

Jonah
His Life, Character,
and Mission

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AND MISSION

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Tentmaker Publications
Stoke-on-Trent
2001



Tentmaker Publications
121 Hartshill Road
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST4 7LU

ISBN: 1 899003 49 5

First published in 1849
This edition retypeset 2001

Preface

A PECULIAR and somewhat mournful interest hangs around the life and labours of Jonah, not surpassed, in some respects scarcely equalled, by that which attaches to any other of the Old Testament prophets. The elements both of evil and of good wrought with unwonted energy in his experience—at one time depressing him to the lowest depths, and anon raising him to a kind of supernatural elevation. Cast upon degenerate times, when the foundations of the earth were out of course, and the kingdom of God was, in a manner, forced to strike out into new and unexpected channels, it was his lot to tread strange and mysterious paths—paths equally remarkable for the sore troubles and the glorious achievements through which they conducted him—though himself meanwhile so ill prepared for the times, or the times so hardly set for him, that the bright, not less than the dark and cloudy, periods of his life served only to feed the well-spring of his sorrow and dejection.

Unhappy prophet! unhappy, too, in his posthumous connexion with the world, as well as in his personal sojourn in it; for the troublous spirit that attended him through life seems still to have slumbered in his ashes. Reproach and dishonour have been heaped upon his name amongst men. The adversaries of the truth, and not these only, but also its zealous friends and defenders, have shot many a bitter arrow at him, and have thought they improved the record of his singular history according as they enforced against him charges of transgression, and expressed their abhorrence of his character. Not so “the greater than he,” whose

servant and forerunner he was, and who once and again pointed an evil and adulterous generation to the wonderful experience and history of Jonah as already containing the elements of his own, and as pregnant with lessons of highest wisdom to those among whom he lived. And, following in his footsteps, we also have sought to honour the son of Amittai, yea, to vindicate his title to a distinguished place among those who have done and suffered much for the cause of God—men of noble hearts and devoted lives—in whose very failings we still discern the lofty and self-denying spirit that animated their bosom.

What we have written, however, in the following pages, is not to be regarded simply, nor even chiefly, in the light of a vindication. The aim rather has been to give a clear and just representation of the times of the prophet—of the nature and design of the singular mission he was appointed to fulfil—and of the varied instruction which is furnished for believers of every age by the mission itself, and the manner in which it was discharged. The work assigned this prophet marked in some respects a new era in the providence of God toward his Church; it unfolded principles of government and ways of dealing, which again reappear in other portions of prophetic scripture more fully developed and variously applied; so that the consideration of the book of Jonah, besides the other advantages it yields, furnishes some sure and well-defined landmarks for guiding our way to a sound interpretation of the word of prophecy. To sincere and earnest students of that word the author presents this volume, as a small contribution toward the right understanding of those portions of prophecy which come within its range, and to all in general who desire to cultivate an intimate acquaintance with the records of God's revealed will. May the Lord be pleased to accept the effort here made to discover his truth, and manifest his ways to the children of men!

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Chapter I

Introductory—The time and circumstances of
Jonah's appearance as a prophet.

It is always of importance for a correct understanding of the prophetic scriptures, to know something of the time when they were indited, and of the persons to whom they were originally addressed, in the case of Jonah it is not difficult to ascertain this, as a passage in the Second Book of Kings marks with sufficient distinctness the period of his agency in the affairs of Israel. Speaking of the second Jeroboam, the great-grandson of Jehu, and the last of his seed that for any length of time occupied the throne of Israel, the inspired historian says, "He restored the coast of Israel, from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet which was of Gath-hepher (a town in the tribe of Zebulon); for the Lord saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter; for there was not any shut up, nor any left, nor any helper for Israel; and the Lord said not, that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, but he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Joash."—(2 Kings xiv. 25–27.)

This passage puts it beyond a doubt, that Jonah was in the exercise of his prophetic office, certainly not later than the commencement of the reign of Jeroboam II.; for, the prediction he is recorded to have uttered respecting the recovery of a part of the Israelitish territory from the yoke

