

ISN'T THE STORY OF JONAH JUST A BIG FISH STORY?

We have all heard of some tall tale that fishermen have told. Unfortunately, many people put the story of Jonah in this same category. It is a tremendous story and it does involve a great fish. However, in this case it is not an invented story, but rather a “historical account” about a real person — the prophet Jonah. In this study we will examine the reliability of the Book of Jonah. We will also glean some lessons from Jonah that are applicable today.

We will consider these four areas in our study of Jonah

1. Jonah was as actual person.
2. Archaeological evidence concerning the Book of Jonah.
3. The feasibility of Jonah having been swallowed by a big fish.
4. Lessons from Jonah

1. Jonah was an actual person.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* refers to our Biblical Jonah as, "Jonah mentioned in II Kings 14:25 who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 785 BC."

Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian and was a non-Christian who lived AD 37-93. The following is from ***The Works of Josephus***, Chapter 10:

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Amaziah, Jeroboam the son of Joash reigned over Israel in Samaria forty years.... "Jeroboam made an expedition against the Syrians, and overran all their country, as Jonah had foretold. Now I cannot but think it necessary for me, who have promised to give an accurate account of our affairs, to describe the actions of this prophet, so far as I have found them written down in the Hebrew books. Jonah had been commanded by God to go to the kingdom of Nineveh; and, when he was there, to publish it in that city; how it should lose the dominion it had over the nations...." (*Josephus then gives the account of Jonah as we find in the Bible, and then concludes :*) "Now, I have given this account about him, as I found it written in our books." (PDF pg. 371)

Note that this first century historian started talking about Jonah as an actual person before he gave the biblical account of Jonah as was written in their books. He also stated that "Jeroboam made an expedition against the Syrians, and overran all their country, as Jonah had foretold." Josephus describes Jonah as acting as a prophet before going into the Biblical account. The logical conclusion is that Josephus, a Jewish historian, considered Jonah to be an actual person in history.

Justin Martyr was a Christian writer AD 110–165. From “Dialogue of Justin”, Chapter CVIII, ***Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume One*** (1989):

“And though all the men of your nation knew the incidents in the life of Jonah, and though Christ said amongst you that He would give the sign of Jonah, exhorting you to repent of your wicked deeds at least after He rose again from the dead, and to mourn before God as did the Ninevites, in order that your nation and city might not be taken and destroyed, as they have been destroyed; yet you not only have not repented, after you learned that He rose from the dead.”(PDF pg.221)

So now Justin has declared to his readers that they knew of the incidents in Jonah's life as well as the repentance of the people of Nineveh. As we can see he expected his readers to know this story was true. There is little doubt that Justin believed Jonah was an actual person, and the repentance of the Ninevites was an actual event in history.

Another Christian writer in the first century also seemed to believe Jonah was an actual person as you can see from this quote from Irenaeus [AD 120-202]:

“Irenaeus Against Heresies”, Chapter XX, ***Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume One*** (1989):“Long-suffering therefore was God, when man became a defaulter, as foreseeing that victory which should be granted to him through the Word. For, when strength was made perfect in weakness, it showed the kindness and transcendent power of God. For as He patiently suffered Jonah to be swallowed by the whale, not that he should be swallowed up and perish altogether, but that, having been cast out again, he might be the more subject to God, and might glorify Him the more who had conferred upon him such an un hoped-for deliverance, and might bring the Ninevites to a lasting repentance.”(PDF pg. 407)

The most important witness declaring Jonah to be an actual person is Jesus Christ Himself. **Matthew 12:39-41(NIV)** “He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.’”

Jesus compared Jonah’s time in the fish to His own coming death and resurrection. Why would Jesus use Jonah as an illustration if Jonah in the belly of the fish were merely a myth? Jesus also declared that the people of Nineveh would stand in judgment against them because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. Obviously, Jesus believed the book of Jonah to be an accurate historical record. We can ask for no greater witness to the reliability of the book of Jonah than that of the Creator himself (Colossians 1:13-16, John 1:3, Hebrews 1:2.).

As I have previously written, Jesus was foretold in some detail before He was even born. Jesus performed miracles, offering them as evidence for His claims. Jesus predicted His own death and resurrection. There is historical evidence giving confirmation that Jesus really rose from the dead. No other person in history can make this kind of claim. Our conclusion is the testimony of Jesus Christ is greater than that of any man; and He believed the book of Jonah to be an accurate historical record.

