



PROPHET

ON THE

RUN

BARUCH MAOZ

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE
BOOK OF JONAH

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Preface

The Bible is the word of God. Its message is relevant to men and women of every generation. But it is written in an ancient language (Hebrew, in Jonah's case) and with an assumed social and historical context that is generally unfamiliar to modern readers of the Bible.

Every language has its own poetry, its special way of conveying ideas. Every culture expresses its views of reality by different nuances. My goal in this book is to give the reader a graphic sense of the message of the book of Jonah, taking into account the particularities of Hebrew and of the historical background against which the narrative was written.

In an effort to achieve that goal, I have undertaken my own translation of the Hebrew so as to more clearly convey a sense of its poetry, its imagery and its flow so that the reader will be enabled to get at the author's intent without having to deal with technicalities. I sacrificed the English to serve the Hebrew. I hope readers will find reading my text helpful in spite of this, or rather, because of it.

This is not a study commentary. Others, better qualified, have provided excellent exegetical commentaries to the Bible. I would not presume to stand alongside them. Rather, I have learned much from them. This book is designed to convey an understanding of the biblical text, intimate some of its practical implications, and engage the reader in examining his heart and life in light of what he has learned. It is meant for Mr. and Mrs. Anybody, at just about any age.

Since its original publication in 2008, I have been gratified to learn that this little book has been beneficial to many around the globe,

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and that it has been used in personal devotions as well as by Bible study groups. I thank and praise God for his goodness.

I have preached series of sermons from the book of Jonah on a number of occasions, and been challenged afresh each time. This book is the product of those happy experiences. It is my prayer that my readers will be helped to love God and his word by reading this book, and that they will become eager, obedient students of God's word.

Gedera 2010

Introduction

For good reason, it is customary to begin a Bible commentary with an introduction which informs the reader about the book being studied, providing details about its author and his background, the book's historical context, its literary characteristics and other such information. Since this is not a technical commentary, this introduction is not required for understanding the book's message. Some readers will find it helpful, while others may wish to skip directly to the first chapter.

The Nature of the Book and the Date of Its Composition

Some Bible scholars believe that the book of Jonah is not a historical narrative but a literary fiction that was designed to convey a moral message. The primary motivation for such a view is an assumption: those who consider the book of Jonah to be fiction do not believe in miracles. We do, because we believe in God.

We do not assume miracles are commonplace. We recognize that God normally rules this world through the patterns he has established in nature and in the essence of all that exists. These are often spoken of as the Laws of Nature. These laws do not bind God; they merely describe the way he usually acts. A God who, with a mere word, called this amazing world into existence, who made everything out of nothing, would have no difficulty in arranging the chain of events described in the book of Jonah, including a large fish to swallow the prophet and spit him out onto dry ground three days later. It

is possible that those who deny the existence of miracles do not, in fact, believe in God.

Scholars who deny the historical nature of the book of Jonah disagree about what kind of book it actually is. Some prefer to describe the book as an allegory; others insist it is a parable. Some say it is prose, while others claim it is a poem. Some state it is a *midrash* (a rabbinic story with a moral lesson); others read it as a symbolic narrative. We should not be unnerved by the claims and counter-claims of scholars. Scholarly views are as fluid as any other fashion, and they change as radically.

However, we can safely trust the unchanging Word of God. The Bible does not present the book of Jonah as anything but historical narrative. It is, of course, meant to convey a message, but that is true of all narratives. This story is meant to be considered as true as its message. That is probably why Jonah was placed among the prophets, not the poetic books.

The book of Jonah describes a series of events that occurred in the life of an historical figure who is referenced in another biblical text (2 Kings 14:25). There is no indication that the story is intended as an allegory or a parable.

Finally, our Lord Jesus referred to events narrated in this book in a manner that assumes their historical nature (Matt. 12:38–41, Luke 11:29–32, Matt. 16:4).

Some scholars date the writing of Jonah so late that the book is removed from its historical context and Jonah could have been neither its author nor the direct source of information for its composition. This view is largely based on the existence of a supposed Aramaic influence on the Hebrew text. Other scholars deny any such influence. Whether it exists or not, we need to remember that Jonah resided in the north of the country, not too far from Aram, and he lived during a time when Aram was at the peak of its power. This could easily explain an Aramaic influence on his language, should any be proven to exist.

