

Study One - The call to action

The Reluctant Prophet



Port of Joppa (Jaffa); image in the public domain

Starter

Being asked to do one thing and doing the opposite is not an unfamiliar scenario to anyone who has had or looked after children. Can you think of examples from your own experience?

Because this is such a short book, it is useful to have read all four short chapters before starting the study, to get a feel and perhaps remind yourself of whole story.

Bible Passage

Jonah Chapter 1:1-16

If it helps, go round the group and read a couple of verses each.

Key Verse

“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)

So Who Was Jonah?

The book of Jonah is anonymous, and there’s no indication that this is the prophet himself writing a confessional account of his adventures. However, there is

evidence of Jonah the man, because the description in verse 1 takes us to a passage in 2 Kings 14:23-27 where we read of the prophet Jonah prophesying the restoration of Israel’s boundaries under King Jeroboam II.

This dates him to somewhere between 782-753BC, around the time of Amos (c751BC) and Hosea (c743BC) and within a period of great political turmoil.

The name Jonah has a meaning of “dove” in Hebrew, which had also long been a symbol for Israel (as in Psalm 74:19)

Jonah is also mentioned by Jesus (Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 11:29-32)

“Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.” (Luke 11:29)

It is also worth noting that Jonah was from the village of Gath-hepher, just a few miles from Nazareth in Galilee, a fact conveniently forgotten about by the Pharisees when they said in jest that no prophet ever came out of Galilee (John 7:52).

It would seem that at the time God was speaking to Jonah, Israel was just on the ascendency and Assyria feeling rather fragile, riven internally by division and externally from surrounding nations.

Anything could happen, so not a bad time perhaps to bring God's word to the population of Nineveh!

Question 1

If you've managed to read this short story, what was your immediate impression - that this is a real historical narrative, an allegorical or teaching story illustrating aspects of Israel's behaviour (Jonah's name in Hebrew means dove, which is also a symbol for Israel), or a parable like those used by Jesus to demonstrate a moral or spiritual lesson for the people?

Question 2

What can it add to our understanding to have at least some knowledge of the historical and/or political context of a Bible story?

Most of the Old Testament prophets denounced the surrounding nations, because this has always been a very turbulent part of the world. But they did it from a safe distance!

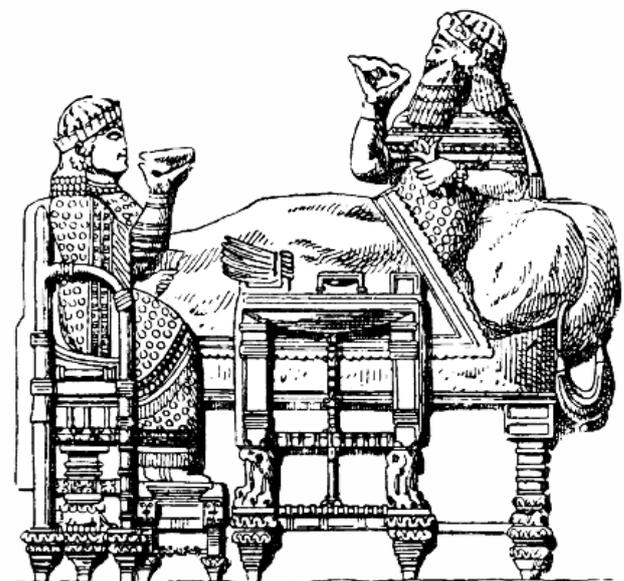
Jonah is asked not to make his pronouncement from the safety of home, or send a warning of God's impending judgement against the city by messenger, but to make the arduous 500 mile trek northeast across the desert and deliver the message himself.

Question 3

Why do you think the personal visit is required in this instance?

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Assyrian furniture and feasting

"Go to Nineveh and preach against it!"

Nineveh is an ancient Mesopotamian city on the eastern bank of the Tigris River settled as early as 6000 BC and the flourishing capital of the Assyrian empire.

It is now encircled by the modern city of Mosul, Iraq.

