

## Jonah in Nineveh

May 30, 2021

Jonah 3:1-10

The very second line of our lesson book states, “The book of Jonah is a work of fiction ...” This is indeed a position widely held by scholars. Yet, *Jonah* is a book of our *Bible*, that we accept as God’s word. How can we accept that the *Bible* includes fiction, masquerading as prophesy, and still consider the *Bible* the one single most authoritative source of revelation of God to us? Is it not a step from that to doubting any or all of the contents of the *Bible*? This is not a small concern. So, before I move on to the specifics of Jonah and our scripture reading, I’d like to talk about this issue.

There are numerous places in the *Bible* where events do not square with our understanding of what is possible. Jonah being swallowed by a “large fish” and surviving there for three days is close to the top of that list. We can add the world being created in seven days, Lot’s wife being transformed into a pillar of salt, the sun standing still in the sky on Moses’s command, and the parting of the Red Sea. Many miracles that defy explanation, culminating with the raising from the dead of Lazarus after five days in the tomb, and ultimately to the Resurrection of Jesus. A modern secularist considering all of these events would label them all as fiction.

We as Christians, Presbyterian Christians anyway, can’t do that. We believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, and accept that as a sure sign of God’s caring grace for us, too, that we will not disappear at death but be taken care of by God. We base this faith on the witness given in our *Bible*. Not only that, we also depend on the witness also of those saints who have gone before us, whose lives we have seen or heard from, back to those who were witnesses to Jesus. But can we believe that some of the Bible is reliable, but other parts are not? This is the basic issue in the inerrancy debate. A Fundamentalist might say that one must believe all of it, every word, as reliable statements of truth. The “Biblical minimalist” scholar would say that you should believe none of it, unless confirmed by testimony from other sources, for example, Egyptian or Babylonian ancient sources. As a practical matter, I find myself needing to take some position in between those extremes. Those things that may be difficult to believe can be believed by faith.

It has been very important to my own understanding of the Bible to realize that what we have was written by human beings, writing in their own time and

place, about what they had heard, perceived, or received from others. I don't believe it is necessary to believe that God dictated the Bible to be written down and passed to us as is. That's the kind of understanding given the Joseph Smith/Mormon writings, and the Moslem Koran. While we read in the Bible, here and there, what God is said to have literally said, there is not a doctrine that all this was dictated. Even in the specific places where a prophet or witness was to write down something from God, that message text was bounded.

If we are able to accept that the *Bible* was written by humans such as us, then what they write is, and must be, limited to what they can observe and understand. The many sources of what we have were transmitted over the centuries, retold, written, edited, and ultimately collected at about the period of the exile to the Third Century (for the *New Testament*) to give us the *Bible* we have today. As with any human endeavor, that effort has been imperfect, with scribal errors, comments integrated in, and sometimes words lost. We can say that the writings were inspired by God – perhaps as some others in the Bible were inspired. God has blessed, in a way that we cannot fully understand, the writing, collection, editing, transmission, and canonization, of these scriptural writings.

I won't try to address the other points where what we read in the *Bible* conflicts what we think of as possible. Jonah and the Whale can be “explained” in a number of ways. Our lesson writer says it's fiction. Perhaps the whole book of Jonah is, as our lesson writer suggests, “the Bible's longest parable.” Are parables fictional? Clearly the parable told by Nathan to David (2 Samuel 12:1-7) is a fictional story, a metaphor. It ends with Nathan telling David, “You are the man!” (In the story, the man who David has just condemned).

Do Jesus's parables all report specific incidents that occurred in the manner Jesus described in his parables? They are stories to illustrate a point. But do they report specific real events? Was there really a particular Samaritan who helped the man beaten by robbers on the road to Jericho? Who was it that could have observed the entire sequence, including the Levite and priest who passed by without helping, and was subsequently privy to the Samaritan's interaction with the innkeeper? The beaten man, perhaps? If there was an outside observer, call him the press reporter of the time, would he not also have been guilty of not helping the man left by the bandits? Do we accept it as a story told by someone who heard of the actions taking place, and Jesus is retelling that story? Either way, we accept the story as illustrating a point and leaving the listener with a surprising revelation of truth. It

was spoken by Jesus as part of His teaching. It lives on in Jesus's command, "Do this, and you will live." (Luke 10:28) Perhaps we could accept *Jonah* as a parable.

Truth is stranger than fiction. We can probably find an instance where someone has observed most everything "unbelievable" in the *Bible*. A story similar to Jonah and the whale has been told about a man cast up on a beach whose skin was turned white. He said he had been swallowed by a fish.

We could also accept Jonah's trip and ministry to Nineveh without accepting that he was in a fish for three days. As Jesus said about a similarly difficult phenomenon, a camel going through the eye of a needle, with God, anything is possible. What of Nineveh? Nothing in the historical record seems consistent with the city of Nineveh repenting during the days of King Jeroboam II of Israel. However, Assyrian records have gaps, especially during turmoil when new kings were struggling to gain power. The reign of King Jeroboam II was the time of the historical prophet Jonah mentioned in II Kings 14:25. Jonah seems to have prophesied success for this particular king.

Perhaps more important to the dating of this story is that it uses a vocabulary and style more consistent with after the exile than with the time of Hosea, Amos and Jeroboam II. *Jonah* is very unlike any of the other prophetic books. Of Jonah's actual preaching, only eight words are preserved: "**Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**" (RSV) Who was it that wrote down this story and preserved it if not Jonah himself? Someone could have written down what Jonah said. But wouldn't Jonah have had more to say in conclusion? The writings end with the relationship of Jonah to God up in the air. These are the kinds of arguments scholars have brought against the book of *Jonah* to argue that it is fiction.

