

INTRODUCTION:

The Book of Jonah is unique among the prophets in that, instead of containing a group of oracles or visions, it relates an extended episode in the life of the prophet. From 2 Kings 14:25 we learn that Jonah was from Gath-hepher, a town in Galilee, and that he prophesied during the time of Jeroboam II, which means that his book is probably to be dated in the first half of the eighth century B.C. The story line is simple. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and denounce her wickedness, but he fled by boat in the opposite direction. He feared that preaching God’s message would result in God showing mercy. He was thrown overboard to save those on his ship from a fierce storm, and God arranged for him to be swallowed by a large fish. After three days, the fish spit him out on dry land, and God again called Jonah to preach against Nineveh. This time he went. His message that Nineveh would be overthrown in forty days was as powerful as it was brief. The entire city repented, and God revoked his judgment against them. Jonah became angry and went out of the city to see what would happen to it. God caused a plant to grow up to shade Jonah, and then He caused it to die. Jonah was again angry, because he needed the shade, but God used the incident to teach him a lesson about forgiveness and mercy. God pointed out that Jonah was more concerned about a plant than he was about a city with more than 120,000 inhabitants. The Book of Jonah occupies an important position in the Old Testament canon because it so clearly shows that, although God had a special relationship with Israel, He did not abandon His compassion for other nations. In Jonah’s experience with the fish, Jesus saw a sign pointing to His own burial, and He used Nineveh’s repentance to chide His unrepentant contemporaries (Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32).

ABOUT NINEVEH:

In various periods of Assyria’s history, Nineveh was the capital, and apparently it was such when Jonah visited there in the eighth century B.C. Within a few decades Assyria became the dominant power in the region and carried Israel (the northern kingdom) into exile. Perhaps Jonah was so resistant to preaching repentance to the people of Nineveh because he realized that the repentance and subsequent sparing of Nineveh would seal Israel’s fate. Nineveh’s fall finally came in 612 B.C., about a century and a half after Jonah was there. When Haran, the last major Assyrian city, fell in 609 B.C., Babylon

became the next undisputed power. Babylon would subsequently and latter carry Judah (the southern kingdom) into exile. The prophets Zephaniah (Zeph. 2:13) and Nahum (Nah. 3:5-7) correctly prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed.

ABOUT TARSHISH:

Many Bible scholars locate Tarshish (which means “refinery”) in the area now known as Spain. It had a copper-smelting station from which Phoenician traders brought the refined metal to the Middle East to exchange for other commodities. Leaving from Israel, Tarshish would be in the opposite direction from that of Nineveh.

THE THREE SECTIONS OF THE BOOK OF JONAH:

(Section-1: Jonah’s Disobedience)

God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry against it, but he was unwilling to go. Instead, he fled in the opposite direction, boarding a ship at Joppa to go to Tarshish. Jonah’s disobedience resulted in a storm that threatened to sink the ship and kill everyone on it. The sailors sought to discern the cause of the storm through prayer and casting lots. The lot pointed to Jonah as the cause and he subsequently confessed and had the sailors throw him overboard so that they would not be destroyed because of his disobedience. Their doing so calmed the storm but God sent a fish to swallow Jonah, perhaps to save Jonah’s life from drowning and provide him a second chance. (Chapter 1)

(Section-2: Jonah’s Prayer)

Surprised at finding himself alive in a fish, after his dire experience of being thrown overboard and sinking into the depths of the sea, the prophet gave thanks to God for his present escape from death and gratefully expressed the hope of ultimate deliverance. God responds instructing the fish to vomit him up onto dry land. (Chapter 2)

(Section-3: Jonah’s Message and Results)

Commanded a second time by God to go to Nineveh and cry against it, this time Jonah complies. All of Nineveh immediately and publicly repents, and thus God repents from sending destruction upon them, saving the people and the city. At this Jonah was displeased; not that his prophecy had been nullified by the repentance of the people, for he and his hearers expected that it would be (Jonah 3:9; 4:2), but perhaps because he felt that with the sparing of Nineveh the doom of his own country was sealed.

