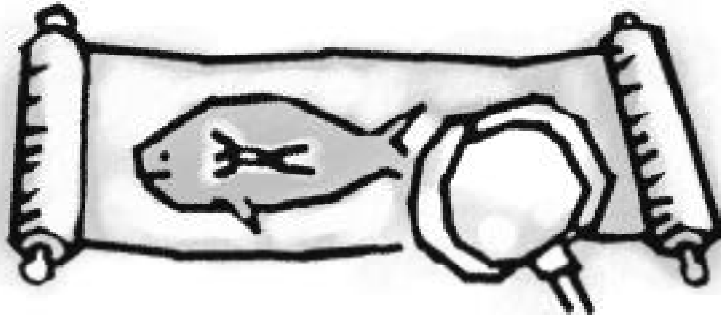


# Biblical Prophets, Modern Critics<sup>1</sup>



**SAB  
PM**

**SOME MAN GETS SWALLOWED** by a big fish. He spends three days and nights in the fish's stomach. Then the fish vomits him up alive on the shore!

Are we supposed to believe this story? Yes we are. The story of Jonah is in the Bible. If the Bible is God's Word, then Jonah is part of the Word too. "All Scripture [the whole Bible] is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking [scolding] error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living" (2 Timothy 3:16, TEV). "All Scripture" includes the book of Jonah and the story of the unwilling<sup>2</sup> prophet (Jonah) who becomes fish food.

Some scholars<sup>3</sup> say the book of Jonah is a myth,<sup>4</sup> a story that shows a religious point, but nothing more. But these scholars could not be more wrong. We will see this quarter why we can believe that the story of Jonah is true.

This week we will take a look at some facts about Jonah. These facts show that Jonah was a real person who did important work for God.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** How is the book of Jonah introduced? Why were Jonah's personal experiences important to the book? Why do some scholars think that Jonah was not real? In what ways has modern thinking influenced our Christian faith? Should God's miracles performed in the life of Jonah surprise us?

**MEMORY VERSE:** "The Sovereign [Ruler] God never does anything without revealing [showing] his plan to his servants, the prophets" (Amos 3:7, TEV).

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 4.

<sup>1</sup>critics—people who decide if something is good or bad, true or false, then write about why they believe something is good or bad, true or false.

<sup>2</sup>unwilling—not willing.

<sup>3</sup>scholars—experts on a subject.

<sup>4</sup>myth—a story that is not true; an imaginary person or thing that happened.

**SUN PROPHEMIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES.<sup>5</sup>**

The Bible is made up of prophets and their messages. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel were all prophets whose messages showed almost the same things. The same as other books of prophecy, Jonah includes both a prophet and a message. But most books of prophecy include mostly the holy messages from God given by the prophets. The prophets' messages may differ from book to book. But a small part of the prophet's life stories also is included. In most of the books, the focus is on the message, not the prophet. But most of the book of Jonah deals with Jonah, while his message is given in fewer than ten words. As we will see, the story of Jonah and his adventures is in many ways the message itself.

**What is the important part of Jonah's message to Nineveh? Jonah 3:4.**

Jonah's message is not long. But this message agrees with and follows the messages of other prophets whose lives are not in question.

**Quickly read through some of the other prophets such as Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, and Obadiah. What information do you learn about these prophets?**

Reading about some of these prophets gives us only a little information

about them. We learn their name, where they are from, and who their father is, but not much else. We do not know much about Jonah's background. But his experiences are an important part of the book. This is rather different from the other prophets.

**Why is the life of the prophet not as important as the message the prophet gives? The following verses will help you with your answer. Psalm 118:8; Psalm 146:3.**

**MON "AND THE WORD OF THE LORD..."**

In the Hebrew language, the book of Jonah begins with words often translated, "And it came to pass [one day]." These same words are in Joshua 1:1; Judges 1:1; Ruth 1:1; 2 Samuel 1:1; Esther 1:1; and Ezekiel 1:1.

<sup>5</sup>autobiographies—stories of people's lives written by the people themselves.

Different Bible translations of this Hebrew sentence may not always show the use of this special wording. But the same wording is used throughout the Old Testament to begin stories about history. The wording itself shows that what has happened is continuing and that the story being told is true. This wording also shows that the author does not plan to tell a false story.

