

“All the Prophets Testify”: Jonah Introduction & 1:1-3

Midweek Bible Study – 2025 October 29

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<https://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies/prophets>

Invocation & Opening Prayer

Follow-up to last class: pace, depth, other comments or questions

Jonah “Isagogics” (introductory matters prior to “exegesis”, text’s explanation or interpretation):

Who: God inspired the book through the prophet Jonah (“dove”), son of Amittai (“loyal” or “faithful”). *TLSB* gives Luther’s mention of Jerome’s report of some who think that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath who fed Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-24 and Luke 4:26; confer Keil-Delitzsch on the account of Jerome), though Luther himself does not hold that view but holds to 2 Kings 14:25’s description of Jonah (AE 35:323-324).

What: Four-chapter (but only 48 verses) actual historical account, not something experienced only in spirit or a fictional “parable” or other lesson. (Confer Jesus’s treatment of the account as history in Matthew 12:39-42, though reflect on *TLSB*’s treatment of “the sign of Jonah” on p.1479, and confer/compare *CSSB*’s on p.1369.) *CSSB* p.1370 notes the biographical aspects and remarks on the book’s unique focus on a single prophetic mission. Roehrs-Franzmann notes that the prophetic message is in the narrative, in which the “great fish” has a small role (confer Allen), with the account being about the compassionate God’s dealing with His prophetic servant.

When: *TLSB* p.529 puts Jonah in Jehoash’s reign (798-782 BC [note the overlapping dates of the kings there, and note the difference with Luther’s reference to Jeroboam II]); p.1082 says about 790 BC, with reference to 2 Kings 14:23-25; p.1478 likewise says about 790 BC. (Whether what *TLSB* p.1480 describes as Jonah’s proclamation of the Lord’s decision to allow Israel to expand its borders under King Jeroboam II [793-753] preceded or followed Jonah’s adventure with the great fish is not stated, though Keil-Delitzsch thinks the mission to Nineveh comes later [confer Laetsch and Luther]) *CSSB* pp.1369-1370 discusses Israel’s restoration of its borders against Damascus and internal troubles in Assyria that led to Israel’s overconfidence and complacency. Laetsch traces out how Nineveh’s repentance in a sense led to Israel’s destruction.

Where: *TLSB* p.529 puts Jonah in the northern kingdom of Judah; p.1478 notes places including Israel, Nineveh (Assyria [not necessarily our “Syria”]), Tarshish (p.1479 notes the debated referent of Tarsus in Asia Minor or Tartessus in Spain), and Joppa (seaport on the Great Sea [the Mediterranean]). *CSSB* p.1372 notes, “The story of Jonah extends to the boundaries of OT geographic knowledge” and says, “Inscriptions and pottery from Spain demonstrate that Phoenician trade linked the far distant ends of the Mediterranean, perhaps as early as the 12th century BC.

Why: *TLSB* p.1478 says “To describe God’s mercy toward the people of Nineveh and toward all who repent”. *CSSB*’s CPH editors p.1369 say, “That God’s grace is extended to all nations is the topic of Jonah ... the book of Jonah is one of the [OT’s] clearest manifestations that God’s grace is meant for all peoples.”

How: *TLSB* p.1478 notes the following:

Law Themes: Evil; flight from God; indifference; Sheol (meanings include grave or hell, depending on context); fasting and sackcloth; God's appointed testing. (As with Joel, we might note again that, if "fasting and sackcloth" are taken as "repentance", understood as "sorrow" and "faith", then such repentance depends on the Gospel creating the "faith" and the Gospel's content being faith's object.)

Gospel Themes: God's appointed mercy; steadfast love; God turns/relents (or, as we discussed with Joel, people change in relationship to God [distinguish between His antecedent will to save and His consequent will to damn]); pity.

Outline (*TLSB* suggests the account presents Jonah's life as seven scenes of a play; the following is from p.1479; compare *CSSB* p.1371 with its breakdown of two parallel cycles with various comparisons and contrasts [confer Allen]; also compare Roehrs-Franzmann's outline by chapter.):

- I. **Account of Jonah's Call and His Reaction (1:1-3)**
- II. Onboard Ship in the Midst of a Storm at Sea (1:4-17)
- III. Inside the Great Fish (2:1-10)
- IV. Yahweh gives Jonah His Assignment a Second Time (3:1-3)
- V. Jonah Delivers the Message; Nineveh's Response (3:4-10)
- VI. Jonah's Prayer in Nineveh (4:1-3)
- VII. Jonah Sits Outside the City of Nineveh; Yahweh Teaches a Lesson on Mercy (4:4-11)

