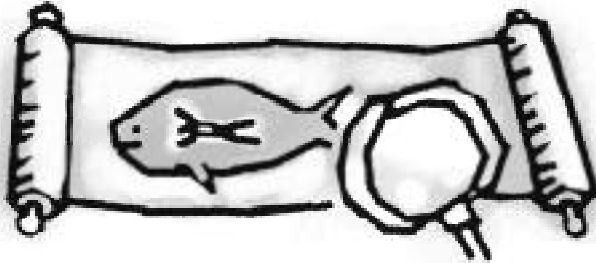


Biblical Prophets, Modern Critics



Sabbath Afternoon

SOME GUY GETS SWALLOWED by a big fish, spends three days and nights in its belly, and then is cast alive on the shore! We're supposed to believe this?

Of course we are. After all, the story of Jonah is included in the Bible, and if the Bible is the Word of God, then Jonah is part of that Word too. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). This includes the book of Jonah and the account of the reluctant prophet who becomes fish bait.

Some scholars seek to dismiss Jonah, and the book bearing his name, as a myth, a parable, a nice story that expresses a theological point, nothing more. They couldn't be more wrong. The book of Jonah was placed in the canon, and—as we'll see this quarter—with good reasons too. This week we'll take a look at some facts about Jonah that, purely from a scholarly perspective, show he was a historical figure who did an important work for the Lord.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: How is the book of Jonah introduced? Why were Jonah's experiences central to the book? Why do some scholars dismiss the authenticity of Jonah? How has the modern worldview impacted our Christian faith? Should the supernatural occurrences included with a prophet's life surprise us?

MEMORY TEXT: " 'Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets' " (Amos 3:7, NKJV).

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

PROPHETIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES.

The Bible is composed, basically, of prophets and their messages. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are “major” prophets; Jonah is one of twelve “minor” ones.

“Major” or “minor,” the prophets all exhibit some similar features. Like other prophetic books, Jonah includes both a prophet and his message. However, most prophetic books are composed chiefly of the sacred messages from God delivered by the prophets. Though varying from book to book, generally just a slight amount of biographical material is included. In most cases, the focus is on the message, not the messenger. In contrast, most of the book of Jonah deals with him, personally, while the message itself consists of less than ten words. Yet, as we’ll see, the story of Jonah, and his exploits, is, in many ways, *the message itself*.

Read Jonah 3:4. What is the essence of Jonah’s message to Nineveh?

Though not a lot of words, they’re packed with what’s essentially the message found all through the Bible, and that is consistent with other prophets, as well—prophets whose lives and ministries are not questioned for their historicity.

Skim through some of the “minor” prophets: Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Obadiah. What information do you learn about the prophets themselves?

It’s clear from reading these other prophets that only a tiny bit of information is given about them or their exploits. We learn their names, where they are from, who their fathers are, but not much else. In contrast, though we don’t know much about Jonah’s background, his experiences themselves play a central role. This is the exception with the minor prophets, rather than the rule.

As the lesson stated, little emphasis is usually placed on the life of the prophet as opposed to the message the prophet bears. Why do you think that is so, and what point should that make for those of us who often tend to focus too much on people themselves as opposed to the Lord? See Pss. 118:9; 146:3.

“AND THE WORD OF THE LORD . . .”

The book of Jonah begins, in the Hebrew, with a phrase that is often translated “And it came to pass.” This same phrase appears in these texts: Joshua 1:1; Judges 1:1; Ruth 1:1; 2 Samuel 1:1; Esther 1:1; and Ezekiel 1:1.

Different translations of this Hebrew expression may not always reveal the use of this specific phrase (such as the King James Version, with Jonah, which simply uses the word *now*), but the identical phrase is used throughout the Old Testament to begin historical narratives. The phrase itself indicates both a continuity with what has already happened and the factual nature of the account that follows. In other words, nothing about that particular Hebrew phrase indicates, in any way, that the author means to express anything other than factual history.

What other specific phrase does the book of Jonah open with? Jon. 1:1.

It’s not the only time that phrase is used in a prophet’s ministry. “*The word of the Lord* came to him [Elijah], saying ‘Arise, go to Zarephath’ ” (1 Kings 17:8, 9, NKJV, emphasis supplied). “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, emphasis supplied). “*The word of the Lord* came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh’ ” (Jon. 1:1, 2, NKJV, emphasis supplied).

