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One

THE HISTORICITY OF JONAH

Pause a minute and recall what an astonishingly varied collection of different types of literary materials the Bible contains. One thinks immediately of its stories or narratives and poetry. But that is not all. We find also prophecy and apocalyptic writing, letters both to individual people and also to whole church congregations, liturgical hymns, and even architectural blueprints. Add to that the laws and legal materials. One can even tune into conversations, some short and others lengthy.

These many literary types have attracted much attention and commentary throughout the centuries, starting way back in the time of the Old Testament itself. Later biblical authors refer to and expound on what Moses had composed earlier. The writers of the New Testament frequently provide rich commentary on the Old Testament. Jesus Himself quotes the Old Testament book of Genesis when He discusses marriage and divorce (Matt. 19). Paul often cites poetry from the book of Psalms when he discusses Jesus and His Messiahship. In fact, the minds of all the New Testament writers are steeped in the Old Testament. Peter even refers to Balaam's talking donkey to illustrate his discussion of false teachings then disturbing the church:

"They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever" (2 Peter 2:15-17).

Biblical poetry of both Testaments has long been widely acclaimed, even by those who do not accept Scripture as sacred revelation from God. Many state university literature courses study the profound nature of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament. It may come as a surprise to some students of Scripture that poetry appears in almost every part of the Bible. Nearly every book in the Old Testament contains some. In fact, up to 40 percent of the Old Testament consists of poetry, including much of the prophetic materials. Even though writers don't often do it, many Bible authors found no difficulty in weaving poetry within the narratives or stories they composed.

Prophetic writings are also a prominent feature in Scripture. In fact, such materials comprise a large proportion of the Old Testament. Modern language translations group the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel together in what scholars often call the major prophets. The book of Jonah is the fifth of 12 in the collection commonly called the minor prophets, or the Book of the Twelve in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, we find also the "non-writing prophets" such as Elijah, Elisha, and Nathan, among others, in the historical books of the Old Testament.

The many prophetic books, whether major or minor, exhibit a number of similar features. For example, the book of Jonah, like most of the other prophetic books, includes an account of the prophet's life as well as his message. The prophetic books generally consist of the sacred oracles proclaimed by the prophet, with a lesser percentage of biographical material. For example, the book of Isaiah has extensive chapters of prophecy compared with a much lesser amount of narrative details of Isaiah's life. The book of Jonah reverses this proportion. The prophet's prophetic message consists of only a few words: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). Instead, we find an extended focus on the prophet's life.

Most of the books of the minor prophets also contain biographical material. For example, we read about the time period in which Hosea lived and also his unusual marriage (Hosea 1:1-3). We learn that Amos had another occupation besides that of prophet. He also includes historical markers that indicate the time when he lived, such as naming the ruling monarchs plus mentioning a powerful earth-

quake (Amos 1:1). Historical details are always present in the books of the prophets, but the amount of such information is often generally brief when compared to the length of the oracles they proclaim.

But the book of Jonah is noticeably different. In it the reader discovers a detailed account of an event in Jonah's personal life. And with its inclusion of supernatural occurrences, the book of Jonah corresponds more closely to the chronicles of the prophets Elijah and Elisha recorded in 1 and 2 Kings.

It should not surprise us that the book links supernatural occurrences with Jonah's life. Such a thing is not unusual for a prophetic ministry. The lives of Elijah and Elisha are similar examples. Some of the miracles that God performed through Elisha include the healing of a spring (2 Kings 2:19-22); the miracle of the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1-7); the raising of a young boy from the dead (verses 8-37); the stew of poisonous food cured (verses 38-41); the miraculous feeding of many with only a small amount of food (verses 42-44); the healing of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-19); and the iron ax head floating on water (2 Kings 6:1-7). Miraculous experiences also occur in the prophet Jonah's life. Thus the inclusion of miracles in the book of Jonah is no reason to dismiss it as merely a mythical tale.

Unfortunately, though, modern critics of Scripture dismiss the historicity of the book of Jonah because of its supernatural happenings, such as the "great fish" swallowing Jonah and his remaining alive for three days inside the fish. It is interesting to note, however, that the book refers to such miraculous events only briefly and in a low-key manner. Only three verses mention the "great fish." The same applies to the two winds, the worm, and the plant, all spoken of as under God's control. The writer of the book of Jonah mentions these details unobtrusively in a matter-of-fact manner, as if the reader should not be startled at all to find God's power displayed in such a way. In fact, biblical narratives regularly contain both natural and supernatural elements without any apology or attempt to explain. The writers assume that the sovereign power of the God of heaven makes such events possible. Yet it is these very miraculous features in the text that receive the most extended critique and denial by some modern minds.

