

More than a Fish Story

The Prodigal Prophet – Part I

Jonah 1:1

Introduction

Let us start our study today with a pop quiz. For this quiz, fill in the blank with the first answer that pops into your mind.

- Zaccheus climbed – the sycamore tree.
- Adam and – Eve.
- Noah and – the ark.
- Daniel and – the lion’s den.
- Ahithophel and – just kidding – I don’t know who he is either!
- Jonah and – the whale.

Part of our problem with these biblical accounts is that we only study the surface, the sensational. There is a lot more to Noah than an ark; there is a lot more to Daniel than the lion’s den and to Zaccheus than climbing a tree; there is a lot more to Jonah than a whale.

The truth is that when we think of Jonah, the whale is what we think about. His is just a really interesting fish story.

However, Jonah’s story is much more than a fish story.

In less than fifty verses of scripture, there is a storm at sea, the conversion of idolatrous sailors, a miraculous rescue, a song of praise, the repentance of a brutal nation, the unique revelation of God’s relationship to unbelieving Gentiles, a disobedient Jew, and uses of all sorts of nonhuman creations – the wind, a fish, a vine, a worm, and cattle. In many ways Jonah is a microcosm of God’s relationship and sovereignty over all creation, all kingdoms, and all history.ⁱ

We do not think about Jonah and the greatest national revival ever recorded – and after the shortest sermon ever preached.

We do not think of Jonah and the mercy of God.

We do not think about the fact that Jonah was the first missionary in human history sent by God to a Gentile nation. We never think about the fact that he is the only prophet on record sent to a heathen nation with a message of repentance.ⁱⁱ

Even worse, we do not immediately think of Jonah as the signature sign of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The book of Jonah is much more than a fish story.

Objections to the Story of Jonah

There is little wonder that Satan has attempted throughout history to make the book of Jonah the butt of many jokes and sneers. For centuries, the average liberal professor and pastor, along with many so-called scholars, have attempted to downplay, discredit, deride, and destroy the credibility of the book of Jonah.

Since many of you have or will sit in classrooms with professors that delight in sneering at this inspired story of Jonah, let me briefly lay out five of their objections.

1. First, liberals object to the abundance of miracles in the book of Jonah.

Frankly, we would expect this.

They do not believe God sent a fish to swallow Jonah. In fact, they do not believe God created fish to begin with, so why would we expect them to believe God could command a great fish to do anything? They do not believe God created the plants and animals in Genesis chapter 1, so why would we expect them to believe Jonah chapter 1?

We will never convince an unbeliever of God’s power until they have placed their faith in the power God’s Son. Until then, Paul wrote,

. . . a natural [or unsaved man] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are . . . spiritually discerned. (I Corinthians 2:14)

2. Secondly, liberals consider Jonah a fairytale because of the strange unique mission of Jonah.

Liberal scholar points out that God had never commissioned a Jewish prophet to go to a Gentile nation. This must just be a story to make the Jewish people feel good!

However, just because God had never before sent a prophet to a Gentile nation, does not mean He

would not. The truth is that both Elijah and Elisha, under the direction of God, made contact with pagan kings, so for Jonah to be a special envoy to a pagan people is not difficult to imagine.

3. Liberals object to this story, thirdly, because Jonah refers to Nineveh in the past tense.

In chapter 3, Jonah writes,

. . . Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city . . . (Jonah 3:3b)

The use of “was” is perfectly acceptable in narrative writing. Most of the book of Jonah is just that – narrative.

4. A fourth objection by liberals is that they believe Jonah was never in Nineveh at all due to the length of time he records it took to walk through it.

Jonah writes in chapter 3,

. . . Nineveh was . . . three days’ journey in breadth. (Jonah 3:3b)

However, everyone knows that Nineveh was small enough to travel through in one day.

Oh? What about the outlying areas? What about the suburbs of this leading kingdom that overpowered the northern kingdom of Israel.

We know the population of Nineveh was larger than our city of Cary today. If we tried to deliver a message of coming doom to more than 100,000 people, traveling on foot from one end of Cary to the other, it would easily take several days – if not weeks.

The unbelieving world is grasping at straws.

5. The final objection is that Jonah uses some words that seem incompatible with his vocabulary.

Aren’t we glad these scholars know Jonah’s vocabulary so well?

The truth is that the words in question appear in Old Testament books both before Jonah’s time and after.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jonah is not make-believe. He was a real man, living in a real time, with a real challenge on his hands.

Background of Jonah

Jonah, in fact, has already been around for quite a while. He was the court prophet for Jeroboam II who reigned in the northern kingdom of Israel 750 years before the birth of Christ.

Jonah had already delivered a rather famous prophecy which had been fulfilled as the northern kingdom of Israel regained some of its lost territory (II Kings 14). Write this reference in the margin of Jonah 1 as we read II Kings 14:25.

[God] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai . . .

This verse collaborates the time and place of Jonah’s ministry. II Kings even mentions his hometown which would become known during the days of Christ as Galilee.

