An Introduction To The Book Of Jonah

Romans 15: 4 – For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

I. The geopolitical circumstance at the time of the writing of the book.

A. Jeroboam II was king of Israel for 41 years. (789 – 748)
   1. The kingdom was already divided so “Israel” refers to only the northern tribes.
      a. The northern kingdom had turned from God to worship the golden calves set up in Dan and Bethel by Jeroboam I. I Kings 12: 25-33
      b. Israel was just coming out of a lengthy time of oppression. II Kg 14: 27
   2. The southern kingdom was being ruled by more righteous kings.
      a. For the first 15 years of Jeroboam II’s rule, Amaziah was king of Judah.
      b. Jehoash, the father of Jeroboam II had conquered Judah and captured King Amaziah. II Kings 14: 11ff
      c. For the last 26 years of Jeroboam II’s reign Uzziah was king of the Judah. 52 yr
   3. Even though Israel was very wicked and worshipping idols, God used Jeroboam II to lead them to prosperity.
   4. As indicated by the prophet Jonah (II Kings 4: 25) Jeroboam II was able to expand Israel’s borders to what they had been under Solomon. (Minus Judea)

B. During this time the Assyrian empire was in a period of decline lasting 80 years.
   1. Israel had been paying tribute to Shalmaneser king of Assyria, but after the death of Shalmaneser they freed themselves.
   2. The monarchy lost power to a group of high officials called the “turbanues.”
   3. Like any entity that’s run by a committee, Assyria began to decline under them.
   4. It was not until Tiglath-Pileser III usurped the throne that they recovered.

II. The “great” city of Nineveh was intimidating to all who opposed it.

A. The city of Nineveh was located 500 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee.
   1. On the eastern shore of the Tigress River in what is now northern Iraq.
   2. The city of Mosul is across the river from the ruins of Nineveh. (237 miles north of Bagdad)
3. Today Nineveh is little more than a mound.

B. Nineveh was one of the oldest cities in the world.
   1. It was founded by Nimrod, the great grandson of Noah.  Genesis 10: 8-12
   2. Nimrod was the grandson of the cursed Ham, an aggressive man of weapons.

C. Nineveh was possibly the largest and grandest city on earth.
   1. Babylon was its only rival.
   2. Nineveh was 60 miles in diameter, a three day’s journey.  Jonah 3: 3
   3. It’s walls were 100 feet tall.  ( Equal to a 10 or 11 story building )
      a. There were 1500 towers strategically placed around the wall each 200 ft. high.
      b. The wall was so thick at the top three chariots could go side by side on it.
   3. They had parks and farm land inside the walls.
      a. In the event of a siege, they could raise food for the people.
      b. Many animals were kept in the city.  ( Jonah 4: 11 )
   4. The population of the city may have reached a million people.
      a. They had 120,000 children under 3 or 4 years of age.  Jonah 4:11
      b. Figuring two parents and two older siblings, it was at least 600,000.

* This great city and the nation it represented were perennial enemies of Israel.

D. The Assyrian people were known for their extreme cruelty in war.  Jonah 1:1, 3:8
   Secular history reveals that they would:
   1. Lead off captives strung together with fishhooks.
   2. Impale people on poles, often these were children.
   3. Create a mound of heads by the gate of a defeated city.  ( use bodies as decoration )
   4. Cut off people’s hands and feet, then leave them to die.
   5. Mutilate people by cutting off their nose, ears, fingers, toes, etc.
   6. Rip their tongue out by the root.
   7. Burn people alive.
   8. Skin people alive and throw salt on them.
   9. Cover walls and pillars with the skins of their enemies.
  10. Split open the stomach of pregnant women to kill their unborn child.
F. The prophet Hosea prophesied that Assyria would destroy Israel.
   1. Hosea 9: 3, 11: 5
   2. It is very possible the Jonah knew the prophecy of Hosea.
   3. Israel refused to repent even after God sent some of His most powerful prophets to call them back to him. (Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, etc.)

E. 150 years after Jonah, the prophet Nahum pronounced God’s judgment on Assyria.
   1. Though they repented at the preaching of Jonah, they backslid when prosperous.
   2. Nahum 1: 14 describes them as vile.
   4. God had ordained them to judge Israel, but they had been too cruel while doing it.
   5. Consequently, God judged those He had used as judges.

III. Jonah the prophet

A. Jonah was a prophet from central Galilee. (See map .. Appendix #1)
   1. He was from the town of Gath-hepher in Zebulun.
   2. Gath-hepher is located 2 ½ to 4 miles northeast of Nazareth.
   3. Those opposing Jesus erred as they said, “no prophet arises out of Galilee.” Jn 7:52

B. The meaning of the prophet’s name:
   1. The name Jonah means “Dove.”
      *His name probably had no relevance to the fact that the people of Nineveh worshipped Ishtar the goddess of love and was whose sacred bird was the dove.*
   2. Amittai, His father’s name means “truth.”
   3. Thus, translated his name is literally: “Dove son of Truth.”

C. Jonah was a prophet known to both God and the king of Israel. II Kings 14: 25
   1. He foretold of the great success that Israel would enjoy.
   2. Thus, the commission to go to Nineveh was not Jonah’s first experience with God.
   3. It’s possible that word of his prophecies to Jeroboam had reached Assyria.

