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Jonah

Preaching against the Foreign Powers

Assyria • Egypt • Babylon

I. Introduction to the Books of Jonah and Nahum

As we think about the content of the prophetic books, we often have to remember that it is influenced by historical events. God uses His prophets to comment on history and to place His plans within history before His people. The development of the superpower empires is a very big part of that plan. The books of Jonah and Nahum are written in reference to one of the great superpower empires that affected God's people during the days of the prophets; that is, the empire of Assyria.

II. Book of Jonah

A. Jonah's Flight from God (Jnh 1:1-16)

The prophet Jonah was called to serve God in reference to the empire of Assyria and in particular to go to its capital city, its largest, most prominent city, Nineveh, to preach there. Now the way most of our translations of the opening words of the book of Jonah make it sound, it is not unusual. The prophets preached against foreign nations on many, many occasions and many prophetic books have whole groups of chapters devoted to collections of their sermons against the foreign powers that had been oppressors of the people of Israel. Reading these words, we can imagine how Jonah heard them as something he would be used to doing: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah fled and refused to do that. He ran from God; he took a boat to go out onto the Mediterranean to try to get as far away as he could from this commission from God. Why?

We know that Jonah was an ardent nationalist. We know that he preached, as 2 Kings 14:25 tells us, against other

2 Kings 14:25

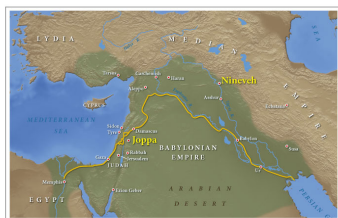
...In accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through His servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.

Jonah 1:2

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

OR

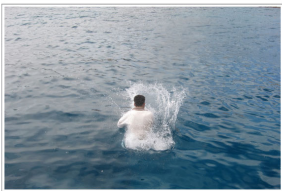
"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to it, because its trouble has come up before me."



nations that were oppressors of Israel. We know that he was eager to see northern Israel, where he lived, grow and increase and be a bigger and more powerful place. Why then would he resist the opportunity to preach against Assyria—a nation that was powerful, that was quite possibly at this time increasingly threatening Israel? We do not know all of the details of the interrelationships between the Assyrians and the Israelites in Jonah's time, somewhere around 770 B.C.

The answer lies in the fact that we must actually, as a number of scholars have suggested, translate a couple of key words in Jonah 1:2 slightly differently. In fact, the verse should read this way: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to it, because its troubles have come before me." That is the way Jonah, in fact, heard it. The word that can be translated "wickedness" or "evil" in Hebrew can also be translated "trouble" or "difficulty"—it has that range of meaning. The term translated "preach against" can also be translated "preach to." In other words, what Jonah heard was God's call to him to go to give the people of Nineveh a chance; that is what he heard. He understood that is what he was called to do, and he hated the idea. He hated the Assyrians; he hated their largest, most impressive capital city, Nineveh; he hated the whole thought of giving them any opportunity to repent. He knew as a prophet that if God was talking about concern for the troubles of a people, the preaching he gave might be an opening for God to bless those people.

Going to Joppa, a city in those days that was in Canaanite hands, he took an ocean-going boat, which was a ship of Tarshish. (Tarshish is a word that can mean "open ocean" in Hebrew.) He headed out to sea. Where he thought and how long he thought he could stay, we do not exactly know. But we know that Jonah probably was reflecting in his imperfect theology—the tendency of many people in those days, and sadly even some Israelites like himself—to think of gods as localized in their power. Apparently, he was at least hoping (in his discouragement over the thought of God blessing the people of Assyria) to get far enough away from where the Lord, the true God, was worshiped. Maybe the Lord's influence on him would be minimal and he could, in fact, escape this call. Was God localized? Was He able to handle His affairs only within certain reasonable



and restricted territories?