At the risk of my scholarly credentials (I don't have any), I (John) am going to simply say, "I don't know." I'm reluctant to accept that *Jonah* is fictional, but I cannot by logic repudiate what the scholars say. I (Cindy) think there is just as much proof that the scholars are wrong. By faith we can repudiate what scholars say! We have to do that because scholars can't prove there is even a God. Jesus said about miracles – These are to show the power of my Father – God. One could say, a testimony to God's power. Nothing compels me (John again) to come down one way or the other. There are lots of things in life, and in the *Bible*, where we simply don't know. Many of these things are unknowable. A scholar should

perhaps conclude that the consensus of scholarship is correct, but I'm unwilling to do that. What I am going to do is read the book of *Jonah* believing that it may be historical and "real," while acknowledging the doubts that have been raised. I think we can take any of these approaches and still appreciate the messages contained in *Jonah*.

When Jonah was sent to Nineveh, that city was the capitol of the Assyrian empire. It would continue to be so for more than a century more, falling to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 B.C., shortly before the Exile. The Assyrians were perhaps the first to systematically make cruelty and terror tools of war in their efforts to expand their empire. Their reputation was comparable to the Nazis of our memory a culture reviled and loathed for everything it represented. If you want to see inspired prophesy against Assyria and Nineveh, read *Nahum*. He is basically saying, "It will be done to you as you have done," giving many particulars. The point is that Jonah is being sent by God to this city whose wickedness surpasses any known before. The last thing anybody other than Assyrians would want is Nineveh's survival. That can perhaps be seen in the action of Josiah to fight the Egyptians at Megiddo, to block them from aiding the remnants of the Assyrian empire. (Perhaps the Egyptians had become more afraid of the Babylonians by then, since Nineveh had already been conquered.)

The size of Nineveh in *Jonah* seems greatly exaggerated. The city has been excavated, and had dimensions of about 16000 ft. by 7000 ft. That is very large for that time. It would have taken far less than three days to cross it, at most several hours. Cindy adds: Maybe the population was extremely large. Fighting crowds to crowds could make it long. Think of New York City before COVID – trying to walk on the sidewalks.

We assume Jonah began preaching his message immediately. **"Forty Days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** (In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Jewish scriptures, it is three days, which seems to fit the immediacy of the response better.) As Chapter 3:5 tells us, the people believed the proclamation. The king's repentance is so sincere that he and his nobles join in fasting and sack cloth, and the fast is declared to include even the animals. For, **"Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."** (Jonah 3:9) As we see in verse 10, that is exactly what happened.

So then, in Chapter 4, Jonah became angry.

**He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4: 2-3)**

Jonah’s stated reason for being angry is that God relented in punishing Nineveh. Perhaps his hatred for the Assyrians made him incapable of reason. That may be understandable. Who would want to relent from terminating the Nazi regime in 1945? Like Jonah, the Allies declared there would be no peace; nothing short of unconditional surrender would be accepted, and that would likewise have meant destruction of the Nazi regime with prejudice.

Or, perhaps Jonah reasoned that the people of Nineveh would soon return to their evil ways. The future would be better if they were destroyed here and now. The historical record shows that, if there was any repentance at all, it was short lived. Within about a half century the Assyrians destroyed Israel, and continued on to make a vassal state of Judea and conquered Egypt. Surely it would be better if that had not happened!

This would be a case of Jonah substituting his judgment for God’s judgment. We don’t know what else might have happened. We simply do not have the perspective to understand “what if” questions with confidence. Should the Allies of World War I have dismembered and suppressed Germany after that war as they did after World War 2? That would have prevented the Nazis and Hitler, right? Well, maybe. But perhaps the Communist regime in Russia would have become even more powerful, and a greater threat to humanity in mid-century as a result. We just don’t know. We can’t know. Jonah couldn’t know either.

Finally, he doesn’t say so, but Jonah may have in mind Deuteronomy 18:20ff:

**“But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die.” You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the**

**name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.**

Jonah has prophesied the destruction of Nineveh. When that does not happen, perhaps after his return home, he is vulnerable to being called a false prophet. The words he had spoken did not come true. Maybe you are thinking, if this is a parable, yes, the writer can control the story, but that wouldn't happen to a real prophet. But, it did. In *Jeremiah 46*, Jeremiah prophesies that the Babylonians will conquer and destroy the cities of Egypt. It didn't happen. Why? We don't know. Did Jeremiah get held to account for this? We don't know that either. We don't know what happened to either Jeremiah or those refugees of Judah who dragged him off to Egypt during the Exile. Did God relent on the prophesy for some reason, perhaps as an act of mercy? Maybe. What we can be sure of is that, notwithstanding the lack of fulfilment of this specific prophesy, Jeremiah was indeed a prophet. As such, he has blessed us and innumerable others who depend on the Hebrew scriptures and God's working through His people through history.

Prophesy is complicated, and varied, and sometimes difficult to understand. But in the words of Jesus, we find a clarity and unity of message that helps make sense of all the prophets that came before. I do hope that in this study, you all have come to appreciate the prophets somewhat more. I also hope that we will better understand, that our confusion about what God is doing in our time and place is not surprising. It was that way in the time of the Prophets as well.

*Prayer: Compassionate God, may this lesson about Jonah open our eyes to the meaning of repentance. Amen.*

P. S.: I add, thank you from Cindy and me for your faithful attention and care for our Bible Study in this difficult time. With the restrictions relaxing, we are going back to the "normal" way of doing things, and hopefully we can resume in-person meetings in our usual manner this coming fall. We will not plan to continue during the summer. That had been tried and never worked before, with this past summer of a year ago being an exception due to the unusual conditions. May God bless you all and keep you safe. Until we meet again, with love, Cindy and John