Notice how this introductory phrase or “formula” is identical in the calling of other prophets: Jeremiah 1:4; 2:1; Ezekiel 1:3; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; and Zechariah 1:1.

This phrase alerts the reader to the biblical record of God calling a prophet in the Old Testament. In fact, to receive the “word of the Lord” was a mark of a true prophet. It also authenticates that the spoken message does not originate with the prophet but comes from God Himself. In Jonah’s case, the text states that it is “*the word of the Lord*” that comes to Jonah. This is a holy introduction. It should remind us each time we encounter it in Scripture that we need to bow before the God of heaven, with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to bless us, as we study such sacred words. It should also fill us with awe that the God of heaven still communicates with sinful humans.

Describe what you understand the phrase “and the word of the Lord came” to mean. How do you understand that in relation to John 1:1-10? Can “the word of the Lord” come only to prophets? In what ways can we receive “the word of the Lord”?

MORE HISTORICAL POINTERS.

Skim over the following texts. What is happening here that parallels the story of Jonah? Who is the Lord warning here?

Isa. 13:1 _____

Jer. 25:20-27 _____

Ezek. 21:28-32 _____

In these cases, and others, the Lord is specifically trying to reach Gentile nations with warnings about what their sin and iniquity will bring. The book of Jonah, which is also focused on a non-Israelite nation, is, in this sense, no different from some of the other messages in the Bible that do the same thing. Thus, whatever else it is, the book of Jonah has a crucial message about God’s grace, extending beyond the borders of ancient Israel and Judah. This is, contrary to the arguments of some critics, more evidence for its authenticity.

Look at the following texts: **Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32.** Who is speaking, what is being said, and what do these words tell us about the historicity of Jonah?

Look at how the Lord not only speaks of the reality of Jonah and of his experience in the “whale’s belly” (the Hebrew reads, “big fish”) but how closely He ties His own mission to the experience of Jonah. Certainly, as far as Jesus is concerned, there is no question regarding the historicity of Jonah.

There are many who profess to be Christians yet who dismiss some stories in the Bible, such as Jonah, as nonhistorical. What are the implications of that kind of thinking? For example, as we just saw, Jesus clearly believes in the story of Jonah. Those who don’t believe that story must, then, dismiss the words of Jesus. And if we can’t trust what Jesus says here, why trust Him in another place? And if we can’t trust the words of Jesus, then what in the Bible can we trust? What other dangers can you see from this notion of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible we accept or reject as historical?

THE MIRACLES IN JONAH.

Modern critics tend to dismiss the historicity of the book of Jonah, especially because of the miraculous happenings found there.

Do a quick read through the story of Jonah and write down the supernatural things that happened there.

It is important to notice that the miraculous events in the book of Jonah are referred to always very briefly and in a low-key manner. They are not the great focus of the story. The “great fish” is mentioned in only three verses. The supernatural events are referred to as though one should not be surprised at all with God’s power in the natural world.

A man swallowed alive by a big fish only to be spat out alive three days later, however miraculous, isn’t the only miraculous story in the Bible. Look up these texts and the stories surrounding them. What miracles do they depict?

Gen. 21:2 _____

Exod. 13:21, 22 _____

Dan. 5:5, 24-29 _____

Matt. 1:20 _____

Mark 6:44 _____

How can these accounts be explained other than by the supernatural intervention of God? Thus, how foolhardy to dismiss any part of the Bible because of supernatural acts that go beyond what our basic logic, reason, and science tell us. If anything, these stories should show us just how limited our science, our logic, and our reason can be when it comes to the things of God.

THE MIRACLES IN JONAH (CONTINUED).

Among ancient Jewish writers, the authenticity of Jonah was not questioned. Even Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived around the time of Jesus, viewed Jonah as historical and incorporated the story into his history of the Jewish people. The historicity of Jonah is further established by the fact that it's flanked by two unquestioned prophetic books. Also, it has always been included in the minor prophets. The fact that many generations of earlier biblical scholars were convinced that the author of Jonah was not writing fiction is impressive.

It has been only relatively recently that the historical accuracy of the book has been questioned. Why do you think that is so? What is it about the modern era and the success of science that would cause people to question the story of Jonah?

