

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS ON JONAH

Virgil Warren, PhD

A. Observations against Jonah as history

1. Overabundance of extreme miracle (12 miracles in 48 verses)

- a. The storm that arose (1:4)
- b. The lot that fell on Jonah (1:7)
- c. The stilling of the storm (1:15)
- d. The preparation of a “great fish” (1:17)
- e. The fish’s swallowing Jonah (1:17)
- f. The fish’s vomiting him on dry land (2:10)
- g. Jonah’s living through the experience (2:1-9)
- h. Jonah’s predicting the overthrow of Nineveh (3:4)
- i. The gourd that grew up overnight (4:6)
- j. The gourd’s coming up over Jonah (4:6)
- k. The worm that killed the gourd (4:7)
- l. The strong east wind that arose (4:8)

2. The prophet’s surprising behavior

- a. Trying to run away from God
- b. Sulking at the repentance of the Ninevites
- c. Wishing he could die because he had no shade
- d. Staying around Nineveh instead of going back home
- e. An Israelite prophet’s going to Nineveh

3. Unlikely conversion of the Ninevites by a foreign prophet

4. Historical inaccuracies if construed as history

- a. Nineveh “was” (3:3)
- b. Nineveh was not a city so big that it would take three days to walk through it (3:3)
- c. “King” of Nineveh instead of king of Assyria
- d. 120,000 people; too many for a city with an eight-mile circumference

5. Literary feature

- a. The stylized expression “*Nineveh that great city*” (1:2; 3:2; 4:11)
- b. A poem on the lips of a man in a fish’s stomach

B. Observations for Jonah as history

1. Usage elsewhere in scripture

- a. Jesus' comparison of Jonah's experience to his own (Matthew **12:34-42**; **16:1-4**; *Luke **11:29-32**)

(1) Ninevites will stand up in the judgment and condemn Jesus' generation because they repented at Jonah's preaching, but Jesus' generation did not. The existence of men repentant over Jonah's preaching would have to be the real case, for they could not otherwise rise up in the judgment with their predicted function.

(2) Jesus used Jonah as a "sign" of his own resurrection. Depending on the meaning of his statement, the three-day experience of Jonah in the fish's stomach would have to be real to serve as a sign to the contemporaries of our Lord. Jonah's experience was primarily a sign to his own generation. Another understanding of the expression is to see "the sign of Jonah" as a label for the Messiah's resurrection rather than a reference to the Old Testament event. Such labeling was used because of the loose similarity between the two cases. A third approach makes the Ninevites' repentance the "sign" (A. J. Glaze, Jr., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. VII, p. 157).

(3) Jonah's preaching and his being in the fish are compared with Jesus' ministry and his being in the grave.

(4) Jonah is listed along with the queen of Sheba and King Solomon (Matthew **12:42**; Luke **11:32**) with the implication that he and his experiences were as real as they and their experiences were. Though points (3) and (4) often appear in literature on this question, it seems that a comparison does not require both sides of the analogy to be of the same character. The likeness of the things compared is the point of a comparison, not necessarily their character (as history, story, etc.) as well.

- b. Jonah is mentioned with Elijah the prophet in 1 Kings **17:9-24**.

c. He is named alongside Elisha the prophet (2 Kings **5:1-27**), who was from the same period with a mission to the foreign city of Sidon. In response to the implication of conjoining Jonah with Elijah and Elisha, however, see the note above in (4).

d. There was a historical prophet by the name of Jonah from the time and place assumed in the Book of Jonah (2 Kings **14:25**).

2. External considerations

- a. Classification among the prophets

(1) Jonah is classified among the prophets in the prologue to Ecclesiasticus, written *ca.* 180 B.C.

(2) In the organization of the Old Testament canon, Jonah is listed among the prophets, not in the writings. Historical forces are at work among the prophets since the identity of God's spokesman was necessary for evaluating his credentials as a divine spokesman. The historical principle takes priority in canonicity. A book by an unknown author (which is likely the case if Jonah did not write it) would create a problem for acceptance into the Jewish canon.

b. Regarded as historical in antiquity

- (1) Tobit 14:4
- (2) 3 Maccabees 6:8
- (3) Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* 9:10:1-2

c. Only in relatively modern times has readers questioned the historicity of Jonah. Presumably the *raison d'être* for the change was a predisposition against miracle on the part of rationalists and deists in the last century or so.

