

A Study of the Minor Prophets
The Book Jonah – Lesson 1 - Introduction

I. Jonah's unique commission reflects the wideness of God's mercy. The reference to "Jonah son of Amittai" in 2 Kings 14:25 places the ministry of Jonah in the reign of Jeroboam II, in Israel, from 793–753 BC. According to 2 Kings 14:23–25, Jonah prophesied the expansion of Israel's borders in the north to Lebo Hamath, which was carried out by Jeroboam II during his long and prosperous reign. Israel's military success was evidence of God's grace because Jeroboam II, like all of Israel's other kings, had not followed the Lord (2 Kgs 14:27).

II. Jonah's message to Israel makes it all the more surprising that the Lord chose Jonah to proclaim a message that led to God showing mercy to the hated Assyrians. In the previous century, the Assyrians had expanded westward and had forced Israel's kings to pay tribute, but a time of internal weakness and economic instability in Assyria allowed for Jeroboam II's extension of Israel's territories. Nineveh was a major city in Assyria and would, in subsequent generations, become the center of the Assyrian Empire. The Lord sent Jonah on a unique preaching mission to this foreign city to announce its impending destruction, but with the intent that this warning of divine judgment would lead to repentance.

III. Historicity: Scholars have debated the historicity and literary genre of the book of Jonah. Most modern scholars have treated the book as a parable, allegory, or satire, but a number of evangelical scholars have continued to defend the historicity of the book. Arguments against the historicity of Jonah have focused on (1) the supernatural elements in the story, particularly how Jonah survives in the belly of the fish for three days; (2) the improbability of or lack of evidence for the repentance of Nineveh; (3) historical inaccuracies or exaggerations in the book; and (4) literary features of the story that suggest its fictional character.

IV. Scholars who defend the historicity of Jonah say that what happens to Jonah as a miracle that occurs only because of God's direct intervention. The lack of outside confirmation for the events in Jonah is not surprising, in light of the overall scarcity of Assyrian historical records from Jonah's specific time period. Additionally, it is not entirely clear to what degree the Ninevites repented of their sinful acts, how long this repentance lasted, or whether this repentance ultimately had a significant impact on the nation of Assyria at large. Population estimates for Nineveh in the seventh century BC are roughly 300,000, so the number of 120,000 seems in line for the time of Jonah, particularly if the total includes the entire province of Nineveh that was in that time.

V. While an historical reading of Jonah is preferred here, it is also important to remember that belief in the historicity of Jonah is not "a litmus test of orthodoxy" and that the events in Jonah are not central to redemptive history in the same way as the exodus or the resurrection of Christ.