The tendency to view Jonah as fictional is a relatively recent development, however. The vast majority of early Jewish and Christian writers believed that the events recorded in the book actually occurred. Among Jewish writers, first-century Josephus, a contemporary of Jesus, clearly viewed the book of Jonah as historical and incorporated the story into his history of the Jewish people: "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]."¹

Early Christian writers also viewed Jonah as factual history. They assumed that the book's content reported actual events and was not merely an allegory.² The fact that centuries of biblical scholars have believed that the book of Jonah was actual history is impressive. It is only in the modern era that one finds suggestions that the book of Jonah is an ancient myth, a parable, or an allegory—anything but a document of true history.

However, several indicators within the text of the book of Jonah underscore its historical nature. Noticing such details makes one a more careful student of the Bible. In fact, scholars now refer to giving careful attention to textual details as a "close reading of the text." Bible-believing Christians, who have long accepted Scripture as authored by God Himself, should naturally incline toward such a "close reading of the text." They believe that the content of the Bible, though composed of a wide variety of literary materials from many different writers, has been superintended by God Himself and thus portrays a unified worldview. Each book contributes another piece in the extensive biblical mosaic picturing God and His involvement in human history.

An important technique of a "close reading of the text" involves a careful comparison of words and phrases (especially in the original language) within the different biblical books. For example, the book of Jonah begins with the idiomatic expression "now . . . came" (*vayebi*). This exact phrase also opens many other books of the Old Testament, such as Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 2 Samuel, Esther, and Ezekiel.

Different translations into English of this Hebrew expression may blur this fact, but the identical phrase appears at the outset of each of

these and several other historical books in Scripture. Thus, if one accepts Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, Esther, and Ezekiel as actual people who lived in the past, to be consistent Jonah must be too.

English translators often render *vayebi* as "and it came to pass." To some this may suggest fairy-tale content. However, we should never consider "and it came to pass" as the equivalent of "once upon a time" when reading Scripture. This Hebrew term never reflects that kind of meaning. Rather, it indicates that what follows is closely linked to what has already happened. The term can also occur within a book in Scripture to mark a change of events, such as in Ezekiel 3:16, in which it divides Ezekiel's recounting of a vision from a later time period.

Continuing our "close reading" of the book of Jonah, we find that the first verse also reveals that Jonah receives the identical prophetic call that many other biblical prophets did: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah" (Jonah 1:1). In the Old Testament it is such a common announcement of the prophetic office that this "introductory formula" should just jump out at us from the text! The very same expression reports the divine summoning of such prophets as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Haggai, Zephaniah, and Zechariah, as well as Jonah.

"Then *the word of the Lord* came to me, saying" (Jer. 1:4).

"Moreover *the word of the Lord* came to me, saying" (Jer. 2:1).

"On the fifth day of the month, which was in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity, *the word of the Lord* came expressly to Ezekiel" (Eze. 1:3).

"*The word of the Lord* that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah" (Hosea 1:1).

"*The word of the Lord* that came to Joel" (Joel 1:1).

"*The word of the Lord* that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (Micah 1:1).

"*The word of the Lord* which came to Zephaniah . . . in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah" (Zeph. 1:1).

"In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, *the word of the Lord* came by Haggai the prophet" (Haggai 1:1).

"In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, *the word of the Lord* came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying" (Zech. 1:1).

And, of course, Jonah.

Being alert to this Hebrew phrase or formula enables us to become sensitive to the biblical expression of God's calling a prophet in the Old Testament. As we have seen, many of the prophetic books open with "the word of the Lord that came to . . ." In fact, to receive the word of the Lord was the authenticating mark of a true prophet. "Then the Lord appeared again in Shiloh. For the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh *by the word of the Lord*" (1 Sam. 3:21). And Scripture links this prophetic indicator with Jonah more than once:

"He [Jeroboam II] restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to *the word of the Lord* God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher" (2 Kings 14:25).

The fact that we find such verbal linkage repeated in different prophetic books underscores for us that the book of Jonah is a genuine historical record. When other prophetic books open with this introduction we read it as actual information about a real person. To be consistent, we must understand the book of Jonah in the same manner. The use of this one phrase alone assures us that we are not dealing with fairy tales, legends, or myths.