3. Historical marks in Jonah

- a. The account of his call, as with other prophets (1:1)
- b. Historical, geographical, and other particulars

- (1) Tarshish (1:3; 4:2)
- (2) Joppa (1:3)
- (3) Nineveh (1:2; 3:2, 5, 7; 4:11)
- (4) Jonah's genealogy (1:1)
- (5) The population of Nineveh (4:11)

Myth emphasizes philosophical rather than historical truth. Its ideas are timeless and placeless because they do not apply to a given setting. As a result, those matters that localize, such as names and dates, appear more sparingly than they do in a discrete episode. Jesus' parables of the Good Samaritan and perhaps the Rich Man and Lazarus do show that non-historical forms of presentation are not completely devoid of concretizing elements.

c. Under the higher critical reconstruction of Israel's religious development, the Book of Jonah as a literary piece might have been opposed by the "priestly school," whose authority it seems to attack (Glaze, *Broadman Commentary*, Vol. VII, p. 157).

4. Literary objections

a. As a "parable" the book is too long. As an allegory the elements do not line up individually with truths they might represent. Jonah could perhaps be placed in the form of myth.

b. Nothing indicates the intention of the author in writing the piece if it is not historical, although that is true of short stories generally in modern literature.

C. Difficulties in Jonah as history

If we consider Jonah as an extended parable or short story, we are relieved of (a) defending the abundance of miraculous elements in the book, hence, one motivation for wanting to consider it parabolic. The main question here is the extent of miraculousness in life. Although God may intervene from time to time, he does not necessarily cause

miraculous things to happen all around all the time. We could accept the events in Jonah without supposing that such experience came to everybody throughout the history of Israel.

Parabolically understood, Jonah does not commit us to (b) defending a moralizing view of history. As in the previous matter, however, the kind of events Jonah records do not have to be generalized as the author's view of what happens to everybody usually. Whether Jonah teaches such a view is itself open to question. A thoroughly historical hermeneutic does not universalize these discrete events. In fact, generalizing them may reflect an unconscious tendency to apply a literary hermeneutic to create problems for the historical view. Getting rid of the problem in the case of Jonah does not eliminate having to deal with the moralizing view itself, because other prophets are as reasonably charged with teaching the same idea. The treatment below sketches different ways of handling difficulties urged against the historical approach to Jonah.

1. The gourd that grew up overnight

a. The gourd was a real plant. Some plants grow rapidly, and a few have been suggested as fulfilling the requirements here. The *Ricinus communis* (a castor oil plant) grows as much as a foot a day.

*b. "*Grew up in a night*" is a hyperbole that stresses its unimportance as indicated by ephemerality. The point would be something like Jesus' statement about "*the grass of the field, which today is and thrown in an oven tomorrow*" (Matthew 6:30). A person might say, "*He changed overnight.*"

2. Expressions involving God's "*preparing* _____"

a. God created a great fish, a gourd, a worm, a wind (1:17; 4:6, 7, 8) as a special creative act.

*b. Hebrew idiom assigns God as the source of things that were naturally produced, although some providential oversight is evident as to timing and placement. Semitic idiom often assigns the explanation of effects to their ultimate cause, especially when the more immediate causes are not evident or visible. "*God hardened Pharaoh's heart*"; "*Satan entered into Judas*"; Satan filled the heart of Ananias to lie; yet he conceived in his own heart to lie (Acts 5:3-4). God hardened Pharaoh's heart; yet Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 10:1; 8:15). The Lord opened Lydia's heart; yet Paul opened her eyes (Acts 26:17b-18). Quite a few other examples show that such expressions mean ultimate inspiring source, not miracle.

3. The fish's swallowing Jonah

a. Although most types of whales could not swallow a man, a sperm whale might [G. Macloskie, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, LXXII (1915), 36ff]. Whales, however, are not common in the Mediterranean Sea.

b. In 1771, a man was reported to have been swallowed and soon recovered with some damage to his skin [A. J. Wilson, *Princeton Theological Review*, (Oct. 1927), pp. 636ff].

*c. Keil and Delitzsch reported an incident of a shark (*squalus carcharias*) that had swallowed a fifteen-hundred-pound horse. See the Keil-Delitzsch commentary on Jonah for other examples.

d. Another incident was reported by Francis, *Sixty-Three Years of Engineering*. London: J. Murray, 1924, pp. 298-300 [cp. *Expository Times*, XVIII (Feb., 1907), p. 239].