Account of Jonah's Call and His Reaction (1:1-3):

1:1 *Now*: the Hebrew conjunction can be a simple "and". Keil-Delitzsch points to Ruth 1:1 and 1 Samuel 1:1 and comments, "This was the standing formula with which historical events were linked on to one another, inasmuch as every occurrence follows another in chronological sequence; so that the ["and"] simply attaches to a series of events, which are assumed as well known".

the word of the Lord came: *TLSB* notes the "Typical introduction to OT prophecy". *CSSB* similarly refers to "the divine source of the prophet's revelation", and we think of verbal inspiration and so also of inerrancy. Apart from inspiration, perhaps somewhat surprising would be Jonah's depiction as an "anti-hero" or in a negative light. Aside from Moses, God apparently did not speak to anyone "face to face" but may have used visions, dreams, or other methods. To some extent we might confer "the presence of the Lord" twice in 1:3 and once in 1:10. From our perspective, our distinguishing between the inscripturated Word of the Lord and the incarnate Word of the Lord is difficult.

to Jonah the son of Amittai: Allen discusses how hearers in the Southern Kingdom might have trouble hearing the account because of the prophet's activity prophesying "favorably" in the Northern Kingdom.

1:2 *Arise, go*: two commands are given, and only one is really obeyed (confer “rose” in 1:3).

Nineveh, that great city: Several commentators point out the city’s construction by Nimrod according to Genesis 10:11. *TLSB* notes, “Capital of Assyria, a powerful, ruthless nation more than 500 miles NE of Jonah’s hometown in Israel” (about from Kilgore to Memphis or St. Louis?), which, it says, “posed a threat to the entire region including Israel.” The capital had a “fortified wall” with a circumference of about 8 miles (the diameter would be about 2.55 miles?). Roehrs-Franzmann details Nineveh’s location on the east bank of the Tigris and says it represented “the pride and power and brutality of the kingdoms of this world at their worst” and says Jonah’s mission to such a foreign land was unique. The name “Nineveh” apparently also could be applied more-broadly to a larger complex of four cities, including “Nineveh” in the narrower sense. Allen discusses the “greatness” of Nineveh as surpassed by the “greater-ness” of God.

call out against it: *TLSB* says, “Proclaim God’s impending judgment.” The nature of the judgment is not specified by *TLSB*. Certainly from the context we can understand a proclamation of the law condemning sin; what, if any, Gospel Jonah might have been to proclaim if the Ninevites repented is not specified at this point, though, as Roehrs-Franzmann traces out, we can deduce from elsewhere that Jonah knew he would be calling the Ninevites to repentance and so to receive the same mercy that Jonah and all of God’s covenant people could receive then and that we can receive still today.

their evil: *TLSB* notes that the Hebrew term is “used nine times in a variety of ways” and says that, “Later, Nahum would charge Nineveh with plotting against the Lord, wanton cruelty, prostitution, and arrogance.”

has come up before Me: there is a certain “condescension” as God in a sense accommodates Himself to our ways of thinking, in this case, that He is “up” in heaven and we are “down” on earth. The idea expressed may go to the magnitude of the Ninevites’ evil, that it was so great that word of it had reached even heaven, as it were. *CSSB* refers to Genesis 18:20-21 and what the Lord says to Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah; Roehrs-Franzmann similarly refers to Jeremiah 51:9 about Babylon’s judgment reaching up to heaven, having been lifted up even to the skies, and Revelation 18:5 about sins heaped as high as heaven. Yet, we should not think of God as in any way ignorant of anything that happens here, as if we can flee from His presence, as Jonah apparently to some extent thought (Roehrs-Franzmann refers to disobedience as blind because it does not want to see).

3:3 *But*: the Hebrew conjunction can be a simple “and”, though in this case the adversative “but” is certainly appropriate given the contrast between God’s command and Jonah’s lack of obedience. Allen notes that the expected continuation does essentially come in 3:3, though Allen also notes the Southern listener might expect disobedience from a Northern prophet.