Jonah's reaction seems to have been swift. Other prophets such as Jeremiah and Elijah struggled with the task of delivering God's message, but they didn't actually try running away!

Instead of a 500 mile journey, Jonah seems to have wanted to get away as far as

possible, and a 2000 mile sea voyage to what would have been a Western Mediterranean Phoenician colony fits that bill perfectly.

Jonah, who was an acknowledged prophet with a good track record, cannot face this challenge and with a full wallet heads for Joppa, the Mediterranean port where the apostle Peter was staying when he got the call to visit Cornelius in Acts 10 (we shall look at this story briefly in a later study).

Question 4

Why did Jonah run away?
(See chapter 4:2)

Question 5

So could God not have stepped in and made it difficult for Jonah to find a ship and the necessary fare? What does the ease at which Jonah managed to purchase a berth on that ship have to say to us about our God?

Question 6

What does this say about Jonah's understanding of God?

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Jonah all at sea!

There are a few suggestions as to what was going through Jonah's mind. It might be simply fear of the unknown, travelling to a hostile city so far from home and putting his own life in danger.

Then there's Jonah's own attitude to these foreigners. He seems to be more concerned about the Ninevites getting a dose of God's wrath, than having the opportunity to repent and see God's mercy.

Perhaps he's worried about the consequences for him if nothing happened to the Ninevites despite his preaching - such a loss of face for a prophet?

And then there's the issue of what happens if they repent and God forgives them, because at the back of his mind would be the fact that Israel itself was sorely in need of turning away from sin and repenting as a nation. It would reflect badly on Israel if Nineveh received God's mercy!

Although the Israelites were familiar with the sight of the sea, because of the topography of their country, they were predominantly a land-based rather than a maritime nation. The fishermen who followed Jesus were operating on Lake Galilee, which though large and prone to changing weather conditions was not the Mediterranean Sea! It is perhaps not a criticism of Jonah when we read that he went below deck when the sea got choppy, we might well decide to find somewhere to lie down quietly under the same circumstances.

The sailors were foreigners, probably Phoenician, and Jonah is quite open with them about his reasons for travelling (see 1:10) so when things get scary with the storm they not only cry out to their own God (which was likely to be Baal, a name covering many different gods who were associated with cities in the region) but also demand that Jonah does the same to his God, because they fear that he might be the cause of a potential disaster.

Question 7

Jonah's view of foreigners was possibly not what we might call "politically correct", due in part to the way in which his nation had been treated in the past. How is that position put to the test on the ship? Why?

Something interesting happens when the situation worsens. Firstly, despite Jonah insisting that they throw him overboard, the foreigners try their hardest to save his life by rowing back toward the shore - they show mercy to him whilst risking their own lives.

When that fails, they do as he has asked and throw him into the sea, with a prayer to Jonah's God, not theirs. And as the storm subsides it is to Jonah's God, not Baal that they turn in fear and awe with their worship and vows.

One life seemingly sacrificed for many. Does that ring a bell?

Jonah's actions saved them physically, but possibly also spiritually. And this while he was running away from his real mission.

But God isn't finished with Jonah yet!

Question 8

What does the story tell us so far about the tendency to adopt an "Us and Them" approach to other nations in the world?

Question 9

Jonah wanted to be as far as possible physically from God when he got the call to go to Nineveh. Was he right, is that possible, and do we sometimes try to do the same?

Question 10

What other ways do we find to distance ourselves from God?

Question 12

Are we right to see parallels between the life of a human being such as Jonah, and that of Jesus - sacrificing his life for others?

Food for thought

We probably live in a country where it is difficult to see one particular nation's people as our enemies, but we do see clashes of culture which can manifest themselves in misunderstandings and inflammatory language, leading to distrust and tension.

The same can sometimes happen within our family or circle of friends. The solution is usually not to run away from the situation, as Jonah did, but to be willing to go that extra mile to confront and address the problem before it gets out of control - to be agents of peace and reconciliation.