Years ago, Thomas Jefferson decided to edit the Gospels. In them he expunged from the texts anything he believed went contrary to reason, common sense, and rational thought. The result was the Jefferson Bible, a version of the Gospels in which the virgin birth, the miraculous healings, the raising of the dead, Christ's claims to divinity, the Resurrection, and Christ's ascension to heaven were—among other things—edited out. According to Jefferson, these things could not be true. Why? Because, in his thinking, they went against common sense and reason.

What does the story of the Jefferson Bible tell us about the limits of logic and reason in attempting to understand the ways of God? How does the answer help us respond to modern attacks on the authenticity of the story of Jonah?

How do these following texts help us understand that Jefferson's problems were the same problems many modern critics of the Bible have, as well? Job 11:7; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2:14; 3:19; Heb. 10:38. Most important, how can the points brought out in these texts help protect us from the kind of skepticism so common today?

FURTHER STUDY:

Read 2 Kings 14:23-25. This reference provides the information that Jonah ministered God's Word to King Jeroboam II of Israel (782/781–753 B.C.). During the reigns of his immediate predecessors, the Aramean states headed by Damascus had made savage attacks on Israel, inflicting terrible suffering on the population (2 Kings 13:3-5; Amos 1:3). Jehoash (798–782/781 B.C.) succeeded in recovering the cities of Israel (2 Kings 13:25), and Jonah predicted that Jeroboam would restore Israel's borders to their Davidic limits.

The prediction was fulfilled (2 Kings 14:25-27). Israel prospered once more but not for long. Both Hosea and Amos severely rebuked the northern kingdom as early as Jeroboam's reign (Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1). But whereas Amos was a southerner from Tekoa, not far from Bethlehem, Jonah was a northerner. It would not be surprising to learn his family suffered during the Syrian incursions into Israel. This might explain some of his intense antagonism toward Nineveh of Assyria, an even more menacing country at the time than Syria.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. Think about what would happen to Christianity if, indeed, Jefferson's Bible provided the most accurate historical account of the Gospels. What then would we be left with? What hope would we have? What are the implications of the thinking that would limit the Bible—any part of the Bible—to the confines of modern science and reason? Why have so many people who have gone down this road ultimately abandoned their faith entirely?**
- 2. Look again at these texts: Job 11:7; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2:14; 3:19; and Heb. 10:38. Are they saying that worldly wisdom or reason or science is bad or that they cannot of themselves lead us to the things we really need to know? See John 17:3.**

SUMMARY: God had a good reason for putting Jonah in the Bible. And with the book, He shows us that He is more than willing to do the unexpected in order to fulfill His purposes for us.



The Tenacious Sister

John Ash III

When Lin,* a 39-year-old Chinese woman from Inner Mongolia, became a Christian three years ago, she began inviting people to her home to study the Bible and worship. Within a short time, many of her neighbors had joined her worship group.

The Chinese officials and religious authorities began watching Lin's activities. As attendance at her weekly meetings climbed to nearly 100 people, the authorities ordered her to disband the group. She refused, so the police began intimidating those who attended the meetings. "If you keep going to these meetings, we'll throw you in jail!" they warned. The threats worked, and the attendance at the house-church meetings dropped to about 40. But additional intimidation had little influence on the remaining believers.

The authorities decided to jail Lin. But publicly arresting her was not so easy. So they persuaded her to come to the police station to fill out some paperwork. Once she was at the police station, she was arrested and jailed without filing charges or going through the proper channels.

The authorities made it difficult for her husband to visit her, and she was not allowed to have a Bible or any other religious material. But her husband wrote Bible texts on a blanket and sent it to her. The officer who delivered the blanket to her had no idea what it contained.

While in jail, Lin made friends with other prisoners. As the months passed and their relationships deepened, she began sharing her faith. Soon a large number of the prisoners accepted Jesus as their personal Savior and changed their disruptive behavior.

The authorities had planned to keep Lin in prison for a year, but six months after her arrest she was released. She asked the officer in charge why she was being released halfway through her sentence, and he admitted that if she had stayed in the jail any longer, all the prisoners would be converted to Christianity.

Soon after her release the group of believers was meeting in her home again, and on any given Sabbath at least 50 people attend. The government officials have not changed their stance toward house churches and small groups, but they have learned by experience that jailing Lin will not stop her, for even in prison she will share her love for God with others.

*** Not her real name. John Ash III is executive secretary of the Chinese Union Mission, headquartered in Hong Kong.**

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