Jonah rose to flee: Jonah “rose” as commanded in 3:2, but instead of “to go” we hear “to flee”. The Hebrew has a sense of hurrying or hastening. With no spoiler alert, *CSSB* refers to the reason given in 4:2, that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster, but arguably beyond that also to some misplaced fear of Israel’s losing its privileges as the people of God (confer Keil-Deltizsch). Allen comments, “One must respect the narrator’s sequence: there is a time to explain, but it is not yet. *TLSB* comments, “Response was a jarring aberration for a servant of the Lord. Scripture nowhere reports that any other prophet disobeyed God’s call.” Of course, we do not know whether Jonah had been a “servant of the Lord” yet up to this point, nor should we necessarily assume that just because we are not told “that any other prophet disobeyed God’s call” that no other prophet did disobey God’s call. For example, we might think of Moses’s reluctance to go (Exodus 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13; Allen mentions also Elijah’s and Jeremiah’s hesitation) and of those whom the Lord Jesus called in the New Testament who either did not go at all or who betrayed Him, fled from the Garden when He was arrested, or denied Him while He made the good confession. (Then there is an interpretation of Peter’s actions in John 21:7 as in some way imitating Jonah’s fleeing.)

to Tarshish ... to Tarshish: twice in the verse with some degree of emphasis. As noted above, commentators differ as to whether Tarsus in Asia Minor is probably meant or Tartessus in southwest Spain. Either one would be far removed from Nineveh, though certainly Spain would more in an “opposite” direction (and more-readily require a sailing ship?).

from the presence of the Lord ... away from the presence of the Lord: despite the ESV’s translation, the Hebrew text is the same in both cases. The expression is repeated in this verse and used again in 1:10. Keil-Delitzsch comments, “away from the presence of the Lord, out of the land of Israel, where Jehovah dwelt in the temple, and manifested His presence” but “not to hide himself from the omnipresent God, but to withdraw from the service of Jehovah, the God-King of Israel.” Similar is Laetsch, who notes that standing in the presence of someone can have the sense of acting as one’s official minister. *TLSB* refers to “Jonah’s misconception that somehow he could escape from the Lord by getting out of Israel” (confer the discussion above, both about the ways that the word of the Lord might have come to Jonah and about the evil of the Ninevites coming up before the Lord). We might think of Psalm 139:7-12 (confer *CSSB*), where the same verb translated “flee”, same preposition translated “from”, and same noun translated “presence” all are used. More literally, the noun means “face” and can mean “presence” or “person” (anthropomorphizing God the Father as if He has a human face). Prepositions can indicate in the presence of, as here from the presence of. We might think of our sin meriting our being cast out from God’s presence (even our occasional delusion that God is unaware of what we do in secret) but His forgiving us when we repent and so His causing His face to shine upon us. Luther distinguishes God’s natural omnipresence and His spiritual presence where is Word, faith, and worship and so people are.

he went down to Joppa: the verb includes the idea of going down, often from the Temple in Jerusalem to another place, sometimes even geographically or topologically higher in elevation. We do not know for sure where Jonah was when the word of the Lord came to him, perhaps in his hometown of Gath-hepher, but if Jonah was working in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, then he may not have been in Jerusalem (for his part, Luther thinks Jonah was in Jerusalem). The Mediterranean seaport of Joppa may have been in Philistia and so neither in Judah nor Israel, *per se*, though close to Israel's southern border with Philistia (so the map on *TLSB* 558). Incidentally, *TLSB* refers to Joppa as "Peter's point of departure to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles" with reference to Acts 10:5, but, regardless of what *TLSB* might mean by that (going from there to Caesarea to see Cornelius?), there is no indication in the text of Acts or otherwise that I am aware of that would suggest that Peter *sailed* from Joppa anywhere in missionary activities.

found a ship ... paid the fare and went on board, to with them: *TLSB* comments, "Ships routinely carried passengers as well as cargo." Allen comments, "The plethora of verbs indicate the hustle and bustle in which he engages in order to achieve this self-centered end." We have occasions to reflect on the similarities between Jonah's sailing from Joppa to whatever Tarshish and Paul's (Saul of Tarsus) sailing from Caesarea Maritima to Rome. Of course, Paul went as a prisoner and Jonah of his own "free will", and Luther, at least, lets Jonah's sin be great for our comfort of knowing that as he was forgiven so can we be forgiven.

What are you taking home from the prophecy considered tonight?

Although we have not gotten through v.6 yet, *TLSB*'s Law and Gospel Application Note for 1:1-6 says, "Our own disobedience merits punishment, but God in His love and mercy works to bring us to repentance and a restored relationship rather than closing the door on us."

Next time, November 12, Jonah 1:4-17 (no class November 5).

Closing Prayer & Benediction