This introductory formula or phrase "the word of the *Lord* came to . . ." also authenticates that the prophetic message that follows does not originate with the prophet, but derives from God Himself. For the text states that it is "the word of the Lord" that comes to each prophet, including Jonah. This is a holy introduction. It should also remind us each time we encounter it in Scripture that we are studying not only people and history, but sacred messages. And we should be filled with awe that the God of heaven would condescend to communicate His holy will with sinful human beings.

The prophetic commissions of Jonah and other Hebrew prophets have additional similarities. Notice how God summons the prophet Elijah and sends him to another city: "*The word of the Lord* came to him [Elijah], saying, '*Arise, go to Zarephath*'" (1 Kings 17:8, 9). On still an-

other occasion "*the word of the Lord* came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, '*Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel*'" (1 Kings 21:17, 18). The prophet Jeremiah receives a corresponding injunction when God commands him: "*Arise, go to the Euphrates . . .*" "Then I went to the Euphrates . . ." the prophet recalls (Jer. 13:4-7). God summons the prophet Jonah in the same way: "*The word of the Lord* came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, '*Arise, go to Nineveh*'" (Jonah 1:1, 2).

The divine mandate is verbally identical for Elijah, Jeremiah, and Jonah, again underscoring the historical nature of the book of Jonah. If we accept the historicity of Elijah and Jeremiah, Scripture links Jonah's prophetic ministry to theirs in this obviously parallel manner.

We can further establish the historicity of the book of Jonah by noticing how the Old Testament flanks it with two unquestioned prophetic books, Obadiah and Micah. The fact that Jonah is in the "Book of the Twelve," as the Hebrew Bible names the minor prophets, helps us to understand why no one questioned its content as historical for so many centuries. Even the position of the book of Jonah within the grouping of the 12 minor prophets reveals a broadly historical sequence.

Moreover, Jonah delivers a message that is obviously prophetic in nature, dealing with the same issues of destruction and restoration fundamental to all biblical prophets. For example, Old Testament prophets insist that the city of Jerusalem, as with the city of Nineveh, is destined for destruction if no genuine repentance takes place. And we will find that Yahweh will draw on His infinite stores of mercy to delay or defer judgment for both cities. The book of Jonah contains historical prophecy as genuine as any other in the Old Testament.

Another indicator that serves to establish the factual nature of the book of Jonah appears in its very literary style. Again this involves noticing what might seem to be insignificant details as we continue our close reading of the text. The book refers to Jonah in the third person, a trait typical of prophetic writing in the Old Testament. The prophets often speak of themselves in the third person.

For example, we find the prophet Amos answering and pleading with God. Note how Amos relates in first person the words God spoke to him in vision:

“Thus the Lord God showed me”; “And so it was . . . that I said”; “Thus He showed me”; “And the Lord said to me”; “And I said”; “Thus the Lord God showed me”; “And He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ So I said” (Amos 7:1-8:2). Yet, as you read further in the book of Amos, he also refers to himself in the third person.

Isaiah also speaks of himself in the third person when reporting how God sent him to meet Ahaz: “And it was told to the house of David, saying, ‘Syria’s forces are deployed in Ephraim.’ So his heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind” (Isa. 7:2).

The prophet Ezekiel also moves back and forth between first and third person:

“Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the River Chebar, that the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month, which was in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin’s captivity, *the word of the Lord* came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the River Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was upon him there. Then I looked” (Eze. 1:1-4).

We find the same phenomenon in the book of Jeremiah. And, as we might expect, the book of Jonah has the entire narrative written in third person.

Another important issue in the book of Jonah that needs our attention is the prominent inclusion of a Gentile nation. Other prophetic books also feature divine oracles to nations outside Israel. Isaiah’s oracles include Assyria, Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Syria, Ethiopia, and Egypt (Isa. 9; 10;13-24). Jeremiah prophesies about Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, and Babylon (Jer. 46-51). Ezekiel’s prophetic messages address Babylon, Philistia, Ammon, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt (Eze. 25-32). God even directs a second prophet to Nineveh:

“The burden against Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite. . . . ‘Behold, I am against you,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will burn your chariots in smoke. . . . Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and robbery” (Nahum 1:1-3:1).

God discloses His concern for all nationalities long before the New Testament. Even the original covenant given to Abraham back in Genesis included the nations of the world: “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. . . . And *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Gen. 12:2, 3). Thus we should not be astonished when God directs Jonah to Nineveh.