Imagine this – the prophet whose biography would provide an illustration of Christ’s resurrection, was prophesying in the same neighborhood where Jesus Christ would later live and preach.

Jonah prophesied for God during the ministry of Hosea and Amos. It is very likely that Jonah had been trained by his predecessor, Elisha.^{iv}

J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, “Jonah would have been a leading prophet among the schools of the prophets when Elisha was nearing the end of his remarkable ministry.”^v

It is interesting to consider that Jonah and Elisha would have known one another.

Jonah was one of the revered prophets of the Jewish people. In fact, the father of Peter and Andrew, disciples of Christ, was named Jonah. More than likely, the famous prophet was his namesake. You may remember that Peter was known originally as Simon Bar-Jonah (Matthew 16:17). Bar means, “son of”. Simon was the son of a man named after – perhaps in honor of – the famous prophet of Israel.^{vi}

As far as the average person felt, Jonah was all this and more. He was the prophet of old who helped Israel succeed. He had preached the greatest evangelistic campaign in Israel’s history – seeing the pagan kingdom of Nineveh come to faith in God. And he came for his crusade on a cruise ship – a private cruise ship that was specially made by God.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, incorporated Jonah into his antiquities. He wrote, “But since I have promised to give an exact account of our history, I have thought it necessary to recount what I have found written in the Hebrew books concerning this prophet [Jonah].”^{vii}

One hundred fifty years after the death of Solomon, Jonah is preaching in Israel. This is not fantasy or fiction. Jonah was for real.

So, let me invite you to take a closer look with me at these 48 verses of scripture and the life and times of the prophet Jonah.

Introduction to Jonah

Now some of you have a translation that accurately begins this little book of Jonah with the word “Now” or “And”. This is the small Hebrew word “waw,” which is often translated “and”. It reveals the interesting point that verse 1 of Jonah followed the previous verse of something else. However, we are not told what or where.

Warren Wiersbe made the interesting note that if one of his books began with the word “And,” the editor would probably wonder if something had been lost – including his ability to use the English language. Wiersbe went on to write that by opening with the word “And,” the book of Jonah hints to us that God’s story of grace and mercy is a continuing message.^{viii}

Note further in Jonah 1:1,

And the word of the Lord came to Jonah . . .

Whenever we read, “And the word of the Lord came to [someone],” it is a formulaic phrase that marked the true prophet of God.^{ix}

False prophets claim to speak the word of God or to speak for God. However, false teachers only take God’s name in vain when they do.

To have the word of the Lord come to someone would have been either a mark of authentication for the true prophet or would have meant that someone other than a prophet was being asked to participate in a special mission of God. For Jonah, it was the authentic mark of his prophetic ministry.^x

The “word of the Lord coming to someone” meant that something was about to happen. Someone was about to slip into action. *Something* was going to happen to *someone*.

Notice that nothing is said about Jonah – nothing is said about his birthplace or his previous ministry. We have absolutely no introduction.^{xi}

We are not even told how the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Was it a dream; a vision in the night; a voice; an angel? We do not know. There are no details – just the facts.

Perhaps you have already discovered that everything that happens in this book seems to happen in fast motion. Absolutely everything that can be left out is. Nothing clutters the hallways of this story.

Now notice further in Jonah 1:1,

And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai . . .

Who is Amittai? I told you, we do not know; it is not important.

However, I do want to point out the interesting meanings of both of these men’s names which gives us a picture of the coming drama.

Jonah is the Hebrew word for “dove”. Often, children of believing Hebrews would be named after animals, in the hope that the child would grow up to exhibit everything good about its best characteristics.^{xii}

The dove was known for gentleness, harmlessness, flight, and most significantly, peace.

Ever since Genesis 8:11, when the dove flew back to Noah with an olive branch or leaf in its mouth, the dove became a symbol of hope and peace. In fact, to this day around the world, the phrase “to extend an olive branch” is used to symbolize the offering of peace.

Whenever the dove is seen on flags, emblems, or banners, it is in flight, which signifies its role as a messenger.

So this is a man whose name was the symbol of peace, sent as a messenger to extend the olive branch to a nation headed for destruction. Jonah, the “dove,” is about to be commissioned by the Emperor of heaven to serve as the ambassador of peace.

The text tells us Jonah was the son of Amittai. Amittai comes from the same Hebrew root word that gives us the word “amen,” which is the confirmation of truth.

So, “Jonah the son of Amittai” meant “the messenger of peace, the son of truth”.

This is much more than coincidence. Here is the messenger of peace who is going to tell the truth.

Jonah did not go to the Ninevites and talk to them about peace, love, and joy. He went to them and told the truth – “If you don’t repent, you will be destroyed.”

We cannot have peace with God unless we believe the truth of God.

Jonah will deliver the truth to a pagan nation on the brink of disaster. He will literally live out his name.

However, Jonah does not really want to do this, does he? This is the part we remember!

Let us not be too hard on this “dove of peace” though, before we know all the facts.