Not at all. Of course He is the only God in the world. So out on the Mediterranean Sea, Jonah and his shipmates are caught in a storm. The storm is horrible. It is clear to those who are rowing that the problem is terrible. They have taken down their sails; they are trying to row for shore; it is a fairly hopeless enterprise. But of course, they are desperate and try whatever they can. They know that this sudden storm with such intensity is not just an accident of nature; some god has caused this, and so they ask everyone to pray to his god, thinking in their usual polytheistic fashion. Jonah is awakened (he has been sleeping) and is invited to pray to his God. Eventually Jonah confesses, "I am the cause of this storm; my God is powerful here and He is trying to send me a message. Throw me overboard and the storm will stop." They do not want to, and they try not to. But eventually they feel it is their only solution, so the captain orders his men to throw Jonah overboard. As soon as Jonah hits the water, the storm stops. A kind of sequel to the first chapter, we read at the end of it that those sailors came and offered sacrifices to the Lord, the God of Jonah. They may not have believed in Him previously, but they sure were impressed by what they saw that day out on the Mediterranean.

B. Thanksgiving Inside the Great Fish (Jnh 1:17-2:10)

Meanwhile, Jonah is going down, down, down into the sea; he is drowning. He is going to die. He had said, "I deserve to die for my sins; I disobeyed God. Here I am a prophet, a spokesperson for God, and I have disobeyed Him." Suddenly, gulp—he is swallowed by something! He is alive; he is not dead. And as time goes by, he remains alive. God had prepared a great fish to swallow him. The question sometimes is asked, "What could this be?" We know that there are numbers of stories of whales actually swallowing humans and humans living for hours or days inside whales, because there is a certain amount of air intake that keeps coming inside.

We also know that cold water causes the human brain to concentrate oxygen within it, and people can live a very long time at the colder temperatures down in the ocean. We also know that basking sharks sometimes have swallowed



people without doing harm to them bodily. Whatever the fish was and however God miraculously employed it, Jonah was preserved. So in chapter 2, we hear him praying an eloquent prayer of thanksgiving. He says, “I was dying. I was going into the depths of the sea, but you rescued me O Lord. When my life was ebbing away, my prayer rose to you.” And so he says, “I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.”

He is thrilled. He had sinned against God and deserved to die, and yet God’s mercy was so great that God had rescued him from death. He preserved his life, and enabled him to sing this prayer of thanksgiving, this musical prayer of joy at God’s mercy, as we have it in chapter 2. So he who deserved to die is grateful, eloquently grateful, for God’s mercy on him as of the midpoint of the book.

C. Repentance of the Ninevites (Jnh 3:1-10)

With chapter 3, we read that the big fish, having spit him up on the dry ground, had, in effect, headed him in the direction of Nineveh. And he did then spend the days and weeks it took to travel to Nineveh and began to preach there. Now we are told that Nineveh was a great city, which required “a three-day visit.” This is a better translation than some of the older translations of “a three-day’s journey,” suggesting it would take three days to get there or three days to walk across it or something. But rather, again there is a translation issue, and the word that can mean “journey” in Hebrew often means “visit.”

It was the practice in ancient times when someone visited a city to arrive the first day, let people know you were there (you could not call or write ahead), and then the second day you would do your business. You have your meetings with those who had arranged their schedules to receive you, and then the third day there would be a formal send-off. Anything in diplomacy, anything official, anything that represented the kind of visit one would pay to a major city, could be termed a three-day visit. We have numbers of examples of this in the literature of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians.

In the case of Jonah, it was only on the first day that he got



ITINERARY:

Day 1: Arrival
Day 2: Business
Day 3: Departure



Jonah 3:5

*The Ninevites believed God.
They declared a fast, and all
of them, from the greatest to
the least, put on sackcloth.*

there that things broke loose. He just started going through the city telling his message. And by wildfire, it seems, people began saying, “This is right; this is a message from God; and we have got to do this.” Word reached the king, and the king joined in and encouraged by proclamation that everybody should repent before “God.” Now, this does not mean that the people of the city of Nineveh necessarily turned to the true Lord, the only God, and believed in Him as an orthodox Israelite would; none of that is ever said. What is said is that they believed that God, using the most general term “god,” had spoken to them and that they had displeased Him and needed to repent.

