah, they asked him who he was, and what he had done to bring upon them such a storm? He told them he was a Hebrew; that he worshipped the God of heaven; was one of his prophets; and fled from his presence to avoid going to Nineveh, whither he was sent. They asked him what was to be done to secure them from shipwreck? He replied: Throw me into the sea, and the tempest will cease.

God prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. This fish, according to some, was a whale; or, as others say, the lamia, canis carcharias, or the sea-dog. The prophet continued in the fish three days and three nights. He cried unto the Lord, and the Lord heard him, and commanded the fish to cast him upon the shore, as it is believed, at the foot of a mountain which projects a great way into the sea, between Berytus and Tripoli. Others think it was upon the coast of Cilicia, two leagues north from Alexandretta.

After this the word of the Lord came a second time to Jonah, and directed him to go to Nineveh. When he came into the city, which was three days journey in extent, about twenty-five leagues in circumference, Jonah walked up and down a whole day, crying out, "In forty days Nineveh shall be destroyed." The Ninevites believed his word; they appointed a public fast to be observed; and, from the meanest of the people to the greatest, covered themselves with sackcloth. The king of Nineveh, supposed to have been Sardanapalus, known in profane authors by the name of Anacyndaraxa or Anabaxarus, descended from his throne, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down upon ashes. God suffered himself to be moved with their repentance, and did not execute the sentence which he had pronounced against them.

Jonah was afflicted at this; and complained to God, saying, that he had always questioned whether, as being a God of clemency and mercy, he would not be flexible to their prayers.

After this, in all probability, Jonah returned from Nineveh into Judea.

The Greeks have for a long time expressed their veneration for Jonah. There was a church dedicated to this prophet in the sixth age.

We do not know when it was that Jonah foretold how Jeroboam II., king of Israel, should restore the kingdom of Samaria to its former extent, from the entrance of Hamath to the Dead Sea. Whether this was before or after his going to Nineveh, we cannot tell.

Our Savior makes frequent mention of Jonah in the Gospels. He says that the Ninevites shall one day rise in judgment against the Jews, and condemn them, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and the Jews would not hearken to Him who was greater than Jonah. And when the Pharisees required a sign of him to prove his mission, he said he would give them no other than that of the prophet Jonah, that is to say, of his resurrection, which would complete all his miracles, and render the Jews inexcusable in their hardness of heart. For a discussion of the question concerning the three days and three nights which Jonah lay in the belly of the fish, see Mat 12:40 (note), and the notes there. And for Oriental and Jewish legends and fabulous relations relative to the history of this prophet, see Calmet in his preface to this book.

That there are difficulties in this book every man must allow; and that learned men have differed greatly in their mode of interpreting the book, and explaining these difficulties, is well known. Some have considered it an allegory; referring entirely to Manasseh, and what was done before, during, and after the war with Esar-haddon, king of Assyria. Manasseh being taken prisoner by the Assyrians, and thrust into a dungeon; where, having lain three days and three nights, on his earnest prayer to God in the dungeon, he was delivered, etc. Others have thought, that instead of a fish, a ship is meant, which had the image of a whale on the stern, and might be called Κητος, or the whale. Others have thought that the whole of the account of Jonah's being swallowed by a great fish, his praying in its belly, and being cast on dry land, was a dream which he had while fast asleep in the ship. See Jon 1:5. And others state that the whole book is a parable, intending to point out God's justice and mercy, and how prevalent repentance is to turn aside the threatened stroke of Divine wrath.

There is a fable, most probably of Phoenician origin, which, bearing some similitude to the history of Jonah, may have been taken from this book. Laomedon, king of Troy, having displeased Neptune, to appease him, was required to expose his daughter Hesione to be devoured by a sea-monster. She was chained to a rock, and was awaiting her fate at the next flux of the tide. In the interim Hercules slew the sea-monster, and delivered the princess. To this Lycophron, in his Cassandra, verse 33, etc., is supposed to allude: - Τριεσπερου λεοντος, ὃν ποτε γναθοις Τριτωνος ημαλαψε καρχαρος κυων. "Of the lion the offspring of three nights, which the fierce dog of Triton swallowed down greedily."

The scholiasts explain this in the following manner: While the princess was standing chained to the rock, expecting the greedy dog (καρχαρος κυων, the shark) to come and devour her, Hercules stood by ready armed; and when the monster came forward with open mouth, he jumped directly down his throat, and spent three days in cutting and hacking his entrails; and afterwards came out of the monster, with the loss of all the hair on his head. Cyril, in his comment, says this was occasioned by the incredible heat of the monster's stomach.

This fable might have been easily taken from the true history; though some have been ready enough to intimate that the history of the prophet was taken from the fable.