Then through the withering of a plant that produced shade for Jonah as he watched to see what God would do with the city, the Lord teaches the lesson of divine compassion on man and beast as being irrespective of man’s relation to the church.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH:

The purpose of the book is primarily to teach that God’s grace is not limited to the children of Abraham, but the Gentiles can receive mercy while still outside the pale of Israel’s law. But besides this great lesson the Book of Jonah affords illustrations of truth, which from their nature may perhaps even be regarded as “lessons of truth.”

(Lesson-1: Gentiles may be more likely to respond to God’s Word than Israel)

Nineveh repented at the preaching of one prophet, whereas Israel repented not, although many prophets were sent to it (Matthew 12:41). This illustration may indicate the general truth that the Gentiles may yield a readier acquiescence to the doctrines of God than Israel had done, acquiescing not more readily to the moral law indeed, but to the revelation of God as a whole.

(Lesson-2: People of God’s kingdom shall lead Gentiles to Repentance)

Jonah, an Israelite and God’s servant sent to preach to the Gentiles, is an evidence of God’s will that the people of God’s kingdom shall lead the Gentiles to repentance and to God. Jonah was not the only Israelite in whom this truth was exemplified: Elijah was sent to a woman of Zarephath (1 Kings 17), Elisha cured Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), and Christ talked to a woman of Samaria about the things of God and healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7; John 4).

(Lesson-3: Jonah’s fate is symbolic of Israel’s fate)

Jonah, an Israelite and God’s servant fleeing from duty, is cast into the sea, but is delivered in order that he may fulfill his mission. This incident accordingly received an allegorical interpretation: Jonah symbolizes the nation Israel. Israel, as a nation, had been chosen to be a witness and upholder of divine truth, but Israel often apostatized and failed to execute its mission. It was in consequence swallowed up in the exile by Babylonia (Jeremiah 51:34) as was Jonah by the fish. In exile, however, the nation like Jonah (Jonah 2) sought the Lord. There followed a return from the exile; in other words, the nation was disgorged (Jeremiah 51:44) as was Jonah (Jonah 2:10). Upon the return from

Babylon, many Jews were disappointed that the judgment uttered by the prophets did not at once take effect, just as Jonah was displeased that God spared Nineveh. But God’s purposes will be carried out, and the remnant survived to fulfill Israel’s mission to the world (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-13).

(Lesson-4: Jonah as illustration of the Messiah’s death for sins not His own)

Jonah, an Israelite and God’s servant is cast into the depths of Sheol (the grave) and yet brought up alive out of the pit (John 2:2, 6). This may illustrate the death for sins not his own, and the burial and the resurrection of the Messiah, the representative Israelite and perfect servant of the Lord (Matthew 12:40).

JESUS’ REFERENCES TO JONAH:

When the people asked Jesus to produce a sign to prove the truth of His witness, He told the ***“evil and adulterous generation”*** that demanded the sign that ***“no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet”*** (Matthew 12:39; 16:4), and goes on to compare Jonah’s three days in the fish with His three days in the earth (Matthew 12:40).

Likewise, in Luke 11:30 Jesus says, ***“For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation.”*** Both Jonah and Jesus were sent by God to call for the people to repent and turn back to God. Both also spent three days in the darkness of a grave, Jonah in a fish and Jesus in a tomb. Although Jonah sacrificed himself for the sailors by instructing them to throw him overboard that they be saved from the storm, the distinction between Jonah and Jesus is that Jonah ended up in the fish because he fled God’s command, while Jesus spent three days in the grave because He refused to flee but instead offered Himself up for the sins of us all.

VERSE NOTES:

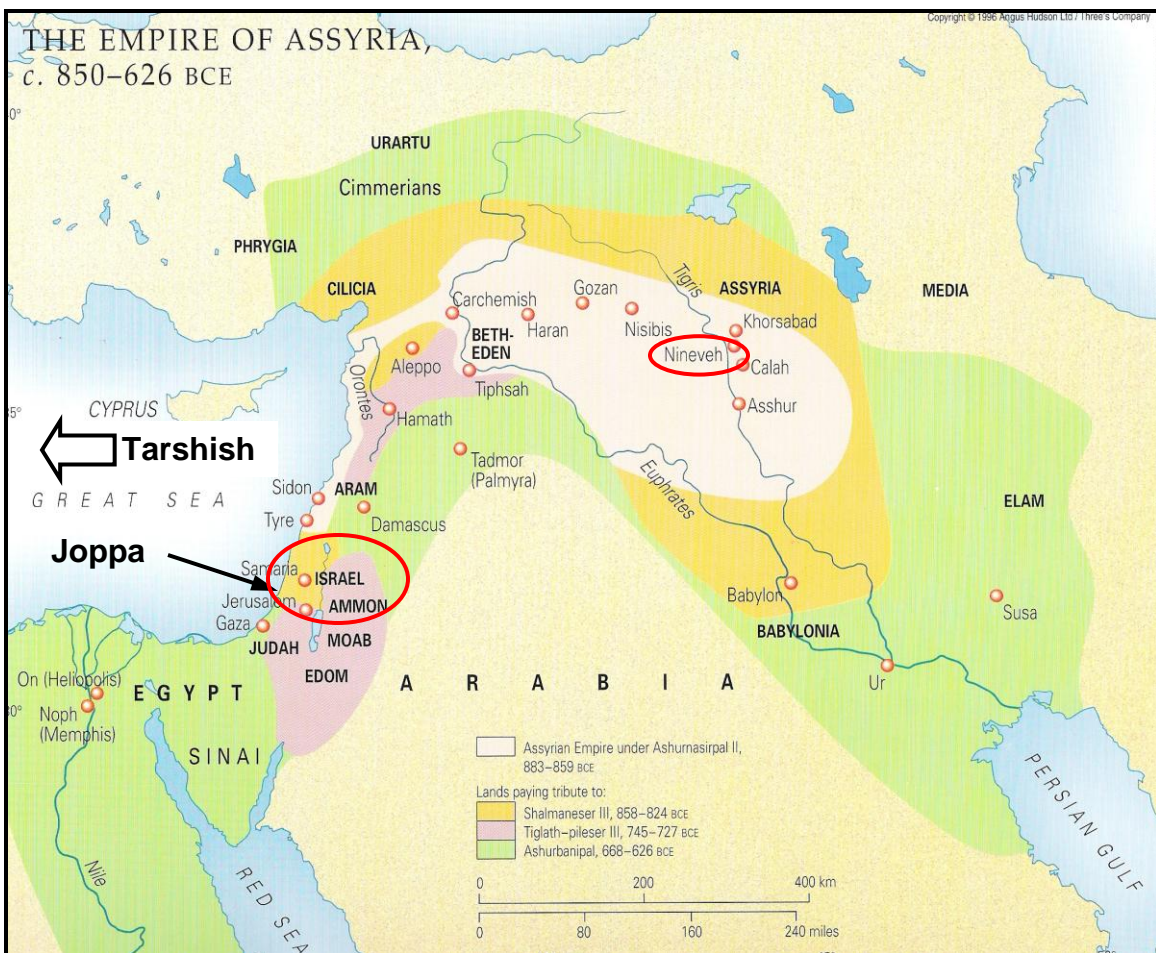
(3:3) The phrase, “a three days walk” means that it would require three days for Jonah to travel the circuitous route throughout the entire city, up and down every street, in order to preach his message of repentance.

(4:11) The phrase, “persons who do not know the difference between their right hand and left hand,” was an idiomatic expression signifying very young children who had not reached the age of accountability, of making moral decisions (Heb. 5:13, 14). This verse justifies inclusion of the Book Jonah in the canon, because it shows so clearly that the