There is good evidence that the events in the book of Jonah take place during the reign of a certain Assyrian king called Ashur-dan III. Ashur-dan reigned from 773 to 756 B.C. We have a lot of records about his reign. We know that there were some very difficult wars for the Assyrians during this time that made them jumpy. They were threatened by outsiders when militarily weak. We know that there had been a total eclipse of the sun in his time—the Assyrians were highly superstitious and scared of such omens. We also know that there had been other astrological signs and indicators, that there had been earthquakes, that there had been riots, that there was civil unrest. And we can imagine this king eager to join with his people in something. As kind of getting on the bandwagon, as we might say, he was only too happy to proclaim a fast and that everyone including the animals, as the Assyrians often did, would wear sackcloth as a sign of their mourning before the Lord. In chapter 1, we saw Jonah flee from God somewhat defiantly. We see in chapter 3 the Assyrians repenting before God relatively humbly.

D. No Thanksgiving Outside Nineveh (Jnh 4:1-4:11)

In chapter 4, Jonah goes outside the city to see what will happen. Now much of chapter 4 is, in effect, a flashback. It does not presuppose the repentance of the people quite yet. Jonah builds a shelter for himself. Assyria was in an area that had long been deforested, and there was nothing but scrub trees around for firewood; almost anything by way of lumber had to be imported from a great distance away. So Jonah would have built his little hut probably out of stones and it would have been a three-sided structure. But the hot sun above would certainly be difficult to endure.



God causes a special leafy plant to grow, a leafy gourd of some kind. It grows quickly and it provides a roof over his shelter. He learns to love that plant, and he appreciates it. “This is great! I could not build a roof myself, but I have got this lovely plant to sit under to shade me.” Then God causes the plant to die, and Jonah becomes angry, furious. “My plant is gone! I am sitting out here in the heat.” He gets hotter and hotter, because God causes the wind to get hotter and hotter. With the hot, viciously brutal wind and the sun beating down, Jonah is almost delirious and in pain with this situation. He does not want to go inside the city that he hates and wait there under shelter. What he wants is for God to destroy that city. As he preached, he told them that they would be destroyed if they did not repent, and so he is hoping they will not repent.

God speaks to him and says, “Have you a right to be angry?” Jonah says, “I am so angry I could die!” And He says, “Did you care about your plant?” Jonah says, “I loved my plant!” God says, “Well, if you cared about a plant, should not I care about people and animals in the city of Nineveh?” Almost all of us in all cultures think of humans as more worthy than animals, and animals as more worthy than plants; every society has done this. So God says, “You are caring about something on the bottom level of a plant. Shouldn’t I care about the people and the animals?”

Jonah, eloquently grateful for his own rescue from sin, is furious at the rescue of the city of Nineveh from sin. The hypocrisy of Jonah’s actions and words is really pretty obvious to us, and thus in the book there is the further message that God is a God of all people, even the enemies of the Israelites. God loves everybody; His plan is to redeem the world, not just any particular ethnic group. Jonah, who so allied himself intellectually and spiritually with just the purposes and values of one ethnic group, needed to learn an important lesson about the compassion of God. That is where the book ends.

III. Book of Nahum

With Nahum, we also have a book that concentrates on Assyria, and in particular on its great capital city, Nineveh. The book of Nahum really is a prophecy against Nineveh or a group of

Nahum

ACROSTIC:

Verse 1: A . . .

Verse 2: B . . .

Verse 3: C . . .

Verse 4: D . . .

Verse 5: E . . .

Nahum 1:3

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of His feet.

prophecies against Nineveh, united into a whole.