The appeal made to the main facts of this history by our Lord, proves that we are to admit of no allegorical exposition of these facts.

1. There was such a person as Jonah.

2. He was swallowed by a sea-monster, in whose belly he was miraculously preserved three days and three nights.

3. This same prophet preached to the Ninevites; and they repented, and turned from their sins, under his ministry.

This testimony puts an end to all mythological, allegorical, and hypothetical interpretations of those great facts. And in its literal sense alone, I undertake the interpretation of this book.

Jonah, sent to Nineveh, flees to Tarshish, Jon 1:1-3. He is overtaken by a great tempest, Jon 1:4-14; thrown into the sea, Jon 1:15, Jon 1:16; and swallowed by a fish, in the belly of which he is miraculously preserved alive three days and three nights, Jon 1:17.

Verse 1

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah - All that is certainly known about this prophet has already been laid before the reader. He was of Gath-hepher, in the tribe of Zebulun, in lower Galilee, Jos 19:13; and he prophesied in the reigns of Jeroboam the Second, and Joash, kings of Israel. Jeroboam came to the throne eight hundred and twenty-three years before the Christian era, and reigned in Samaria forty-one years, 2Kgs 14:23-25. As a prophet, it is likely that he had but this one mission.

JONAH 1: 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it, for their wickedness has come up before me."

Verse 2

Go to Nineveh - This was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and one of the most ancient cities of the world, Gen 10:10; and one of the largest, as it was three days' journey in circumference. Ancient writers represent it as oblong; being in length one hundred and fifty stadia, and ninety in breadth, the compass being four hundred and eighty stadia. Now as the stadium is allowed to have been equal to our furlong, eight of which make a mile, this amounts to fifty-four English miles: see on Jon 3:3 (note). But we must not suppose that all this space was covered with compact streets and buildings; it took in a considerable space of country, probably all the cultivated ground necessary to support all the inhabitants of that district. Calmet computes the measurement of the circumference to be equal to twenty-five French leagues. It is reported to have had walls one hundred feet high, and so broad that three chariots might run abreast upon them. It was situated on the Tigris, or a little to the west, or on the west side of that river. It was well peopled, and had at this time one hundred and twenty thousand persons in it reputed to be in a state of infancy, which on a moderate computation would make the whole number six hundred thousand persons. But some, supposing that persons not being able to distinguish their right hand from their left must mean children under two years of age, and reckoning one such child for every twenty persons from that age upwards, make the population amount to two millions five hundred thousand. Nor can this be considered an exaggerated estimate, when we know that London, not one-tenth of the size of ancient Nineveh, contains a population of upwards of one million. But calculations of this kind, relative to matters of such remote antiquity, are generally precarious, and not very useful: and ancient authors, though the only guides, are not always safe conductors. Mosul is generally supposed to be the same as the ancient Nineveh. It is in the province of Dearbekir, on the west bank of the Tigris.

Their wickedness is come up before me - This is a personification of evil. It ascends from earth to heaven; and stands before the Supreme Judge, to bear witness against its own delinquency, and that of the persons whom it has seduced.

JONAH 1: 3 But Jonah rose up 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 its fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Verse 3

To flee unto Tarshish - Some say Tartessus, in Spain, near the straits of Gibraltar, others, Tarsus, in Cilicia; and others, Taprobana, or the island of Ceylon, formerly called Taprobah; and Tabrobavagh in Sanscrit, to the present day.

And went down to Joppa - This place is celebrated as that where Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus, was chained to a rock, and exposed to be devoured by a sea-monster, from which she was delivered by the valor of Perseus. It is the nearest port to Jerusalem on that side of the Mediterranean.

And he found a ship - The Phoenicians carried on a considerable trade with Tartessus, Eze 27:12; and it was probably in one of their ships that Jonah embarked.

He paid the fare thereof - He paid for his passage. This shows that there was traffic between the two places, and that each passenger paid a stated fare.

From the presence of the Lord - He considered that God was peculiarly resident in Judea; and if he got out of that land, the Lord would most probably appoint another prophet to carry the message; for Jonah appears to have considered the enterprise as difficult and dangerous, and therefore wished to avoid it.

JONAH 1: 4 But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty storm on the sea, so that the ship was likely to break up.

Verse 4

A great wind - They were overtaken with a storm, which appears from the sequel to have come by the immediate direction of God.

Like to be broken - They had nearly suffered shipwreck.

JONAH 1: 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and every man cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the ship, and he was laying down, and was fast asleep.

Verse 5

Cried every man unto his god - The ship's crew were all heathens; and, it is probable, heathens who had each a different object of religious worship.

Cast forth the wares - Threw the lading overboard to lighten the ship, hoping the better to ride out the storm.

