

The Sign of Jonah

The book of Jonah is black and blue from abuse by skeptics. No book or story in the Bible has been doubted as much as Jonah. One Ivy League critic I read said, "Only the illiterate and simple minded would view this story as real." Typically theologians and scholars think Jonah is an allegory to Israel. God sent prophets to Israel, but she would not repent, yet God is long suffering, patient, merciful, and always ready to relent in His judgment if she will but repent. As evil as the Ninevites were, God relented in the promised judgment because the people in all contrition repented. How much more would God do for Israel?

This is very nice, but it certainly seems to me that it is clear the original author took it as an historical event. Even more important, Jesus mentioned it as an historical event in Matt.12:38 and Luke 11:29. The Old Testament historians mentioned Jonah as a real person who was a prophet of God during the reign of King Jeroboam II from 790 BC to 753 BC (2Kings 14:23-25). So let me get this straight, the original author, the Old Testament historians, and Jesus attested to the historicity of Jonah, but some critic from Princeton who does not believe in miracles does not. Now, who are you going to go with? I believe these critics' problem is not so much with Jonah as it is with God. Since they don't believe in the supernatural or in miracles they certainly can't believe in the story of Jonah.

The real question is---Is there a big enough God to do these things? Is there a God who created Heaven and earth and all life? If He created whales, can He appoint one to swallow a man?

What is the Real Miracle in the Story?

As a youth the only part of the story I focused on was the part about the big fish swallowing Jonah. I had no idea why or for what purpose. Amazingly, the whole story encompasses four chapters yet the only part everyone knows is only two verses long---clearly most people have missed the real story.

Nineveh was the capital city of the greatest empire in the world at that time. Estimates of the population of greater Nineveh (the ruins have been found), range from 600,000 to 750,000. The real miracle was not that a great fish swallowed a person; the real miracle here was that this ENTIRE CITY CONVERTED TO JUDAISM IN THREE DAYS. The people of Nineveh, through the reluctant preaching of Jonah converted to the God of Israel. The King ordered a national period of prayer and fasting to the one true God. This is the real story and the real miracle. The whale is chicken feed compared to this. The greatest city on earth entirely converted in three days by one man with 8 words who hated their guts. This story is not about a big fish, it is about a missionary journey and the sovereignty of God in graciously saving an entire city from destruction.

The Reluctant Evangelist

Jonah and Israel hated Assyrians and the people of their capital Nineveh. Assyrians were vicious, ruthless warriors famous for torture. Assyria had already been at war against Israel and conquered some of the northern cities of Israel committing many atrocities---so all of Israel hated Assyria. This is why Jonah tried not to obey God in chapter one by going the opposite direction when God called him to preach in Nineveh. This is also why Jonah was so disappointed when God spared Nineveh. Jonah was hoping that God would wipe them out and remove this threat from their northern border. In Jonah 4:1-2, the repentance and salvation of Nineveh “greatly displeased Jonah...and he prayed...Was this not what I said...to forestall this I fled to Tarshish for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God...”

This makes the salvation of Nineveh an even greater miracle. I used to think Billy Graham was the greatest evangelist ever, or John Wesley, or John Knox, but no---it was Jonah. Imagine the greatest city converted in three days by one man who wasn't even trying, using only eight words, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” With this simple message delivered by the most reluctant evangelist I can imagine, God saved Nineveh. It was the world's greatest revival by the world's worst evangelist. I know I just said Jonah was the greatest evangelist ever. In fact the effects of his message caused the greatest evangelistic event. Jonah, by himself was the worst, but in obedience to the Lord and through the power of the Lord, he was the best.

The Sign of Jonah

How did Jonah gain entry to Nineveh? Why would so many people listen to the words of a foreigner who wasn't even trying? Why would they care about such a short weakly delivered message probably given in a monotone with no passion at all? What attracted them to him? What gave him credibility?

I believe Jesus gave us the answer in Luke 11:29-30 and Matt. 12:39-40. The answer to all the above questions is---THE SIGN OF JONAH. Jesus said in Luke 11 that Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, and in Matt.12 Jesus said the sign was that Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster three days and nights. Clearly Jesus was saying the Ninevites knew about the miracle of being swallowed by the big fish. It was the news of the miracle that preceded Jonah to Nineveh, and drew attention to him and gave him credibility.

Is it naturalistically possible that a person could be swallowed by a whale or a big fish and survive? Yes, it is well documented and appeared in the Encyclopedia Britannica that in 1891 on a whale ship, Sir Francis Fox and two scientists as well as an entire crew, saw a man named Bartley fall overboard. They harpooned a large sperm whale, and in the process of cleaning him, they found Bartley in the whale's stomach. He was bleached white by gastric juices, and all his hair was dissolved. I also have read of several

occurrences of whale sharks swallowing men, and after being caught the men were found still alive in the whale shark's stomach (Round the World After Sperm Whales by Frank Bullen, and Rhineodon Typicus). Again, these men were bleached white and devoid of hair. I bring this up to explore a further possibility of this miracle. I am certain from what Jesus said that the news of the miracle of Jonah being thrown overboard, the storm immediately being stilled, and the great fish swallowing him and depositing him on the beach; was a great "sign" to Nineveh pointing out something supernatural had occurred to send this man to them. What if in addition to the miracle being attested to by the entire crew of the ship, Jonah was also bleached bright white and devoid of hair? It is one thing for news of a great miracle to spread rapidly through the grapevine, but quite another for a mind blowing visual representation of the miracle to be walking the city streets where all could see him. Can you imagine hearing about it from the crew of the ship and then seeing the guy in person who now looks like Casper the Ghost?

I can't prove it, but I believe his amazing unique appearance was his ticket of entry to the city and helped give him great credibility. This casts a whole new light on why God would deliver Jonah in such a way: 1. God disciplined Jonah, in humbling him, God prepared him for his task, 2. God preserved His servant---He was not through with him yet, so God provided free transportation back to the beach, and 3. God prepared not only His messenger, but also those who would receive the message by sending word ahead of this great miracle.

The Sign of Jesus

Just as God gave that great miraculous sign to the people of Nineveh, God also validated what Jesus taught and the sacrifice He made by a sign. Our Lord is the God of second chances. Jonah 3:1 says, "the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time" and he delivered it to Nineveh. Jonah was back from the dead with a message for Nineveh. We also, in Christ have a Savior who is back from the dead with a message for us.

The religious leaders asked Jesus for a sign during His ministry and Jesus refused them, but said, "For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation." Jesus was saying that the miracle of Jonah rising from the belly of the fish validated his message—it was a sign from God. In the same way, the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead validated who Jesus claimed to be and what He came to do. Men could try to explain away all the other miracles of Jesus, but one thing they just could not refute was the Resurrection, the empty tomb. Through this sign to us we know that Jesus has overcome death. Jesus came to give us eternal life---because we know He is alive, we also believe we too shall follow Him and be resurrected and spend eternity with Him. "For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality."

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