**What other special wording does the book of Jonah open with? Jonah 1:1.**

It is not the only time that phrase is used in a prophet's ministry (work). "The word of the Lord came to him [Elijah], saying 'Arise, go to Zarephath'" (1 Kings 17:8, 9, NKJV). "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel'" (1 Kings 21:17, 18, NKJV).

Notice how this wording is used in Jeremiah 1:4; Jeremiah 2:1; Ezekiel 1:3; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; and Zechariah 1:1.

This wording calls the reader's attention to the Bible record of God calling a prophet to work for Him. To receive the "word of the Lord" was the mark of authority (power) for a true prophet. It also shows that the spoken message does not come from the prophet but from God. In Jonah's case, Jonah 1:1 says that it is "the word of the Lord" that comes to Jonah. This is a holy introduction. These words ("the word of the Lord") should remind us

that we need to bow before God with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to bless us as we study the Bible. These words also should inspire us to know that God still communicates with sinful humans.

**Describe what you understand the wording "and the word of the Lord came" means? How do you understand these words in relationship to John 1:1-10? How can we receive "the word of the Lord"? Or can we? Explain your answer.**

### **TUE** MORE REASONS TO BELIEVE IN JONAH.

**What is happening in the following verses that are almost the same as the story of Jonah? Who is God warning in each verse?**

Isaiah 13:1 \_\_\_\_\_

Jeremiah 25:17-27 \_\_\_\_\_

Ezekiel 21:28-32 \_\_\_\_\_

God is trying to reach Gentile (non-Jewish) nations about what will happen because of their sins. The book of Jonah also focuses on a Gentile nation. The book of Jonah is not any different from some of the other books in the Bible that warn Gentile nations. In this way, the book of Jonah has a very important message about God's grace for us also. This is more reason to believe that the book of Jonah is real.

**Look at the following verses. Who is speaking? What is being said? How do these verses tell us that Jonah is real? Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32.**

Look at how Jesus supported the reality of Jonah and his experience inside the fish. See also how closely He tied His own mission (work) to Jonah's experience. Certainly, Jesus had no doubt that Jonah was real.

**There are many people who claim to be Christians, but they do not believe that some Bible stories such as Jonah are true. What does that kind of thinking suggest? For example, Jesus clearly believed in the story of Jonah. People who do not believe Jonah's story must then refuse to accept Jesus' words. And if we cannot trust what Jesus said about Jonah, why trust Him in another place? And if we cannot trust the words of Jesus, then what in the Bible can we trust? What other dangers can you see from choosing what parts of the Bible we accept or refuse to accept as true?**

### **WED THE MIRACLES IN JONAH— PART 1.**

Modern critics do not believe that the story of Jonah is real because of the miracles found in the book of Jonah.

**Do a quick read through the story of Jonah, and write down the miracles that happened there.**

It is important to notice that the miracles in the book of Jonah are not spoken of as being very exciting. These miracles are not the focus of the story. The "great fish" itself is mentioned in only three verses. The miracles are spoken of as if we should expect God's power to happen in the natural world.

**A man was swallowed alive by a big fish only to be vomited out alive three days later. This is a miracle. But this is not the only miracle in the Bible. Read the verses below and the stories surrounding them. What miracles do they show?**

Genesis 21:1, 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Exodus 13:21, 22 \_\_\_\_\_

Daniel 5:5, 24-29 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 1:20 \_\_\_\_\_

Mark 6:44 \_\_\_\_\_



**How could these stories have happened without God's power? We would be foolish not to accept any part of the Bible because God's miracles go beyond what our basic thinking, reason, and science tell us. These stories should show us just how limited our science, our thinking, and our reason can be when it comes to God's power.**

### **THU** THE MIRACLES IN JONAH— PART 2.

Ancient<sup>6</sup> Jewish writers did not question the fact that Jonah was real. Even Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived around the time of Jesus, looked upon Jonah as a real person. He placed the story of Jonah into his history of the Jewish people. The fact that Jonah was placed among the books of prophecy in the Bible shows that Jonah was recognized as a real person. What is more, many earlier Bible scholars believed that the author of Jonah was not writing fiction.<sup>7</sup>

**Only recently, people have started to wonder whether the book of Jonah is true. Why do you think that is so? What is it about modern times that would cause people to question the story of Jonah?**

Years ago, Thomas Jefferson<sup>8</sup> decided to edit the Gospels.<sup>9</sup> He edited

out anything he believed did not make sense to the human mind. So he edited out the virgin birth, the miracles of healing, the raising of dead people, Jesus' claims to be God, Jesus' resurrection,<sup>10</sup> and His going to heaven. According to Jefferson, these things could not be true, because in his thinking, they went against common sense and reason.