We will discover in our next session what it meant to go to the Ninevites – a people renowned for their brutality. They were known to dismember their enemies a limb at a time, leaving the right arm and hand alone so they could shake their enemies hand and smile at them while they watched them die.

Notice that Jonah is given no assurances from God that he will be listened to or that he will even survive. I am not so sure we would not have bought a ticket out of town too!

So, we can easily outline what happens throughout this brief biography with five simple points:

1. See Jonah run.
2. See Jonah swim.
3. See Jonah fly.
4. See Jonah preach.
5. See Jonah pout.

We could also outline this as one commentator who paralleled Jonah's ministry with the story of the Prodigal Son.

In the first two chapters, Jonah plays the role of the prodigal son who runs away from his Father. He carries the inheritance of his Father's riches, but he keeps it for himself, to spend as he alone wishes.

In the last two chapters, Jonah plays the role of the prodigal's older brother who pouts; who refuses to enter in to the homecoming of his repentant brother.^{xiii}

No matter how we outline it, however, I am certain you understand perfectly the reason I am calling this series of studies on Jonah, "The Prodigal Prophet".

Key Lessons from Jonah

Now that we have had an introduction to Jonah, what are some of the key lessons that are sort of lying out in the open for us to learn at this point? Let me suggest a few.

1. **First, be alert – God has delivered His word to us as well.**

Have you ever thought about the fact that the word of the Lord has come to you too? It has – you are holding it in your lap.

You might say, "Oh, not like Jonah – I'm not a prophet."

I am not a prophet either; I am not the son of a prophet. As one man said, "I even work for non-profit organizations."

The truth is that God has spoken.

... He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days [He] has spoken to us in His Son . . .

(Hebrews 1:1-2a)

We hold in our laps the words of the prophets and the words of Christ and His apostles. And they are,

. . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God [the believer] may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

(II Timothy 3:16-17)

God has spoken. So, be alert to what God has spoken to you through His word – it will equip you for life.

2. **Secondly, be encouraged – God can use anyone and anything to accomplish His will.**

We will watch God use pagan sailors, a storm at sea, a plant and a worm, a fish, and a stubborn prophet.

This is the grace of God – even stubborn, faltering Jonah was the servant handpicked by God to bring about a national revival.

So, be alert and be encouraged.

3. **Thirdly, be careful – past obedience does not guarantee future obedience.**

I agree with my commentary friends who believe that Jonah was more than likely an old man when this occurred.^{xiv}

Jonah's greatest test was reserved for his later years. This is much like Daniel who was around eighty-five years of age when he was thrown to the lions.

Jonah had served God for years. He had rubbed shoulders with Elisha and more than likely taught a course or two in the school of the prophets.

No one would have been surprised to learn that Jonah was the one to receive this incredibly dangerous and difficult commission from God. Jonah was the man.

Frankly, I think Jonah would be somewhat embarrassed to know that 3,000 years later, believers like us would be embarking on a close scrutiny of his actions, his emotions, his pride, his fears, his failure. I think he would be embarrassed to know we are about to pour over every word, dig under every

stump, and explore every corner and crevice of his biography.

Think about it – Jonah had years of faithful service as a prophet of God and we have only one verse about it in II Kings, but he has a couple months of failure and we have a book on it.

I am reminded of one of God’s purposes in giving us the Old Testament record – Paul said, “These accounts were given to us,”

... as examples ... (I Corinthians 10:6)

In other words these accounts will teach us what not to do and also what to do.

Frankly, I am grateful that God did not give us a book on Jonah’s successes and one verse on his failures. We would not learn nearly enough of what we need in our own struggle with obedience.

This is a book for saints who get it wrong.

This is a book to warn and amaze and thrill and challenge us to get it right.

On this twenty-second anniversary of Colonial Baptist Church, Jonah’s testimony is even more profound – years of faithful service in the past do not guarantee faithful service in the future. None of us have reached the tape yet.

Be alert, be encouraged, but be careful.

ⁱ James Bruckner, NIV Application Commentary: Jonah (Zondervan, 2004), p. 17.

ⁱⁱ Thomas L. Constable, Online Notes on Jonah: 2008 Edition <http://www.soniclight.com>, p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, Minor Prophets: Volume 1 (Baker, 1983), p. 262.

^{iv} Henry M. Morris, The Remarkable Journey of Jonah (Master Books, 2003), p. 18.

^v J. Sidlow Baxter, Explore the Book (Zondervan, 1960), p. 148.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 19.

^{vii} Josephus, quoted by T. Desmond Alexander, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah (Intervarsity Press, 1988), p. 75.

^{viii} Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Amazed (Victor Books, 2004), p. 71.

^{ix} Bruckner, p. 41.

^x The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary (Baker, 1993), p. 552.

^{xi} William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 13.

^{xii} Ibid., p. 14.

^{xiii} Warren W. Wiersbe, Life Sentences: Key Themes of 63 Bible Characters (Zondervan, 2007), p. 175.

^{xiv} John Phillips, Exploring the Minor Prophets (Kregel, 1998), p. 137.