Jonah was gone down - Most probably into the hold or cabin under the deck; or where they had berths for passengers in the sides of the ship, something in the manner of our packets.

Was fast asleep - Probably quite exhausted and overcome with distress, which in many cases terminates in a deep sleep. So the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane.

JONAH 1: 6 So the ship master came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God! Maybe your God will notice us, so that we won't perish."

Verse 6

The shipmaster - Either the captain or the pilot.

Arise, call upon thy God - He supposed that Jonah had his god, as well as they had theirs; and that, as the danger was imminent, every man should use the influence he had, as they were all equally involved in it.

JONAH 1: 7 They all said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know who is responsible for this evil that is on us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

Verse 7

Come, and let us cast lots - This was a very ancient mode of endeavoring to find out the mind of Divine Providence; and in this case it proves that they supposed the storm to have arisen on account of some hidden crime of some person aboard.

A philosopher being at sea in a violent storm. when the crew began to call earnestly to the gods for safety, he said, "Be silent, and cease your prayers; for should the gods know that you are here, we shall all be lost."

The lot fell upon Jonah - In this case God directed the lot.

JONAH 1: 8 Then they asked him, "Tell us, please, for whose cause this evil is on us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? Of what people are you?"

Verse 8

Tell us - for whose cause - A very gentle method of bringing the charge home to himself, and the several questions here asked gave the utmost latitude to make the best of his own case.

JONAH 1: 9 He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land."

Verse 9

I fear the Lord - In this Jonah was faithful. He gave an honest testimony concerning the God he served, which placed him before the eyes of the sailors as infinitely higher than the objects of their adoration; for the God of Jonah was the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, and governed both. He also honestly told them that he was fleeing from the presence of this God, whose honorable call he had refused to obey. See Jon 1:10.

JONAH 1: 10 Then were the men 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.

JONAH 1: 11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may be calm to us?" For the sea grew more and more stormy.

Verse 11

What shall we do unto thee - In these poor men there was an uncommon degree of humanity and tender feeling.

JONAH 1: 12 He said to them, "Take me up, and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will be calm for you; for I know that because of me this great storm is on you."

Verse 12

I know that for my sake - I am not worthy to live; throw me overboard. God will not quiet the storm till I am cast out of the ship. Here was deep compunction; and honest avowal of sin; and a justification of the displeasure which God had now manifested.

JONAH 1: 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to get them back to the land; but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

Verse 13

The men rowed hard - Were very unwilling to proceed to this extremity, and thought they would risk every thing rather than cast this disobedient prophet into the great deep.

JONAH 1: 14 Therefore they cried to the LORD, and said, "We beg you, LORD, we beg you, don't let us die for this man's life, and don't lay on us innocent blood; for you, LORD, have done as it pleased you."

Verse 14

They cried unto the Lord - Under a conviction that he was the self-existing Being, the Maker of the heavens and the earth, and the author of the present storm, they put up their prayers to him.

Let us not perish for this man's life - They were now about to cast him overboard; but seemed to call God to witness that it was with the utmost reluctance, and only in obedience to his command. There is a parallel passage in the Argonautics, which has been quoted to illustrate this: - Πολλα δε μερμηριζον ενι φρεσι πευκαλιμησι, Η μεν αποφθισωσι, και ιχθυσι κυρμα βαλωσιν Αινολεχη Μμηδειαν, αποτρεψωσι δ' Εριννυν.

Ver. 1171. "And much they doubted, in their prudent minds,

Whether to kill and cast a prey to fishes

Wretched Medea, and avert their fate."

See Newcome.

JONAH 1: 15 So they took up Jonah, and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased its raging.

JONAH 1: 16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD, and made vows.

Verse 16

Offered a sacrifice - The first perhaps ever offered on board a vessel since the ark floated on the waters of the great deluge; and it is most probable that these heathens, witnessing what was done, became sincere converts to the true God.

JONAH 1: 17 The LORD prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Verse 17

Now the Lord had prepared a great fish - לִידָג גָּדֹל dag gadol.

This could not have been a whale, for the throat of that animal can scarcely admit a man's leg; but it might have been a shark, which abounds in the Mediterranean, and whose mouth and stomach are exceedingly capacious. In several cases they have been known to swallow a man when thrown overboard. See the note on Mat 12:40 (note), where the whole subject of this verse is considered at large. That days and nights do not, among the Hebrews, signify complete days and nights of twenty-four hours, see Est 4:16, compared with Est 5:1; Jdg 14:17, Jdg 14:18. Our Lord lay in the grave one

natural day, and part of two others; and it is most likely that this was the precise time that Jonah was in the fish's belly.