

JONAH: FACT OR FICTION

THE BIBLE IS IMPORTANT

OUTLINE:

FIRST SESSION:

- Approach to the BOOK of JONAH:
 - JONAH the MAN – was there such a person? And who was he?
 - JONAH the BOOK – was this book about this man?
 - IS JONAH FACT OR FICTION?
- And generally, what is our APPROACH TO THE BIBLE itself?

SECOND SESSION:

- TEXT OF JONAH CHAPTERS 1 & 2 – some things have not considered before
- SOME POINTS ON PRAYER

THIRD SESSION:

- TEXT OF JONAH CHAPTERS 3 & 4 – some points about the text
 - LONELINESS and COMMUNITY
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JONAH – THE MAN:

1. WAS THERE SUCH A PERSON?

The answer, *amazingly*, is a **SOLID YES!**

We have 3 separate sources of information about *Jonah* – **1 OT; 1 NT**; and the **Book of Jonah**

This is **more** separate, corroborating, sources of information than most of the OT prophets

The sources attest to the historicity of Jonah; and they corroborate one another!

2. WHEN DID JONAH LIVE?

See OT reference – 2 Kings 14:25:

*“He (Jeroboam II) restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the **prophet**, who was from Gath-hepher.”*

3 important things:

1. Jonah lived and served during the time of JEROBOAM II
2. His father’s name was AMITTAI
3. He was a PROPHET – (because the book of Jonah does not specifically call him a prophet)

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THIS JONAH IS NOT THE JONAH OF THE BOOK OF JONAH?

- The name JONAH means “dove” in Hebrew; and may have been quite a common name in Israel
- The name AMITTAI is related to “AMEN” and means “true” or “truly”; is uncommon
- But it is *extremely unlikely* that there were 2 JONAH’s, sons of 2 AMMITAI’s, both PROPHETS
- So, Jonah of 2 Kings is the same Jonah of the book of Jonah

Which means that Jonah lived and prophesied during the reign of JEROBOAM II – 793 – 752 BC

3. HE WAS A PROPHET IN ISRAEL

Another important thing we learn from 2 Kings 14:25 is that:

- Besides the events of the book of Jonah, Jonah was a PROPHET TO ISRAEL
- So, *Jonah* also lines up with all the other prophets to ISRAEL & JUDAH
- And *Jonah’s prophet contemporaries in Israel* would be AMOS and HOSEA

The Book of Jonah also tells us that *Jonah* also had a ministry OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL

Jonah also belonged to a small group of OT CROSS-CULTURAL prophets:

- *OBADIAH* – 850 – 840 BC – to *EDOM*
- *JONAH* – 785 – 750 BC – to *NINEVEH (ASSYRIA)*
- *NAHUM* – 650 – 620 BC – to *NINEVEH (ASSYRIA)*

To complete Jonah's place in OT history – note that Jonah was not the only prophet to *NINEVEH*:

- *JONAH* from ISRAEL visits Nineveh sometime from – 785 – 750 BC
- *NAHUM* from JUDAH visits Nineveh sometime from – 650 – 620 BC
- And Nineveh finally falls to the Babylonians and Medes – 612 BC

4. WHAT DID HE DO?

Jonah was charged to carry out one of the 3 anointed offices in OT Israel:

- *The PRIESTS*:
 - Besides offering sacrifices, priests taught the people –
 - “THIS IS WHAT YOU SHOULD DO”
- *The KINGS*:
 - Besides ruling and protecting, kings were to be an example to the people –
 - “THIS IS HOW YOU SHOULD DO IT”
- *The PROPHETS*:
 - From time to time, God sent prophets to remind the people –
 - “YOU DIDN'T DO IT, DO IT! OR THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES!”

5. WHAT QUALITIES SHOULD A GOOD PROPHET HAVE?

A OT commentator suggests that a good prophet should possess 4 qualities:

- *INSIGHT* – into the situation at hand
- *FORESIGHT* – from God about the outcome
- *COURAGE* – in the face of adversity
- *COMPASSION* – for the people he is reaching

Jonah, we will see, in the coming sessions, WASN'T A GREAT PROPHET!

JONAH – THE BOOK:

- EVERYONE here has read the book of Jonah at least *ONCE*; most, more than once!
- MOST will have also done a Bible study of the book at least once!
- Perhaps in the context of a missionary appeal; or a call to missions!