Another argument for a late dating of the book's composition is based on quotations from what some scholars claim are post-exilic psalms—psalms that were written after Israel was deported to Babylon in the days of Hezekiah King of Judah and of Jeremiah the prophet.

This argument is unconvincing because there are just as many scholars who refuse to date those psalms so late—and who is to say if Jonah is quoting a psalm or a psalmist is quoting Jonah? It is more likely that Jonah was quoting the Psalms, but the opposite is also possible. In either case, such quotes cannot be used to determine a late date for the composition of the book of Jonah.

Nineveh was destroyed in 616 B.C. and the lack of any indication of that event in the book of Jonah firmly places the composition of the book before that time. During the years 782–745 B.C., the period in which we presume Jonah to have lived, Nineveh was under pressure from the northwestern kingdom of Urartu. This would have made the fulfillment of Jonah’s prophecies all the more plausible to Nineveh’s inhabitants. The facts of history seem to permit us to date the events narrated in the book of Jonah in the prophet’s time, even if they do not conclusively prove when the book was written.

All this suggests that the book of Jonah was written sometime before the exile. In fact, since the content of Jonah’s prayer could have only been disclosed by him, it seems likely that the book must have been written while the prophet was still alive, or at least by someone who had heard details from the prophet himself.

Jonah’s narrative is unique among the prophetic books in that it is not a collection of prophetic utterances but a narrative—the story of what happened to a certain prophet at a certain time in his prophetic service.

The Language of the Book of Jonah

The author of this book had an impressive command of Hebrew. His language is rich, evocative and extremely well constructed. He avoids the emotional, incoherent and incomplete sentences with which Hosea addressed his nation. He uses none of the flowery terminology of Isaiah or the studied elegance of Habakkuk. In fact, the Hebrew is so well rounded that many Bible colleges and seminaries use the book of Jonah as part of their courses in biblical Hebrew.

The author was obviously a capable writer. He says no more than is necessary, uses vivid language, and describes events as building from one to the next. He displays a solid understanding of human nature, and employs a multitude of literary devices; humor, questions, ambivalent language, suggestive quotes and anthropomorphisms. Consequently, Jonah is a fun book to read and a fun book to study.

The book ends with a stunning question that calls upon the reader and the careful student of this book in every generation to respond. It is a masterpiece of spiritual and moral instruction. May we learn its lessons and make them part of our lives.

The Prophet

We learn from 2 Kings 14:25 that Jonah, the son of Amitai, prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel in the early days of Jeroboam the Second (793–753 B.C.) or just before his reign—a peak of economic and military success in Israel’s history.

Jonah lived in Gat Hefer in Galilee, in the portion of the land given to the tribe of Zebulun, between Nazareth and Cana. Gat Hefer has been excavated only to a limited extent although it is one of the largest mounds in Galilee. The excavations show that Gat Hefer was a large city, but the shortage of significant findings resulted in a lack of interest on the part of archeologists.

No reference is made elsewhere in the Old Testament to Jonah’s call, attempted escape and journey to Nineveh, or to any of the other events described in the book of Jonah.

Nothing more is known of the prophet, his message to Israel, his family, his life or his death. Seven locations lay claim to be the place of his burial—anywhere from south-central Israel to the ancient site of Nineveh in what is northern Iraq today.

Purpose of the Book

The book of Jonah is extraordinary in that Jonah is the only prophet of Israel actually sent to another nation. Amos, Isaiah,

Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Habakkuk all prophesied about other nations, but what they said was addressed to Israel and meant for Israel's comfort and encouragement. Jonah's message was delivered in a foreign country, to a foreign people. Whatever lessons the people of Israel (or Judah) were to receive from the prophet's life and message, they were to learn indirectly.

The central message of the book is much needed and highly relevant to Jewish ears: Israel has no ownership over God. He is the God of all nations. All owe him obedience, and he shows mercy to all without distinction. This message anticipates the message of the New Testament—that God has taken Jews and Gentiles, set aside the differences between them, and made of the two one new people in Christ.

It is also a relevant message for our day and for the church. In this age of extreme individualism, our differences—national, cultural and linguistic—have been permitted to divide the church. This should not be.

Other important lessons that may be learned from the book of Jonah have to do with the kindness and sovereignty of God, the impossibility of resisting him, his rule over nature and all nations, the need to accept responsibility for our deeds, God's amazing patience, and the nature of true repentance.