2. Archaeological evidence concerning the Book of Jonah.

The incredible thing about the Bible is that it constantly mentions people, places, and things which are often criticized until proven to be true. Archaeology has confirmed the Bible time and time again. Here we will use it to show that Nineveh actually existed. Why does its existence matter? It is added confirmation that the Bible is an accurate historical record. Prophecies of course, have given confirmation that the Bible is an accurate divine record. Archaeology has given confirmation that many of the places mentioned in the Bible actually existed. Many of these places, before they were discovered by archaeological diggings, were unheard of except what is mentioned in the Bible.

Following is a quote from Keller's ***The Bible as History (1956, pages 9-10):***

"About the middle of the nineteenth century, all over Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine investigations and excavations had started in response to a suddenly awakened desire to get a scientifically reliable picture of man's history in this part of the world. The goal of a long succession of expeditions was the Middle East.

"Until then the Bible had been the only historical source for our knowledge of that part of Asia before about 550 BC. Only the Bible had anything to say about a period of history that stretched back into the dim twilight of the past. In the Bible peoples and names cropped up about which even the Greeks and Romans no longer knew anything.

"Scholars swarmed impetuously into these lands of the ancient East. What these men with infinite pains extracted from the desert sand by the Mesopotamia and Egypt deserved indeed the attention of all mankind. Here, for the first time, science had forced open the door into the mysterious world of the Bible.

"The French vice-consul in Mosul, Paul-Emile Botta, was an enthusiastic archaeologist. In 1843 he began to dig at Khorsabad on the Tigris and from the ruins of a four-thousand-year-old capital proudly brought to light the first witness to the Bible: Sargon, the fabulous ruler of Assyria. 'In the year that Tartan came unto Ashdod, when Sargon the king of Assyria sent him,' says **Isaiah 20:1**

“Two years later a young English diplomat and excavator, A.H. Layard, uncovered Nimrud (Kalchu), the city which the Bible calls Calah (**Genesis 10:11**) and which now bears the name of the Nimrod of the Bible: ‘a mighty hunter before the Lord. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel and Erech, and Akkad and Calneh in the land of Shinar. **Out of that land went forth into Assyria and builded Ninevah** and Rehoboth-Ir and Calah....’ (**Genesis 10:10-11**).

“Shortly after that, excavations under the direction of an English major, Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, one of the foremost Assyriologist, **unearthed Nineveh**, the Assyrian capital with the famous library of King Ashurbanipal. This is the Nineveh whose wickedness the Biblical prophets constantly denounced. (Jonah 1:2).”
(End Quote)

We learn a little more about Nineveh in the following quote from:

The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land (1990):

“NINEVEH — The last capital of the Assyrian Empire, situated on the east bank of the Tigris (Hiddekel), opposite modern Mosul. The city was probably founded early in the 3rd millennium BC. During the reign of Sargon II it became one of the capitals of the Assyrian kingdom, and it was the sole capital during the reign of Sennacherib...” “According to a chronicle of the Babylonian King Nebopolassar the united forces of the Chaldeans (Ur) and the Medians (Madai) **destroyed Nineveh in 612 BC**. Its destruction is vividly described by **Zephaniah (2:13–15)**. The remains of Nineveh are hidden in two mounds on either bank of the Hawsar River. One is Kouyunjik Tepe, where the palaces of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal were discovered, and the other, on the south bank, is Nebi Younis (the Prophet Jonah), where the palace of Sennacherib stood.”

From the preceding source, we discover that according to a chronicle of the Babylonian King Nebopolassar, Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC, which is described by Zephaniah (2:13–15). In the Bible in Zephaniah 1:1 we learn just when Zephaniah wrote.

Zephaniah 1:1: “*The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, **in the days of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah.***”

The New Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia states the following: “*Josiah was the king of Judah, ancient Israel's southern kingdom, from c.640 to 609 BC.*”

So, we learn that Zephaniah foretold the total destruction of Nineveh while it was still standing and flourishing.

One final source that I would like to quote concerning Nineveh is found in

Unger's Archaeology and the Old Testament. On pages 89-90:

"Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik) was the great capital of the late Assyrian Empire, located about 60 miles north of Ashur on the east bank of Tigris. So completely was it obliterated according to its prophesied destruction by Hebrew seers that the departed city became like a myth until its resurrection by Sir Austen Layard and others in the nineteenth century. With occupation levels going back as far as prehistoric times, the actual walled city has been traced to indicate an area three miles in length by less than a mile and a half in breadth. But the Hebrews (and perhaps other foreigners) were accustomed to include under the name Nineveh (like the complex of cities that forms modern New York), Calah, 18 miles south, Resen, between Calah and Nineveh proper, and Rehoboth-Ir, which 'must be Rebit-Ninua, west of the capital, since the names are not only etymologically related but have the same meaning'. These are the four places which are enumerated in Genesis 10:11, 12 as composing 'the great city', but other towns, such as Tarbisu, Dur-sharrukin or Sargon's burg, added to the aggregate size of "Nineveh" in the heyday of Assyrian empire."