You should have noted that:

- There is certainly much more to the book than what meets the eye at first reading:

1. This short book **is INCREDIBLY WELL STRUCTURED** – perhaps too well structured

- Some of the EXCEPTIONAL FEATURES of JONAH – the BOOK:

This book of 4 chapters & 48 verses has AMAZING SYMMETRY

- with the accounts of chapters 1 & 2 closely mirroring the accounts of chapters 3 & 4

1. There are 2 MAIN CHARACTERS – *JONAH* and *GOD*
 2. There are 2 CALLINGS to go to *NINEVEH*
 3. There are 2 JOURNEYS by *JONAH* in response to *GOD'S* callings
 4. There are 2 SCENES that *JONAH* faces – the *storm at sea*; and the *drama in the city*
 5. There are 2 sets of SUPPORTING CASTS – the *sailors & their captain*; the *citizens & their king*
 6. They RESPOND in the same way – *sailors*: saved & believe; *Ninevites*: repent & saved
 7. There are 2 INCREDIBLE MIRACLES – a *BIG FISH* swallows Jonah; a *BIG LEAF PLANT* shades him
 8. There are 2 PERIODS OF TESTING – 3 days in the belly of a fish; 3 days under the hot sun
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2. This short book is packed with **STRANGE and FANTASTICAL OCCURANCES**

- There's a *Great Big city*; a *Great Big storm*; a *Great Big fish*; a *Great Big wind*; a *Great Big plant*
- The Hebrew word – GREAT, *gadol*, occurs 14 times in Jonah
 - Every 3 verses some Great Big thing is happening

3. This short book records some of the most **ASTONISHING ACTIONS** and **RESPONSES**

- Jonah responds by running away; then he sleeps in the hold of the ship in a *raging storm*
- The sailors respond to Jonah by throw him overboard; then they all believe in God
- The Ninevites all immediately repent and believe
- The king of Nineveh declares an absolute and universal fast on all – man and animals

4. This short book's narration seems somewhat **COMICAL and CARTOONISH** –

- The terseness of the Hebrew prose; the strange and fantastic events; the surprising and exaggerated responses of the characters; all give the sense that the author is writing *PARODY*
- The book almost seems like a *CARICATURE* or *CARTOON* because everything is exaggerated

The exceptional features and construction of the Book of Jonah must lead the critical reader to question the authenticity and veracity of the text. Is this really a historical text? Or is it a work of FICTION?

JONAH – FACT OR FICTION:

Modern commentators hold generally, one of 5 VIEWS of the BOOK OF JONAH:

1. **IT IS A WORK OF COMPLETE AND UTTER FICTION**

It may be based on the life of JONAH, but that is the point of departure
Everything else is *MADE-UP*; a flight of *FANTASY*; a work of *PURE FICTION*

2. **IT IS FOLKLORE / LEGEND**

It may be part of the ethnic and cultural heritage of Israel but not founded in history
It serves to teach some moral or cultural value or principle – repentance and forgiveness

3. **IT IS A FABLE / METAPHOR / PARABLE**

It is a narrative used to teach a spiritual or moral truth but the story behind it is made up

4. **IT IS BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

The underlying story is true but has been greatly embellished and augmented
The nature and extent of actions and outcomes may have been changed for dramatic effect

5. **IT IS A TRUE STORY**

It is founded in history; it is a true story; all the events in the account actually happened.
The style of writing may include the comic elements but the essential events are true

It is a very sad reflection on the state of Biblical scholarship today, but the MAINSTREAM OPINION – including many EVANGELICAL scholars – is that the Book of JONAH is NOT based in history but is FICTIONAL!

ONE SMALL OVERSIGHT:

- I DO NOT SUBSCRIBE to this MAJORITY OPINION
 - And it is my aim that at the end of this session, all of us will share the same position:
 - My contention is that the mainstream opinion; and the majority Biblical scholarship; and even those evangelical theologians who consider *Jonah* to be fiction; have made one small oversight:
 - And that oversight is the LORD JESUS CHRIST!
 - Because JESUS VALIDATES THE BOOK OF JONAH:
 - To see this, we need to consider the third source of information on JONAH – NT references
 - There are no less than **7 NT references** to JONAH in the Gospels
 - All of which are from the LIPS OF JESUS, HIMSELF
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See **Matthew 12:39-41**:

³⁹But he (Jesus) answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

- Jesus here, is speaking to His opponents – the Pharisees and unbelievers. He had performed amazing miracles and said offensive things about them. His opponents were outraged. They asked for a sign / a proof / evidence that He was who He said He was
- Not because they *wanted to believe* but because of arrogance! They were saying: “How dare you? Just who do you think you are? What proof have you that you are greater than us?”
- Jesus knew that these obstinate & arrogant opponents would never believe Him, no matter what sign He did. So, He referred them to the ultimate sign – His death & resurrection, comparing them to the events of JONAH:

Notice what JESUS said in vs 40:

- JUST AS Jonah was ...; SO WILL the Son of Man be ...
 - Jesus is making a direct coordinate correlation between JONAH and HIMSELF
 - Just as Jonah was; so will Christ be.