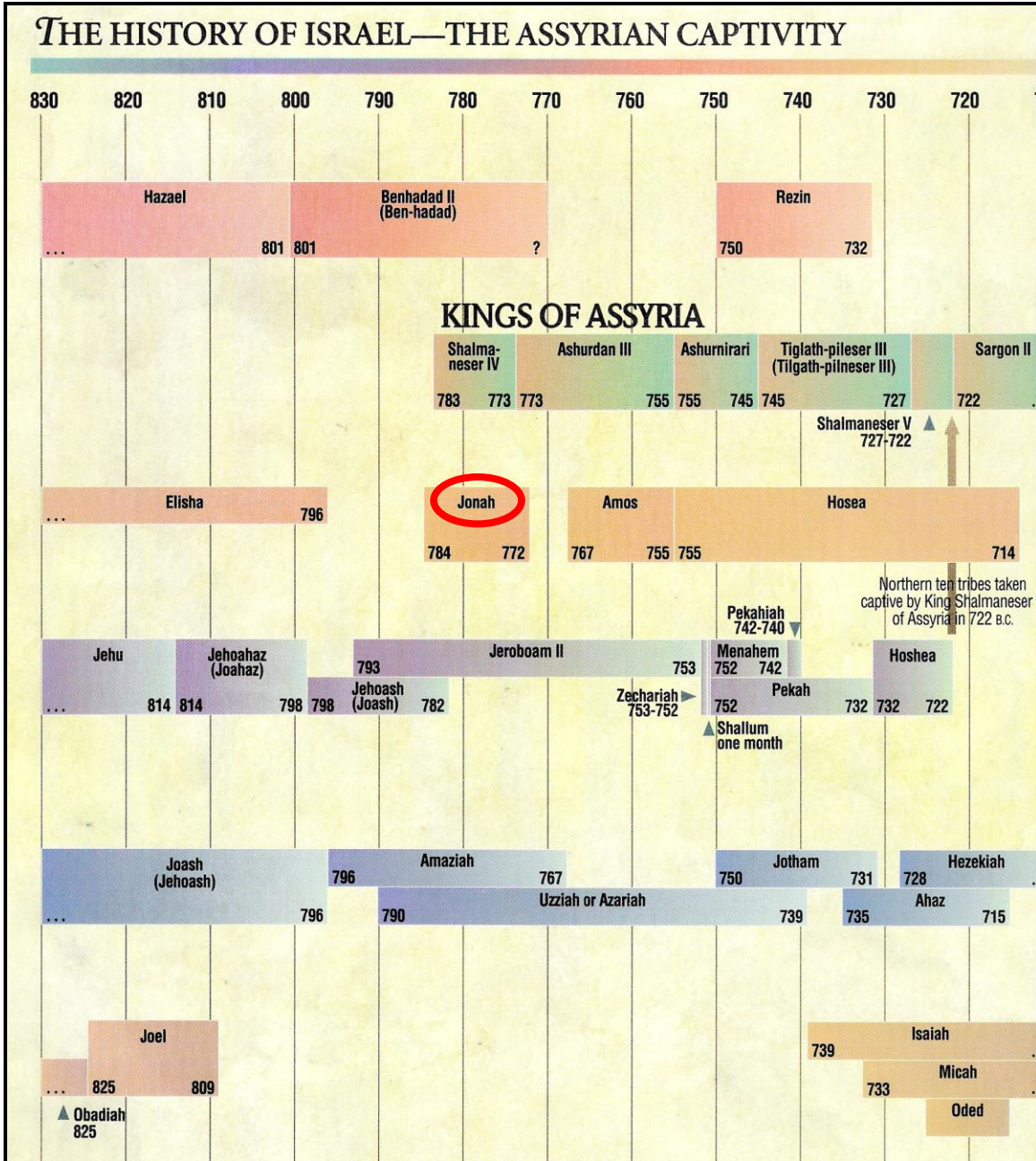
Lord is God of all the nations, not just Israel, and that He is concerned with the welfare of all mankind. Jonah represents so many others in Israel who forgot this lesson. Latter, prophets like Isaiah tried to expand the people’s vision by looking forward to the day when God’s message would reach out to all nations, and Jesus’ great commission assured that this would indeed take place (Matthew 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47).

LOCATIONS:

The map below shows the location of Nineveh in Assyria. Joppa is not shown but would be located on the coast of the Great Sea (Mediterranean Sea) in Israel. Tarshish would be off the map to the west in present day Spain. The location where Jonah was vomited onto the shore is unknown.



The chart on the following page illustrates the approximate time the story of Jonah took place and the prophet lived. There is significant evidence that the actual “writing” of the book may have followed much later after the Babylonian Exile.



References:

Commentary from “*The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*” and “*Zodhiates’ Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*” published by AMG Publishers.

Map from “*Atlas of the Bible and Christianity.*”

Chart from “*The International Inductive Study Bible*”