Outline of the Book of Jonah

The four chapters of the English Bible more or less correspond with a natural division of the book. There is one difference compared to the Hebrew: the last verse in chapter 1 in the English Bible is the first of chapter 2 in Hebrew. But we need not quibble over such a matter. Following the English Bible, the outline of the book would be as follows:

Chapter 1—Jonah Tries to Escape

Chapter 2—The Prophet Asleep and Ensnared

Chapter 3—Jonah Takes Responsibility for His Actions

Chapter 4—The Prophet Repents

1

Jonah Tries to Escape

1:1–4

*

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amitai: “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against her because their evil has come up before me.” And Jonah got up, to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went on board to flee from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind onto the sea, and there was a great storm on the sea, and the ship considered breaking up. (vv. 5-16) The sailors feared and cried out, each to his own god, and they cast the containers into the sea to make (the ship) lighter for them—and Jonah had descended into the ship’s hold, lain down, and slept.

The captain drew near to him and said, “What’s wrong with you, sleeper! Get up, call to your god, it may be that god will think of us and we will not perish!”

And they said one to another, "Let's cast lots and discover on whose account this evil has happened to us." And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. They said to him, "Tell us, you, because of whom evil has happened to us, what is your occupation and where do you come from, which is your country and to which nation do you belong?"

And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and it is the God of heaven that I fear, who made the sea and the dry land." And the people feared a great fear and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" because the people knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. So they said to him, "What shall we do to you, so that the seas will stop shrieking above us?" (Because the sea was becoming increasingly stormier).

And he said to them, "Lift me up and throw me into the sea and the sea will stop shrieking over you, because I know that because of me this great storm is upon you." But the people rowed to return to the dry land, but could not because the sea was increasingly stormier against them.

So they cried out to the Lord and said, "Please, Lord, let us not perish because of the death of this man and do not hold us accountable for the death of an innocent, because you, O Lord, have done what you wished." And they lifted Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea's anger was relaxed. And the people greatly feared the Lord, so they offered the Lord a sacrifice and made vows to him.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amitai:
“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out
against her because their evil has come up before me.”
And Jonah got up, to flee from the presence of the Lord.

The Call—Verse 1

Like so many stories in the Bible, Jonah’s story begins with God. God turns to Jonah the son of Amitai with a clear, unequivocal command: “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against her because their evil has come up before me.”

Nineveh was a major city in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In the previous century, Assyria had been a major military power, conquering the Arameans and forcing the Israelites to pay tribute. But in the days of Jereboam’s reign and Jonah’s ministry (793–753 B.C.), Assyria experienced an economic, political, and military recession that would end only in 745 B.C. following the ascension of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne. Consequently, Assyria did not pose a serious threat to Israel during Jonah’s lifetime.

In spite of Assyria’s relative weakness, it remained rich, ambitious and confident. Riches brought corruption. The Assyrians practiced idolatry, and Nineveh had for centuries been a center of pagan worship. Their idolatrous practices encouraged a shortsighted hedonism that undermined the roots of the nation’s power. They sought immediate gain rather than morality which would create social cohesion and lasting strength, as Proverbs 14:34 teaches: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”

This is the environment into which God sent Jonah. He instructed Jonah to “call out against her”—to declare in Nineveh that God is about to bring punishment on the city, because the Ninevites led lives that were evil in God’s sight. Because God is not only the God of Israel, but the Lord over all the nations of the world, even those who are not in covenant with him are not free to live their lives as

they wish. They are still bound by his will and must live according to the moral standards that he has established.

It is wrong to think that non-Christians are free from God's law. All people are bound by God's law, and all will be judged by it. Paul tells us that God's anger "is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (Rom. 1:18), be they Jewish or Gentile, believers or unbelievers. "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom. 2:12).

"Because their evil has come up before me"—this is the foundation for gospel preaching. Only when we recognize our sin in contrast with God's holiness will we understand our need of a savior from the consequences of wrongdoing.

This idea creates a real measure of discomfort. But it is also very comforting because it teaches us that all of our deeds are important because they have moral implications. Our deeds count in God's sight. Obviously, it is not a good thing if our deeds are evil in his sight, but at least they have value! If what we do matters to God, how much more must we matter to him? This simple fact lays the ground for hope, because if God is interested in us, perhaps he will also be kind toward us.

In spite of this, many people live as if there is no point in praying or turning to God at all—they assume that he is busy with more important things, if he even exists. This is not what we learn from Jonah. *Their evil has come up before me* means that he takes note of them. What they do really does matter to God.