JESUS refers to Jonah again in vs 41:

- The Ninevites **repented** at JONAH’S PREACHING; they would **not heed** CHRIST’S PREACHING When JESUS is greater than JONAH!
 - This time, Jesus makes a comparison between JONAH and HIMSELF
 - He points out that Christ’s message of salvation is far greater than Jonah’s
So, rejecting His message would draw the condemnation not only of God but even of the Ninevites who were saved at Jonah’s preaching!

Both times:

- Jesus COORDINATES and COMPARES HIMSELF with JONAH
- Not only does the events of JONAH inform what will happen to CHRIST
- But Christ VALIDATES and AUTHENTICATES the truthfulness of JONAH’S account
- Because it would make NO SENSE at all for JESUS:
 - To compare and coordinate His work & ministry to that of a FICTIONAL character!
 - To claim superiority to something that is a MYTH!

Notice one last thing about JESUS’ reference to JONAH:

- In vs 40 – He refers to the ‘sign of Jonah’ – 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of a fish
This is Jonah 1 & 2!
- In vs 41 – He refers to the preaching of Jonah – and the repentance of the Ninevites
This is Jonah 3 & 4!
- JESUS not only VALIDATES and AUTHENTICATES JONAH – THE PERSON & THE BOOK
He authenticates ALL OF IT!! IT’S ALL TRUE!

APPLICATION:

1. DO NOT BE SWAYED BY THE MAJORITY OPINION

The Elders of our church have a tradition of consensus – actually it is more than a tradition, it is enshrined in our constitution – all decisions must be decided by consensus – and by

consensus they mean unanimity!! But we must not be swayed by the majority opinion – there is NO SECURITY in the MAJORITY VIEW if it is not founded on the BIBLE!! BE SWAYED BY GOD AND THE WORD OF GOD. Let God and the Word of God be your guide – you can always, ALWAYS find an answer in His Word.

2. HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH THE BOOK OF JONAH? DO WE BELIEVE IT TO BE TRUE?

Charles Spurgeon says:

“I would recommend you either believe God up to the hilt, or else not to believe at all. Believe this Book of God, every letter of it, or else reject it. There is no logical standing place between the two. Be satisfied with nothing less than a faith that swims in the deeps of divine revelation; a faith that paddles about the edge of the water is poor faith at best. It is little better than a dry-land faith, and is not good for much.”

Our approach to JONAH, to RUTH, to the SONG of SONGS, to 2 PETER, to PHILEMON, to all 66 Books must be that they are ALL sacred Scripture, and nothing less!

3. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Word of God is very important to God and to us! It is the primary means by which God reveals Himself to us today. And the REASON for REVELATION is RELATIONSHIP! That is why we must trust and rely on the Word of God. And in order to do that we must acknowledge its AUTHORITY over our lives

God’s Word is AUTHORITATIVE because it bears the full authority of God. God’s Word DECREES, DECLARES, COMMANDS, RULES, SETS STANDARDS, PROMISES, JUDGES!

- Without the Word, God is not Lord
- Without the Bible, Christ is not Saviour
- Without God’s Word there is no covenant, there is no Promise, there is no Hope!

4. INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY

The BIBLE is INSPIRED SCRIPTURE – we must affirm the INSPIRATION of SCRIPTURE

- WE DON’T KNOW; GOD DOES
- God alone is capable of speaking authoritatively on subjects that are beyond the realms of human wisdom; and He has carefully chosen His own words to convey these particular truths to us. Inspiration ensures that the words the authors chose to use were the very words God chose. So that each word is decisive because it has divine authority behind it.
- And ALL SCRIPTURE is INSPIRED

The BIBLE is not just TRUTHFUL – it is INERRANT

5. THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

And finally, the BIBLE is SUFFICIENT!

- The GREATEST GIFT of the Holy Spirit is NOT TEACHING or TONGUES – It is the WORD OF GOD IN YOUR HANDS!
- And it is sufficient in power, in authority, in clarity and relevance to accomplish all God’s purposes!

Isaiah 55:10-11

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

- But the sufficiency of the Word is not limited to ‘matters of salvation’ but to **all things** necessary for His glory; for faith; and for Christian life.
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2 Corinthians 12:9:

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

How often do we comfort ourselves and others with this verse from Scripture?

But more important is how often have we asked ourselves where is this sufficient grace found?

- Scottish Presbyterian theologian, *John McPherson* tells us that grace is found:
 - Primarily in the sufficient word of God
 - In the Sacraments
 - In Prayer
 - In the community of God's people
 - All of which we will be considering in this series on Jonah!
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