From the sources that were already mentioned, we have learned that Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 785 BC. Josephus, a Jewish historian in the first century, as well as two early Christian writers and Jesus himself considered Jonah to be a real person in history. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to tell the Ninevites to repent. Before Nineveh was discovered in the 1800s we only had the Biblical record of its existence. Although the people of Nineveh did repent at the preaching of Jonah, their ancestors did not follow in their footsteps. We have also seen that Zephaniah foretold the destruction of Nineveh around 640c-609 BC, which is at least 145 years after Jonah. Later Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC which is somewhere between 3 to 28 years after Zephaniah foretold of its destruction. Furthermore, we found confirmation of the existence of King Sargon and other cities that the Bible mentions as well. Our conclusion is that the Bible, including the book of Jonah, is a historically reliable document.

3. The feasibility of Jonah having been swallowed by a big fish.

J. Vernon McGee, in his commentary on the book of Jonah, declares that he believes Jonah died in the fish and was resurrected. After looking into this matter, I am convinced that although this interpretation is possible, it reads more into the Bible than it actually says. McGee also quotes another book titled *The Bible Today* by Grace W. Kellogg which I would like to include for you here. This quote is in McGee's commentary on pg. 40-42.

"There are at least two known monsters of the deep that could easily have swallowed Jonah. They are the Balaenoptera Musculus or sulphur-bottom whale, and the Rhinodon Typicus or whale shark. Neither of these monsters of the deep have any teeth. They feed in an interesting way by opening their enormous mouths, submerging their lower jaw, and rushing through the water at terrific speed. After straining out the water, they swallow whatever is left. A sulphur-bottom whale, one hundred feet long, was captured off Cape Cod in 1933. His mouth was ten or twelve feet wide — so big he could have easily swallowed a horse. These whales have four to six compartments in their stomachs, in any one of which a colony of men could find free lodging. They might even have a choice of rooms, for in the head of this whale is an excellent air storage chamber, an enlargement of the nasal sinus, often measuring seven feet high, seven feet long, by fourteen feet long. If he has an unwelcome guest on board who gives him a headache, the whale swims to the nearest land and gets rid of the offender as he did Jonah.

"The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* recently quoted an article by Dr. Ransome Harvey, who said that a dog was lost overboard from a ship. It was found in the head of the whale six days later, alive and barking.

"Frank Bullen, F.R.G.S., who wrote *The Cruise of the Cathalot*, tells of a shark fifteen feet in length which was found in the stomach of a whale. He says that when dying the whale ejects the contents of its stomach.

"The late Dr. Dixon stated that in a museum at Beirut, Syria, there is a head of a whale shark big enough to swallow the largest man that history records! He also tells of a white shark of the Mediterranean which swallowed whole horse; another swallowed a reindeer, minus only its horns. In still another Mediterranean white shark, was found (about the size of an ox).

"These facts show that Jonah could have been swallowed by either a whale or a shark. But has any other man besides Jonah been swallowed and lived to tell the tale? We know of two such instances.

“The famous French scientist, M. de Parville, writes of James Bartley, who in the region of the Falkland Islands near South America, was supposed to have been drowned at sea. Two days after his disappearance, the sailors made a catch of a whale. When it was cut up, much to their surprise, they found their missing friend — alive but unconscious, inside the whale. He revived and has been enjoying the best of health ever since his adventure.

“Dr. Harry Rimmer, President of Research Science Bureau of Los Angeles, writes of another case.” In the Literary Digest we noticed an account of an English sailor who was swallowed by a gigantic Rhinodon in the English Channel. Briefly the account stated that in the attempt to harpoon one of these monstrous sharks, this sailor fell overboard, and before he could be picked up again, the shark turned and engulfed him. Forty-eight hours after the accident occurred, the fish was sighted and slain. When the shark was opened by the sailors, they were amazed to find the man unconscious but alive! He was rushed to the hospital and found to be suffering from shock alone, and a few hours later was discharged as being physically fit. The account concluded by saying that the man was on exhibit in a London Museum at a shilling admittance fee; being advertised as ‘The Jonah of the Twentieth Century.’”

