

Character of God
History and Literature of the Old Testament

BIB 111

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There are few stories from the Bible as well known and more often taught than that of Jonah and his experience with the whale. It is popular with children because of the dramatic way in which God deals with Jonah. Adults have studied this story as well, even though they often look over important lessons and dwell unnecessarily on the debate about what kind of fish could have swallowed Jonah. That debate is beyond the scope of this paper. The question that this paper will address is what aspect of God's character does the book of Jonah reveal? The following pages will demonstrate through Jonah's story that God is a God of second chances for Jew and Gentile alike.

The book of Jonah is believed to be written by the prophet Jonah, whose name means a dove (Lockyer, 1986), an appropriate name given his status as a prophet, a man of God. His story begins by presenting what God's will is for Jonah at this time in his life. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:1-2, NIV).

Jonah is a native of Gath Hepher, which is near Nazareth in the northern kingdom of Israel, during the time of the reign of Jeroboam II. Jonah has been called of God to reach the people of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire (Halley, 1965). God needs the Assyrians as part of his plan in dealing with the divided Israel, but he can no longer accept its wickedness (Halley, 1965). Assyria was not only the political enemy of Israel, but the nation was also known for its wide array of false gods. Assyrians were shunned as pagans and outcasts by the Israelites (Lockyer, 1986).

After receiving God's instructions, Jonah rebels and flees to Tarshish, a city believed to be Tartessus, in Spain, one of the most distant points of the known world at the time (Halley, 1965). Dennison (1982) indicates that this is the first of three times that Jonah becomes angry about his situation. While Jonah's writing does not give the reader any insights into Jonah's

recent experiences, one can gather from the state of Israel generally why Jonah might be in such a foul state of mind. Jonah, up to this point in his life has been a Jewish born prophet of and for Israel (Dennison, 1982). But Israel at this point is enjoying a prosperous time in its history, making the society very affluent. Dennison (1982) says that this prosperity has made Israel very “decadent, perverse and idolatrous” (p. 2). Jonah has been trying to turn Israel back to the Lord without having much success. Jonah, reflecting on God’s instructions, no doubt thought if he could not succeed with Israel, how can he succeed with people of a pagan culture like that of Nineveh (Dennison, 1982). So Jonah decides to take what seems to be the easy way out, goes to Joppa, and boards a ship bound for Tarshish.

If Jonah’s sin of disobedience brought about a hidden storm down deep in his soul, God would bring it to the surface as none other can (Henry, 1721)! No matter how far a person runs from God’s will, it is never so far that God cannot work to bring them back. While Jonah was on the sea, God brought about a violent storm, a storm so severe that the ship was in danger of sinking. As Jonah slept below, the sailors did everything in their power to save the ship, including dumping cargo and praying to their gods for deliverance. With the storm continuing to rage, the captain of the ship awakens Jonah in hopes that his god can save them all. Lots were cast to determine who was at fault and it fell on Jonah (Jonah 1:4-7, NIV). Those on the ship turned to him and asked, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you” (Jonah 1:8, NIV)?

No doubt under great conviction at this point, Jonah gave them a testimony of himself and more importantly, about his god, the God in Heaven. They may have never heard this before, and verse 10 indicates they were terrified at his running from such a god. With the storm increasing, they inquired of Jonah what should be done. He answered, “Pick me up and throw

me into the sea...” (Jonah 1:12, NIV). At first, the men tried to row for shore, but after realizing their own efforts were in vain, they asked God for forgiveness, did as Jonah had asked, and the storm subsided (Jonah 1:16, NIV).

This was a great day for the sailors, for they have come to know God. They sacrificed to Him and worshipped Him. But for Jonah, his ordeal was not over. The Bible says, “But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17, NIV). During this time, Jonah repented and his prayer is recorded in chapter two. This chapter concludes with, “And the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (Jonah 2:10, NIV).