D. Jonah was a transition prophet. (Possibly as early as 800 B.C.)
   1. He began prophesying near the end of Elisha’s ministry.
2. Jonah was contemporary with Isaiah and Micah.

3. The end of his ministry overlapped those of Amos and Hosea.

4. He was the first writing prophet.  ( *Elijah and Elisha spoke, but did not write books* )

E. Jonah wrote the book.

1. Jonah 1: 1  “The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,”

2. Jonah was true to his name, “Dove, son of truth.”
   a. He was forthright about his bad attitude and his transgressions.  ( I Tim. 1: 15 )
   b. He presented God as good, just and compassionate.

2. Jesus acknowledged Jonah as being a prophet.  Matt. 12: 28-40

IV. The nature of the book

A. It is written to teach people of this and every other generation.

   *Romans 15: 4* – *For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.*

B. The book was written by a prophet, but it was not a prophecy.

1. The work of the prophet was not just to foretell future events.

2. Prophets were spokesmen for God.  II Kings 17: 23 ,  21: 10

3. They were also teachers.  Deut. 4:5  ( *Moses taught the law.* )

C. This prophecy presents God as the almighty, the sovereign ruler of the universe.

1. In only 48 verses, it records at least 12 miracles performed by God.
   a. The miracles demonstrate God’s control over the natural realm.  ( *sent weather* )
   b. God is shown to be in charge of all of the animals  ( *appointed a fish* ).
   c. God is even in control of which plants grow and of insects.  ( *gourd and worm* )

2. It presents the almighty God as compassionate and eager to forgive.

3. God is shown to be the God of all nations, not just Israel.
   a. God judged His people Israel for their idolatry.
   b. God spared the pagan nation when they repented.
   c. God is the God of the Christian, but He is also God of the lost.  I Tim. 2: 3-6

4. Even the animals are under God’s care.  *Jonah 4:11*  ( *Men are but stewards.* )
C. Liberal critics attack the historicity of the book and some even attack its inspiration:
   1. Mythical - They allege it to be patterned after the Greek myths and others.
   2. Fictional - Just a religious story with a moral.
   3. Symbolic - A story to teach the universal fatherhood of God.
   4. Allegorical - “A word picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.”
   5. Poetic Parable - Like the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah

D. There is no reason to doubt that the book is historical in nature.
   1. It was written by an actual historical person.
      a. II King 14: 25
      b. Jonah 1: 1
   2. The book presents itself as being an historical account.
   3. Jesus believed the book to be historical in nature.
      b. Luke 11: 29-32
   4. The ancient non-biblical writers accepted Jonah as being an historical book.
      a. Tobit 14: 4 ff (apocryphal book)
      b. Josephus in Antiquities IX, 16:4

V. Practical lessons with permanent value taught in the book:

A. You cannot run from God.
   1. God is omnipresent
   2. Compare .. Ps. 139: 7-12

B. When God enjoins us to a task it is easier to do it than to run from it.
   * Anytime one tries to run away from God he’s bound to run into a storm and get into a whale of trouble.

C. A person can limit God by his disobedience, but only temporarily.
   For example:
   1. God seeks true worshippers. John 4: 24
   2. God saves men via the preaching of His message. I Cor. 1: 21
   3. Thus, when Christians do not proclaim the gospel they limit God.
D. God’s people must proclaim that God will be gracious if men will repent.
   1. God has send Christians just like He sent Jonah; are we going or rebelling?
   2. God will receive the rebellious Christian back as he received Jonah.

E. It is possible to hate what God hates and not love what God loves.  I John 4
   1. The Ephesian church was sound in faith and active in service, but .. Rev. 2: 1-7
   2. Jonah finally obeyed God’s instructions, but didn’t love Nineveh.  Jonah 4:2

F. One is foolish who thinks another’s good fortune hurts him.  Jonah 4: 1-3
   1. A rising tide lifts all boats, large and small.
   2. As long as Nineveh’s repentance was in effect, they were no threat to Israel.

G. God can use all incidents in life for His glory and that of His people.  Rom. 8: 28

H. Some prophecies are conditional.  ( IF you don’t repent in 40 days .. if you repent )

I. The tragedy of narrow-minded patriotism.
   1. Jonah was too much of a patriot to be a good prophet.
   2. He loved his nation more than he loved the souls of lost men.
   3. His earthly loyalties prevented him from submitting to God’s will.
   4. Jonah actually wanted to prevent Nineveh from being saved.  Jonah 1:9 cf 4:2

J. The secret of successful preaching.
   1. Go where God sends you and say what God wants said.  Jonah 3: 2
   2. Preach out of love ( Eph 4: 15 ) both for God and for those God loves.  Jon 4: 2

K. Our concern should be for souls and not for gourds.  ( Parable of older bro. Lk 15 )
   1. Blessings were a curse for Israel.  Ezek. 16
   2. When Nineveh’s power was restored, they repented of their repentance.
   3. This has been the pattern of great nations throughout history.
   4. This has been the pattern of the U.S.
   5. Sadly, this has also been the pattern of the church.

L. God will never force one to obey His will, but He can make him wish he had.