of Syria was fulfilled by the hand of Jeroboam. And as this monarch, in fulfilling it, had to wage a difficult and arduous warfare with Syria, in the course of which he got possession of Damascus, the capital of the kingdom, and raised Israel anew to much of its former splendour and importance, we may certainly conclude, that he was at the time in the vigour of his days, and that the conquests achieved by his hand were made much nearer the beginning than the close of his reign. But the prophecy which foretold the result of these conquests must have been earlier still. Nay, it was manifestly uttered at a time when the affairs of Israel were in the most shattered and depressed condition; when, as it is said, "there was none shut up or left," that is, confined or left at large; when there was neither bond nor free, the inhabitants of all conditions being utterly wasted, and there seemed to be none that could act the part of "a helper for Israel." But the kingdom of Israel was never in such a state at any period during the reign of Jeroboam, nor even when he ascended the throne. It had been so, indeed, in the days of his father Joash, who had found the kingdom reduced to the most abject subjection to the king of Syria; but he had gradually restored it, by a succession of victories, to comparative strength, and commenced the prosperous career which was only continued and carried out by Jeroboam. So that the utterance of Jonah's prediction concerning the recovery of Hamath and Damascus, seems rather to belong to the earlier part of the reign of Joash than to any period of Jeroboam's reign; and, though the fulfilment of it is ascribed only to Jeroboam, because it was he who recovered the more distant portion of the territory of which it spake, yet the prophecy itself appears to have equally included the preceding victories and nearer conquests of Joash.

We thus arrive at the result that Jonah was the earliest, in point of time, of all the prophets whose labours and predictions have been recorded in separate books. Hosea and

Amos are both reported to have prophesied in the days of Jeroboam; but, from the other marks of time given in their writings, they could not have begun to prophesy till near the close of his reign.* The time of Jonah thus treads closely on that of Elisha; and we can scarcely doubt that the two were for some years contemporaneous. Elisha lived to an advanced age, and died some time in the reign of Joash, before the close of his successful conflict with the Syrians. And, as Joash's entire reign did not exceed sixteen years, we may reasonably infer that Jonah, who in the course of

* Thus Amos expressly states, that he began to see his vision concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah and Jeroboam, two years before the earthquake. Now, this earthquake, we learn from Zech. xiv. 5, happened in the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah, who did not begin to reign till about fourteen years before the death of Jeroboam. But Jeroboam reigned altogether forty-one years, so that at whatever precise period in Uzziah's time the earthquake may have happened, the two years before it, mentioned by Amos as the commencement of his prophetic agency, necessarily carries us into the latter half of Jeroboam's reign. Then Hosea is said to have prophesied so late as the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah; and between even the last year of Jeroboam's reign and the first of Hezekiah's, a period of about sixty years intervenes. He must, therefore, have been a very young man at the close of Jeroboam's reign, and could not have entered on the prophetic office much earlier. So that Jonah, who seems to have uttered a prediction in the days of Joash, was considerably earlier than either of these prophets. They were the next to follow him; and as it is probable that the transactions recorded in the book which bears his name took place in the latter period of his life, the book itself may possibly not be much older than some portions of the writings of Hosea and Amos. Various reasons might be assigned for the Jews not placing his book precisely at the commencement of the minor prophets; and the belief of Lightfoot (*Chronica Temporum*) and many others, as to his being actually later than Hosea and Amos, seems partly to have arisen from a wrong view of his mission, of which afterwards.

that reign appeared on the prophetic stage, had in his early years sat at the feet of Elisha. His first appearance also was of a kind that fitly became the successor of that gentle and humane ambassador of heaven; for the word then put into the mouth of Jonah, the only *direct* word, indeed, he is recorded to have uttered concerning Israel, was a word of mercy and consolation to the covenant people. It told them, that the Lord still yearned over them for their good, and would once more drive back the tide of evil which had been flowing in upon them, and recover the territory they had lost. Yet, while this promise of returning prosperity was held out, it was not doubtfully intimated, that all stood in an uncertain and hazardous position. The mercy of heaven hovered over the land, as if ready to take its departure; and the Lord had only *not said*, he would blot out the name of Israel, but neither had he said, he would preserve it. The fate of the kingdom hung in a kind of fearful suspense, as if He on whom its destinies depended, were waiting the issue of a last trial, to decide whether it was to be established in peace or given up to perdition.

Such was the posture of affairs in the kingdom of Israel when Jonah entered on his prophetic career. But whence originally arose this extreme danger? How did it happen, that, in a religious and moral point of view, they had come into so peculiarly critical and perilous a condition? It is necessary to know this, in order rightly to understand the future mission and history of the prophet of Gath-hepher; and it will consequently be proper here to take a rapid glance of the course which this kingdom of Israel had pursued since its commencement, and of the kind of dealing to which it had been subjected on the part of God.

The erection of the kingdom of Israel, or of the ten tribes, into a distinct and separate government, it is necessary to bear in mind, is constantly represented in Scripture as a great evil. It came at the first as the