Another key undergirds the historical nature of Jonah. The book includes many references to God. Indeed, we will find Him rather than Jonah as the central focus of the four-chapter narrative or story. This is a critical issue. Considering the reverence for God and even His name that Jewish tradition holds, it seems highly improbable that the Hebrew Bible would include a fictional account, myth, or legend that featured God so prominently.

Other important historical markers include the writer’s linking the story to then-prominent places such as the city of Tarshish and the city of Nineveh, a common feature of Old Testament narratives. All through the Hebrew Bible we find geographical details punctuating the narratives. For example, we find the biblical writers naming rocks, fields, and even trees and tagging them to events. One of many examples is the cave that Abraham bought: “Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, currency of the merchants. So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, which were within all the surrounding borders, were deeded to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife *in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan*” (Gen. 23:16-19).

Later the book of Judges locates Deborah’s “judgment seat” geographically: “Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time. And she would sit under the *palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim*. And the children of Israel came up to her for judgment” (Judges 4:4, 5). The city of Nineveh features prominently in the book of Jonah,

paralleling this use of geography to reinforce historicity.

Moreover, we find Jonah's life attested elsewhere in the Old Testament, situating him both historically and geographically: "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. . . . He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, *the prophet who was from Gath Hepher*" (2 Kings 14:23-25).

Some have even suggested that because the writer does not name the king, the book of Jonah is a fictional story. However, in the biblical narratives, an unnamed royal figure does not connote fictionality. Scripture does not name the Egyptian pharaoh of the Exodus, either. "Pharaoh" is a title, not the name of the monarch. The same thing happens again in the book of Jonah.

Throughout the modern era, scholars have also variously considered the book of Jonah as allegory or a parable because of the skillful use of irony throughout. However, life itself is filled with irony! Human experiences regularly involve incongruities, and things often do not turn out even with the best-laid plans. The recognition of irony in the book of Jonah is not reason enough to classify it as a fairy tale.

The writer of the book of Jonah obviously intended that we understand it as genuine history. As we have just seen, it contains numerous historical links. Furthermore, a narrative or story in Scripture is a historical record. The Bible writers again and again include links of actual places and times to anchor their narrative materials. By this they underscore that what they write is factual.

In the New Testament Jesus Himself speaks of the prophet Jonah and links His own mission to the prophet's experience. In fact, Jonah is the only prophet that Christ does this with. And He also directly associates Jonah with the historical city of Nineveh:

"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For 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. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here" (Matt. 12:38-41; see also Luke 11:29-32).

Taking the Bible as a whole, including the vast number of stories or narratives, some regard the Jewish people as having almost an obsession with history. The different Old Testament Bible writers were always referring to their past history and tying it to local places and events. Their historical memory was vital to them. We have no other known historical records from any other ancient country that are so distinctly grounded in such extensive historical details and records. It is almost as if the Bible writers are urging their readers to check out the veracity of what they are writing about. All through the Old Testament the biblical writers even explain the origin of familiar customs:

"Again the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them'" (Num. 15:38, 39).

Scripture also traces ancient names and current sayings back to their origins: "And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously" (Gen. 28:19).

We could cite many other examples, such as:

"It came to pass the same day that Isaac's servants came and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, 'We have found water.' So he called it Shebah. Therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day" (Gen. 26:32, 33).

The Old Testament links divine commands to specific niches in history:

"Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' Therefore the name of the place is called Gilgal to this day" (Joshua 5:9).

Biblical writers regularly provide personal names, family ties, and geographical data, as if to suggest that the readers should check out

JONAH

the details for themselves. The narratives of Moses in the book of Genesis offer representative examples. Consider the following: "Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God" (Ex. 3:1).

All of this attention to detail anchors the biblical narratives or stories in public and verifiable features of human history. Such details combine to underscore the veracity of the incidents the biblical writers record. It is as if they are insisting that we can trust their accounting of history.

In fact, many scholars now recognize the ancient Jewish writers as the first to write historical narratives or stories with the account moving steadily forward in time, having a beginning and an end. While some scholars call the Greek Herodotus the "father of history," the Old Testament records appeared much earlier.

It is significant that recent studies in theology have again returned to the biblical narrative, recognizing it not only as exquisitely crafted material, but also as contributing significantly to historical and theological studies in Scripture. It is to the specialized qualities of biblical narratives that we now turn.

¹Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 9. 10. 2.

²R. H. Bowers, *The Legend of Jonah* (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1971), pp. 20-32.

THE
INSIDE
STORY

Jonah

WRESTLING WITH THE GOD OF
SECOND CHANCES

JO ANN DAVIDSON



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