The book of Jonah teaches us that God holds people accountable for their deeds. He punishes those who act wickedly, because he is *the righteous Judge of all the earth*. As we shall see, he is also the God of mercy and of grace, rewarding those who repent. But God's grace does not remove his utter hatred for sin, nor does it erase his determination to punish anyone who persists in sin and refuses to turn to him. "God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory,

honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Rom. 2:6–8).

After conversion, recognition of sin and God’s holiness is also foundational for healthy Christian living. It teaches us humility and drives us to trust in God rather than in our own achievements. It drives us to seek forgiveness from and reconciliation with people we have sinned against. Christ indeed atoned for our sin by bearing its guilt and punishment, but sinful deeds are still violations of God’s law, and Christ’s atoning work does not erase such deeds from the annals of history any more than it undoes many of their consequences. Whoever stole must, upon conversion, return the stolen goods. Whoever divorced his or her spouse on unbiblical grounds must do everything morally possible to be reconciled.

The Prophet’s Response—Verses 2–3

So the command came, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against her because their evil has come up before me.”

The author begins his description of the prophet’s response just as anyone in his right mind would expect: God commanded him, “Get up,” and Jonah got up. The next phrase, we assume, will be “and went to Nineveh.” After all, Jonah was a prophet of God. Earlier (in 2 Kings 14:25), he had prophesied the growth of Jeroboam’s kingdom, and it came about exactly as he had predicted. Wouldn’t a prophet naturally—even enthusiastically—do exactly what God commanded?

Not this prophet. *Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.* What madness! What a senseless thing for a prophet to do! Why would a prophet of God think he could escape from God’s presence? How could a prophet believe that he could ignore God’s command?

We learn here that men of God are not free of faults, sin or weakness. Jonah followed in a long line of people who served God but fell into sin. Abraham handed his wife over—twice!—to save his own

neck. Jacob lied, taking advantage of his brother's weak character and his father's blindness. David sinned with Bathsheba. Jonah defied God's direct command and fled from the presence of the Lord.

If we are honest, we must admit that we are no different. None of God's people are without sin. We will never be completely free of sin until the day when we shall be freed by the power of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, at the revelation of God's eternal kingdom.

The story of Jonah should encourage us to pray for those who serve us in the gospel. Like Jonah, although they are called to do God's work, they too stumble and fall—like us, they are not perfect. Because they are subject to greater pressures and temptations than those that face most of us, their struggle with sin is all the more difficult.

We should not expect them to be perfect. We should learn to support them in their weakness by giving them our forgiveness, support and comfort. We should encourage them in their struggles and help them improve their spiritual lives. We should seek ways to support their efforts to develop their walk with Christ, and we should pray for them.

We should give them a real measure of privacy, send them to helpful courses and seminars that will cultivate their spiritual walk, make sure they take vacations, and enable them to purchase good, helpful literature. We should love them because God loves us through them. If we love them as we should, we will be loving and serving ourselves.

We also learn that sin stupefies those who fall into its claws. Note the author's words: *Jonah got up to flee . . . from the presence of the Lord*. But where could he flee? Surely he was familiar with the words David had written years before, *Where can I go from your Spirit?*

Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you, the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (Ps. 139: 7–12).

Jonah's act recalls Adam and Eve's ridiculous effort to hide in the Garden of Eden after they had sinned, vainly concealing themselves among the trees of the garden so that the God who sees everything would not see them and the God who knows everything would not know where they were. Jonah later confessed that God made the sea and the dry land (v. 9). If he knew that to be true, what was the point of his trying to flee from the Lord, even if he took a ship all the way to Tarshish?

There was no point. When we give in to sin, sin takes over our thought processes and causes us to act foolishly, against all logic and contrary to everything we know. Sin makes us stupid.

Attempting the Impossible

The author's language is sharp and colorful. He depicts a series of rapidly executed actions, one after the next, and he groups them all in one sentence to give us a sense of immediacy: "He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went on board to flee from the presence of the Lord."

Jonah came from Gat Hefer in Galilee. It would have been natural for him to have fled north, to nearby Tyre or Sidon. Many ships berthed at these ports and they could have taken him just about anywhere. But Jonah decided to run in the exact opposite direction—as if he could outwit God by such a diversion.