Jonah chapter three begins with God once again expressing his will for Jonah to go to Nineveh, and this time, Jonah is more than happy to obey. When Jonah arrived, he immediately began to preach how they would be destroyed in forty days if they did not repent. Apparently he was convincing, but Jonah was not prepared for the results (Lockyer, 1986) because all the people repented, from the beggar to the king, even to the point of fasting and dressing in sackcloth and ashes (Jonah 3:1-9, NIV). “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10, NIV).

This was a great day for Nineveh, for just like the sailors of chapter one, they have come to know God. But Jonah sees the situation quite differently and now becomes angry again. Through his preaching, something has happened in Nineveh that has failed to happen in all of Israel, the people repented. Since the Assyrians are enemies of Israel, no doubt Jonah would have been pleased to see their destruction by God raining down fire from Heaven. Matthew Henry (1721) indicates that Jonah still had a problem in that “there appeared in Jonah remains of a proud, uncharitable spirit; and that he neither expected nor desired the welfare of the Ninevites,

but had only come to declare and witness their destruction” (p. 3). Where Jonah was thankful that God spared his life earlier, after witnessing God’s compassion over these people, Jonah now wishes to die (Jonah 4:3, NIV).

Jonah has been used of God over the past few days to reach a vast number of people, but Jonah is angry because God’s way differs from his way (Dennison, 1982). God drives this point home in the last part of chapter four by creating a vine to provide shade for Jonah as he sat outside the city. Jonah was pleased with the shade the vine provided, but the next day, God caused a worm to kill it. Jonah becomes angry, and again, he wants to die (Jonah 4:5-9, NIV). The book of Jonah concludes with God explaining that He, not Jonah cared for the vine, something of small value compared to the people of Nineveh. These people were sinners far from God, but they are now His children, needing their Father’s compassion. The book ends with God asking Jonah, “Should I not be concerned about that great city” (Jonah 4:11b, NIV)?

Throughout the book of Jonah, the reader sees aspects of God’s character repeated over and over again. Jonah, a reluctant prophet, shows how God can use those who may not want to be used to accomplish his plan (Lockyer, 1986). Even Jonah finally acknowledged, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (Jonah 4:2b, NIV). More simply put, God is the God of second chances. Even though God needed a messenger, it was His work that brought about revival and repentance (Lockyer, 1986)!

It was seen with the sailors on the ship from Joppa to Tarshish. They were no doubt pagans, not unlike those of Nineveh. When the storm raged, each sailor prayed to his god for deliverance. This deliverance that would not come until Jonah gave them testimony of the one true God, described by Jonah as, “the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (Jonah 1:9b, NIV). The sailors were given a second chance from God when they obeyed Jonah

and cast him into the sea.

At this point God could have allowed Jonah to perish, but instead he was given a chance to repent. God created a fish to swallow Jonah, within which he humbled himself and prayed for deliverance. God continued to work with Jonah despite his anger after Nineveh was saved, and when the vine died. Jonah received many second chances!

Last but not least, God provided a second chance to the people of Nineveh. These people were not part of His chosen people, they were gentiles who were as separated from God as people can get. Matthew Henry (1721) makes an interesting observation when he notes, “We read of no sacrifices offered to God to make atonement for sin; but a broken and a contrite heart, such as the Ninevites then had, he will not despise” (p. 3). God had compassion on them, showing that anyone can come to the Lord and be granted grace because of the love He has for them.

This paper has discussed the book of Jonah and how it reveals an aspect of God’s character, that of God being a God of second chances. From Jonah’s rebellion, the reader can see how God intervened to bring him back and in the process a boat full of sailors came to be God’s children. They were given another chance to serve and worship Him, as was seen when Jonah was cast into the sea. Jonah was then given another chance to reach the people of Nineveh and they too came to be God’s children. God’s willingness to continue to work with Jonah shows how when people turn to Him, they will see how He is a God of second chances, who loves all people, Gentile or Jew.

References

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