4. The prophet's unlikely behavior

a. Prophesying something that did not happen made him look like a fool: "*Sure, sure, we would have been destroyed.*" He knew ahead of time that God would likely do just what he did (4:2). Announcing the destruction ahead of time may have implied that it was a conditional prophecy, as in fact the Ninevites interpreted it (3:7-10).

b. Jewish nationalism and repugnance for the heathen Assyrians might sufficiently explain his disgust for their not being destroyed.

c. Elijah's flight to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 21) for fear of Jezebel ended in the same kind of despondency Jonah manifested.

5. Unlikely conversion of the Ninevites by a foreign prophet

a. The king commanded the people to repent (3:7); how many would otherwise have displayed that behavior is another matter.

b. Being a foreign prophet may have scared the Assyrians more than if he had been one of their own. What reason would a stranger have for coming from a foreign (enemy) country to make this prediction unless he was highly driven? The comments of Solzhenitsyn in his address to the graduating class at Harvard in the spring of 1978 probably made more of an impression on the American people than if a native "prophet" had critiqued American culture.

c. The people of Nineveh may have learned something of the previous calamities that had befallen Jonah. In the case of the sailor rescued from a whale's stomach, his face, neck, and hands were bleached to a deathly whiteness by the chemicals of the whale's stomach. If this discoloration occurred with Jonah, his ghastly appearance would have added effect to his threat.

d. Depending on the date of Jonah's mission to Nineveh, the populace of the area would have been psychologically prepared to heed a message of destruction. During the reign of Assur-dan III (771-54 B.C.) there was a serious plague in 765, a total eclipse on June 15, 763, and another plague in 759. Jonah's coming to Nineveh anytime soon afterward would have had a context of dread to help sensitize the hearts of the people. Somewhat earlier during the rule of Adad-nirari III (810-783 B.C.), the king practiced monolatrous worship of the god Nebo, revealing a tendency toward monotheism that could answer to the setting pictured in the Book of Jonah.

6. Silence regarding such repentance in Assyrian history

a. Perhaps the occasion may be subsumed under the religious reforms of Adad-nirari III, 805-782 B.C., as mentioned above. He restricted worship to one god during his reign.

b. We wonder whether such their records would omit such an episode because it made the Ninevites look bad.

c. Many events in the ancient world are not known to moderns from the relatively scanty evidence that remains (King Sargon, *etc.*).

7. Nineveh, a city of three days' journey

a. "*An exceedingly great city of three days' journey*" means that was its size relative to the mission of Jonah there. It would take three days to go throughout its precincts and deliver the threat. The time does not indicate how long it would take to walk straight through the town.

b. The "city of Nineveh" refers to the administrative district of which it was the center. The Assyrian term for the district (*alninua*) would probably translate into Hebrew by the same word as city (*ninuaki*) would (R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 909). The distance across the district was between thirty and sixty miles, while the walled area of the city proper was about eight miles in circumference.

8. "King" of Nineveh

Such an expression occurs elsewhere, so it is not objectionable. Ahab, king of Israel, is called "king" of Samaria in 1 Kings 21:1; Benhadad, king of Syria, is referred to as "king of Damascus" in 2 Chronicles 24:23.

9. Nineveh was

a. Inferring that Nineveh no longer existed is not legitimate in light of Luke 24:13: of Emmaus Luke comments, ". . . *which was from Jerusalem about seven miles.*"

b. If the Book of Jonah was written in retrospect by the prophet himself, what he says of it was in keeping with its size, population, and the like, at the time he was there.

10. Population of Nineveh

a. The population is 120,000, not 600,000 or so. Not knowing their left hand from their right (4:11) does not have to mean babies so as to imply such a large a number for the total population. The expression refers to their spiritual ignorance of the true God. Solomon speaks of himself as but a child (1 Kings 3:7) because he felt unequal to being king over Israel. Similarly, Jeremiah felt overwhelmed by his call to be a prophet for God: "*I am a child*" (Jeremiah 1:6; cp. Moses in Exodus 4-5).

b. Not only the walled city, but the administrative district may have been included, especially since the note is added "*and a lot of cattle.*" A certain amount of suburbs with temporary housing could have surrounded the city wall and contributed to the population count.

c. Ancient cities did not have the wide streets, open park areas, and so on, that characterize modern cities. The seemingly large population is not unrealistic. Evidence available from Nimrud, a city half the size of Nineveh, indicates a population of 69,574 in 879 B.C. (Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 909). *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 889, estimates from archaeological remains that Nineveh could house 175,000. Robert T. Boyd, in *Tells, Tombs, and Treasures*, p. 140, recounts that 70,000 aristocrats from Nineveh attended the dedication banquet of King Ashurbanipal II.

christir.org