Tarshish was probably a port city near present-day Barcelona, Spain—at the far end of the known world. A voyage from Joppa to Tarshish took approximately one year, and Jonah thought that if he could distance himself so far from the land of Israel, he might also be able to distance himself from Israel's God. The writer emphasizes this by twice repeating the words *from the presence of the Lord* in the space of two sentences.

Jonah's problem was not with what he knew, because he clearly had substantial theological knowledge. He already knew what he needed to know. He certainly knew that the Lord rules over all. The

problem was that his theology had not sufficiently penetrated his heart and his way of life. He acted against what he knew.

That is not the way to use Christian knowledge. What we know should direct our actions. Christ said, “If you know these things, happy are you if you do them” (John 13:17 ESV).

God’s Response—Verse 4

Jonah sought to flee from the presence of the Lord, but the Lord had other plans for him. After Jonah’s five energetic actions—he arose, went down to Joppa, found a ship, paid the fare and went down into its hold—God responded with a single action: *the Lord hurled a great wind onto the sea.*

The language is dramatic, suggestive and terse. God did not simply “send” a strong wind onto the sea. He did not merely “command” the wind to blow mightily on the sea. He actively *hurled a great wind onto the sea*, as a man who lifts a great stone and casts it down. Something of Jehovah’s anger is revealed here, something of his terrible strength.

Jonah’s God is the God of all the powers of nature. When he wishes, the wind blows and the sea becomes stormy. Nature does not act on its own; Jehovah is actively involved in all its processes, and when Jonah tried to flee from his presence, he *hurled a great wind onto the sea*. In consequence, *the ship considered breaking up*.

Once again, the language is evocative. The author speaks of the ship as if it were a person struggling with the storm—moaning and groaning, breathing heavily, and finally giving up rather than continuing to fight against the wind and the waves. The powers of nature and even the ship itself all cooperate with God in putting an end to the prophet’s vain effort to escape from the presence of the Lord.

Summary

1. Jehovah is the God of all nations. He has entered into covenantal relationship with Israel, but he is not indifferent

to other nations. They are all important to him and will all be judged by him. His saving grace is not limited to the people of Israel; the borders of his grace encompass all that exist. God has a real interest in what people do. Our lives have value beyond what we eat or drink, how much we can enjoy life or multiply. God attributes moral value to our actions. What we do matters to God.

2. Sin leads to punishment. The people of Nineveh were living sinfully and God was preparing to punish them in response. But, in God's world, grace often preempts punishment, and God sent Jonah to warn the Ninevites of his anger and impending punishment.
3. All humans are duty-bound to satisfy the righteousness of God as presented in the Law. All will be judged by the Law. The right way to preach the gospel of Christ is to begin with this foundational truth. Only when people understand God's holiness and see their sin in light of that holiness will they also understand their need of a savior.
4. Jehovah is the God of all humankind—of those who believe in him and serve him and of those who do not. Our actions prior to conversion are not annulled by our conversion. Jesus saves us from the guilt and penalty of those sins, but many of their consequences remain. It is our duty to do everything within our power to put right what we have done wrong.
5. Like Jonah, the servants of the Lord are not perfect. Like Jonah, they also sin. We should pray for those who serve us in the gospel, support them in love, forgive them when they fail, and encourage them to improve and continue to serve both God and us.
6. Sin makes us stupid. Sometimes it masquerades as wisdom, but the "wisdom" of sin is artificial. It is worldly and it

blinds us to the truth. In the long run, it will be exposed as shortsighted foolishness.

7. It is better to be wary of sin and not to be attracted to its false promises. Jonah knew better, but he acted as if it were possible to escape the presence of the Lord. He acted contrary to what he knew, as we all do when we sin. We should be on our guard against sin by constantly reminding ourselves of the truths of God's Word and by carefully living according to them.
8. God rules over all, including the powers of nature. He can cause storms, and he can silence them; give life and take it away. We should trust him, love him, and persist in faithful service to him. We should rejoice in his abilities and always turn to him for everything in every situation—because there is no situation over which he does not have control.

Prayer

*Lord, teach us to trust you and,
when we have trusted,
to lovingly obey.
In the name of your Son, Jesus,
Amen.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What have you learned about Nineveh?
2. What have you learned about man and his relationship to God? Note in particular issues of covenant and of law.
3. List all that was contrary to logic and all that was sinful in Jonah's attempt to escape. What is the relationship between the two? What does this teach you about the nature of sin?
4. What have you learned about God?
5. How does God respond to sin?