**What does Jefferson's editing of the Gospels tell us about the limits of thinking and reason in trying to understand God's ways? How do these limits help us answer modern attacks against the story of Jonah?**

**How do the following verses help us understand what Jefferson's problems were? They were the same problems many modern critics of the Bible have too. Job 11:7-9; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 3:19; Hebrews 10:38. How can the points brought out in these verses protect us from the kind of doubt many people have today?**



**We cannot discover the limits of God's greatness and power.**

<sup>6</sup>ancient—very old.

<sup>7</sup>fiction—stories that are not true.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Jefferson—1743–1826. Jefferson was the third president of the United States.

<sup>9</sup>the Gospels—the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called the Gospels.

<sup>10</sup>resurrection—coming back to life after dying.

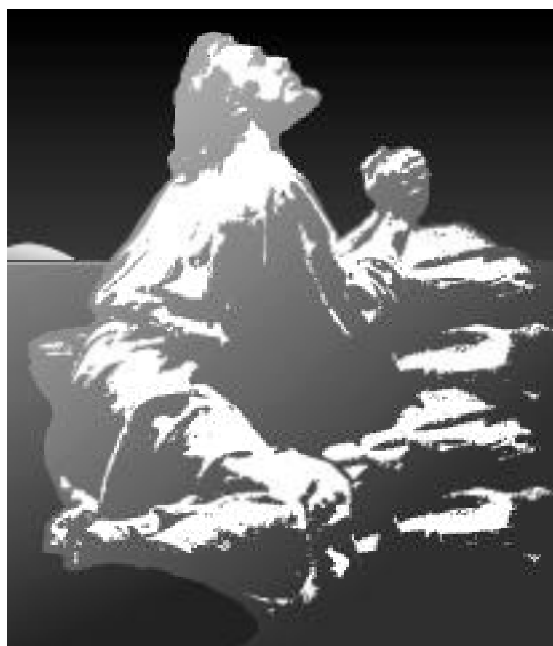
**FRI** **ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Read 2 Kings 14:23-25. These verses tell us that Jonah preached God's message to King Jeroboam II of Israel (782/781–753 B.C.). During the reign of the kings before Jeroboam II, the neighboring countries headed by Damascus made cruel attacks against Israel and caused terrible suffering (2 Kings 13:3-5; Amos 1:3). Jehoash (798–782/781) succeeded in recovering Israel's cities (2 Kings 13:25). Jonah prophesied that Jeroboam would restore<sup>11</sup> Israel's lands to the time King David held them.

The prophecy was fulfilled (2 Kings 14:25-27). Israel prospered once more. But not for long. Both Hosea and Amos greatly criticized Israel as early as Jeroboam's reign (Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1). Amos was a southerner from Tekoa, not far from Bethlehem. But Jonah was a northerner. Perhaps Jonah's family had suffered during the Syrian invasions of Israel. This might explain why Jonah was bitter against Nineveh. Nineveh was a city in Assyria. Assyria was even more cruel at the time than Syria was.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Think about what would happen to Christianity if Jefferson's Bible was true. What would we be left with? What hope would we have? What would the limited thinking caused by modern science and reason mean to us? Why have so many people who no longer believe in God's miracles lost their faith?

2. Read again Job 11:7; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 3:19; and Hebrews 10:38. Are these verses saying that worldly wisdom, reason, and science are bad? Or are they saying that worldly wisdom, reason, or science cannot lead us to the things we really need to know? Read John 17:1-3.



**“Eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent” (John 17:3, TEV).**

**SUMMARY:** God had a good reason for putting the book of Jonah in the Bible. The book of Jonah shows us that God is more than willing to do miracles or to use His power to do the unexpected<sup>12</sup> so He can fulfill His purposes for us.

<sup>11</sup>restore—to make something as it was in the beginning.

<sup>12</sup>unexpected—not expected.