“In 1926 Dr. Rimmer met this man, and writes that his physical appearance was odd; his body was devoid of hair and patches of yellowish-brown color covered his entire skin.” (This concludes the quote in McGee's commentary which originally came from *The Bible Today* by Grace W. Kellogg.)

As you can see it is certainly not an impossible event for Jonah to have been swallowed by a great fish and remained alive. Does this mean that it was only an unusual event and not a divine intervention by God? No, not at all! In Jonah 1:17 we learn that the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. Then in Jonah 2:10 we see that the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land. We know of no one besides Jonah who was swallowed alive and then vomited on land by the fish. This happened because the Lord caused it to happen. This is not the only miraculous event in the book of Jonah. The plant which came up overnight and perished overnight also was divine intervention (Jonah 4:6-10). Of course, the greatest miracle of all recorded in the Book of Jonah is that all of Nineveh repented! The skeptic needs to remember that just because the Bible records miracles does not mean that it is not true. The great mound of evidence for the veracity of the Bible points to the contrary. How can this be? It is because the Bible is what it claims to be, the written Word of God!

4. LESSONS FROM JONAH

To really understand what is being said in this section, it would be very helpful if you would sit down, open your Bible and read the Book of Jonah before you continue. It is a very short book which only has four chapters, or about 1,344 words. A person can sit down and easily read it in ten to fifteen minutes.

It is never too late to pray. Sometimes we believe that circumstances have gone too far. If you were out in the ocean, thrown out of a boat and then swallowed by a great fish, you might tend to think that your fate had been sealed. We need to remember that nothing is too hard for the Lord. This happened to Jonah and it was not the end for him.

You cannot run away from God. Jonah was told by God to go in one direction — so Jonah ran in the opposite direction, and still managed to run right into God. Even when he was confronted by the sailors on the boat he did not repent, but rather he told the sailors to throw him overboard. Did his stubbornness save him from going to Nineveh? No. He thought he would rather die and told the sailors to throw him overboard. Then, apparently after being thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish, he had a change of heart and repented. Jonah could have saved himself a lot of trouble by being obedient to God. This is a good lesson for us. We cannot run away from God. The Lord is everywhere that we may choose to flee. It would be much easier for us to be obedient in the first place. We may not encounter anything as drastic as what Jonah went through, but we are told that whom the Lord loves He disciplines (Hebrews 12:6).

God has control of circumstances, even over nature. God caused the storm which tossed about the ship that Jonah was on. God told the fish to swallow Jonah, and then to vomit him up on shore. God caused the plant to grow which provided shade for Jonah. God also appointed the worm that killed the plant. This was all for a lesson for Jonah, because he was not obedient.

God is gracious and compassionate. God is slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness (Jonah 4:2). God could have easily simply killed Jonah when he took off for Tarshish, instead of going to Nineveh like he was told. Instead, God dealt with him through a process of circumstances until he was willing to go. Not only that, but we know that God hates sin. Nineveh would have been destroyed if they did not repent. Sodom and Gomorrah serve as a good example of what the Lord could have done (Genesis 18:17-19:25).

Instead, God sent Jonah to warn them so that they would repent instead. This is because the Lord would much rather have people turn from their wicked ways and repent, than destroy them (Ezekiel 33:11). From our perspective we might be tempted to side with Jonah. There are reasons why Jonah would not want to go to Nineveh. He was afraid that the people would repent and God would forgive them (Jonah 4:2). Jonah wanted them destroyed, not forgiven. There are many reasons why perhaps Jonah would not want them to be forgiven. We can only speculate as to what exactly those reasons were, since the Bible does not tell us. Put yourself in Jonah's place: if you disliked someone enough that you wanted him destroyed, would you then want to be the messenger to perhaps save him? We need to remember that we are told to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us and pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-28). This is certainly easier said than done; yet, until we do this, we are in the same boat as Jonah, being disobedient to the Lord.

RUNNING FROM GOD

Death will come upon me soon
I think it's time to change my tune

if my heart's not right with God
He will bury me in the sod.

I grieved the Holy Spirit today
because from God I ran away

He warned me of discipline to come
and there is nowhere to run

I must repent and turn to Him
and He will forgive me of my sin

Yes, I think it's time to change my tune
or death will come upon me soon.

By Robert Kiser