

Jonah (December 10)

Reading Jonah

The ship's rounded prow, made from sturdy juniper, cuts the water's surface and skirts past a float of cedar logs from Lebanon. Through a porthole on the lower deck, a Phoenician soldier works his oar, digging into the harbor and pushing northward toward open sea. In racks beside the sailor stand tall amphora jars, filled with Israelite wine. The 12 tons of cargo hold the ship low in the water. As the ship passes the rocky outcrop, which defines Joppa's harbor, its main sail of goats' hair rises and pushes the ship to the west. Sparkling spray and dolphins leap before the prow, bringing the sailors joy and an omen of good travel.

The prophet Jonah lay in the belly of a ship he boarded at Joppa and was rocked to sleep. But his peace was false. His journey grew more and more arduous, for a westbound ship took him directly opposite from where he would end up: on the border of the Assyrian kingdom. After landfall, he would still have a 400-mile journey to reach the great city of Nineveh, the object of God's wrath and his mercy.

Author

Though the book does not identify its author, tradition has ascribed it to the prophet himself, Jonah son of Amattai, from Gath Hepher in Zebulun. In view of its many similarities with the narratives about Elijah and Elisha, however, it may come from the same prophetic circles that originally composed the accounts about those prophets, perhaps in the 8th century BC

Interpretation

Many have questioned whether the book of Jonah is historical. The supposed legendary character of some of the events has caused them to suggest alternatives to the traditional view that the book is historical, biographical narrative. Although their specific suggestions range from fictional short story to allegory to parable, they share the common assumption that the account essentially sprang from the author's imagination, despite its serious and gracious message.

Such interpretations, often based in part on doubt about the miraculous as such, too quickly dismiss the similarities between the narrative of Jonah and other parts of the Old Testament and the pervasive concern of the Old Testament writers, especially the prophets, for history. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that biblical narrators were more than historians. They interpretatively recounted the past with the unswerving purpose of bringing it to bear on the present and the future. Nonetheless, the integrity with which they treated the past ought not to be questioned. The book of Jonah recounts real events in the life and ministry of the prophet himself.

Literary Features

Unlike most other prophetic parts of the Old Testament, this book is a narrative account of a single prophetic mission. As is often the case in biblical narratives, the author has compressed much into a small space; 40 verses tell the entire story. The book depicts the larger scope of God's purpose for Israel: that she might rediscover the truth of his concern for the whole creation and that she might better understand her own role in carrying out that concern.

Blessings for Readers

As you read Jonah, reflect on God's purposes for your life. Day by day we make decisions and plan out our future, but the prophet Jonah describes just how far the Almighty will go to fulfill his plans for us and through us. Turn to him in prayer, seeking his blessing. As you pray, remember that he is a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2).