A. Acrostic Poem: God's Majesty and Judgment (Na 1:1-15)

Nahum begins with an acrostic poem. Chapter 1 of the book of Nahum is written in that style that we call acrostic, in which the various letters of the alphabet are employed to start each successive verse. So you start with the "A" about Nineveh, and the "B," and the "C," and so on. It is a way of systematically going through, in a kind of thorough fashion, a description of God's judgment against the people of Nineveh. Now the particular emphasis of that acrostic poem is on God's majesty in judgment.

It is not just that God is going to punish the people of Nineveh, which certainly is true. The book starts out, after all, saying, "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on His foes and maintains His wrath against His enemies." But there is also the majesty of God; there is this aspect that God's character is not just vindictive. So we read these words, "The Lord is slow to anger and great in power." And we read, "The Lord is good, a refuge in time of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood, he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into darkness."

What is going on here? Why this kind of language? It is yet another instance of an oracle against a foreign nation. One way to reassure God's people that they will be blessed and protected and elevated from their lowly position of subjugation to the people of Nineveh (as was the case, in the middle or toward the end, we are not exactly sure—seventh century or maybe sometime between 650 and 620 B.C. when Nahum preached this) was to reassure people in those conditions that their future will be bright, partly because the future of those enemy nations that suppressed them will, in fact, be reduced in scope. The oppressors have to be brought down. Their power to oppress has to be restricted in order that God's people can be elevated, as is God's plan.

God is described as one ready and able and concerned and willing and determined to take care of what, for the people

Nahum 1:12-13

“Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, O Judah, I will afflict you no more. Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.”



of Israel, was the oppressive nation—that is, Nineveh—in the middle and end of the seventh century B.C. We read these words: “From you, O Nineveh, has one come forth who plots evil against the Lord and counsels wickedness.” So what has got to happen to that kind of nation? “Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be cut off and will pass away.” Then to Judah (the remainder of Israel in those days, the last part of the nation that was not already in the Assyrian Empire): “Although I have afflicted you, O Judah, I will afflict you no more. Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.”

B. Siege and Sack of Nineveh (Na 2:1-13)

In chapter 2, we read about a description of the siege and sack of Nineveh. Nahum has been inspired to paint a picture—it is a futuristic picture, a description of what will take place: “An attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, martial all your strength! The Lord will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines.” He is doing this, in other words, on behalf of His people. These are stories about the way that God will take care of His people. “The shields of his soldiers are red; the warriors are clad in scarlet (this is the attacker). The metal on the chariots flashes on the day they are made ready; the spears of pine are brandished. The chariots storm through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares. They look like flaming torches; they dart about like lightening. He summons His picked troops,” etc. Whoever ends up attacking Nineveh and destroying it, and we know that in fact it was the Babylonians, will be functioning as God’s army. This is exactly what the prophet Habakkuk says. Why are the people of Babylon so evil, yet so successful? God says, “Because I am using them for my purposes.” That is what is going on here.

C. Description of Nineveh (Na 3:1-19)

In chapter 3, we have a description of Nineveh as compared to Egypt. After predicting that it will come to defeat for several verses, in 3:8 we read these words: “Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her wall. Cush and

FATE OF THEBES

FATE OF NINEVEH

A Message of Justice

Egypt were her boundless strength; Put and Libya were among her allies. Yet she was taken captive and went into exile.” Who took Thebes, the capital of Egypt, into exile? It was the Assyrians, in 663 B.C. Now, through Nahum, God is turning the tables on Nineveh and saying, “Are you better than Thebes, that city you destroyed and took into exile? No, since you are not better, since you do not deserve to live when I allowed you to destroy them for their sins, I am also going to cause you to be destroyed for your sins.”

So the book ends with certainty of justice against Assyria and its capital Nineveh. “O king of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall (applause for the destruction of Nineveh), for who has not felt your endless cruelty?” Does God hate Assyria? No, that is not it. But is God determined ultimately to bring justice and judgment so that wrongs will be righted everywhere for all time? The answer is “yes,” and Nineveh deserves it, and will get it; and Nahum is a prophet through whom God gets that message across to His people.