Jonah in the Whale – An Actual Event Pointed to by Jesus Christ

Probe founder Jimmy Williams considers the question: was Jonah a real man experiencing real events or is it an allegorical story? Upon examining Jesus' use of the book, the testimony of first century commentators, and the characteristics of modern day whales and fish, he concludes that Jonah is a record of actual events.

The book of Jonah—is it history, allegory, or romance? Was he really swallowed by a great fish as Scripture records? Or was he even a real person? Did he really go to Nineveh and preach so effectively that an entire city repented and escaped divine judgment? These are important questions that not only involve the integrity of Scripture, but that of our Lord Jesus Christ, who referred to Jonah as a real person.

Like the Sadducees of Jesus' day who rejected all things "miraculous" (Remember their question posed to Jesus about the woman who married seven brothers one after the other and their concern about whose wife she would be in the resurrection in Luke 20:33?), modern scholars have had a field day with this book. Here is an example:

> *The Book of Jonah is unlike any of the other prophetic books in that it is not primarily a record of the utterances of the prophet. Rather it is a short story, clearly fictional. The hallmarks of fiction rest in its anachronisms and its elements of fantasy. . . . Since the book is fiction, it would be best to consider the "great fish" an element of fantasy, a mythological monster, and let it go at that. . . .Popularly, Jonah's fish is considered to have been a whale. . . . If it was a whale that swallowed Jonah, then we are*

> *left with the fact that the only type of whale with a throat large enough to swallow a man is the sperm whale. . . . Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean and, in the course of nature, it is completely unlikely that a man should be swallowed by one there, or still further, survive three days and nights of incarceration. . . . All difficulties disappear, however, if it is remembered that the Book of Jonah is a fantasy.{1}*

Always keep in mind that a large proportion of all modern criticism of the Bible comes from one philosophical presupposition: **miracles do not occur.** Locked into this naturalistic view of reality, it is not surprising that skeptical theologians encounter difficulties throughout the Bible. Given their premise, every miracle in Scripture must be explained away by either tacit rejection, in in the previous quotation, or by giving the "miracle" some feasible, naturalistic explanation. Their attempts to accomplish this throughout the Bible are often so ludicrous, varied, and contradictory, that we turn with relief back to the Bible, preferring the miraculous to the ridiculous!

This always reminds me of the illustration Dr. Norman Geisler alludes to in his many debates: A man visited a psychiatrist to share a problem which greatly concerned him.
"Doctor, I have a terrible problem."
"Please tell me about it," said the doctor.
"Well, I believe that I am dead."
"Hmmmm, that is a heavy concern. May I ask you a question?"
"Of course," replied the man.
"Do you believe that dead men bleed?"
"Of course not. That's preposterous," said the patient.
The psychiatrist reached over and picked up a long hat pin, took the man's hand, and pricked his finger with it. As the blood began to flow, the man stared at his finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

The real question is not, “Are miracles possible?” but rather, “**Does God Exist**?”

The Bible declares that “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). Those who prefer this presupposition (and there is good reason to prefer it) acknowledge that God has, and can activate, for His Sovereign purposes, the prerogative to intervene, to override the natural laws of the universe created by His Hand.

Historical Considerations

Jonah 1:1 declares, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai.”

Is there any other biblical evidence that Jonah was a real person? Yes. In 2 Kings 14:25 we read, “He (king Jeroboam II of Israel) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet which was by (from) Gath-hepher.”

Here we discover that Jonah gave a prophetic word concerning this king, Jeroboam, the greatest and longest-reigning monarch of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Substantial archeological data has been recovered concerning Jeroboam (II) from the city of Samaria (the royal Capital of the Northern Kingdom) and Megiddo, including a jasper seal by Schumacher and inscribed, “Shema, servant of Jeroboam.”{2}

The reference in 2 Kings also informs us as to the time Jonah lived and ministered. It is thought by some that Jonah may have been numbered among the “schools of the prophets” and was a contemporary of Elisha the Prophet (eighth century B.C.)

With respect to the narrative itself, there is no indication within it, nor among any of the early Judaic traditions that would suggest that it is not historical. Interestingly enough,

during the third century B.C., the time which most modern critics assert the book of Jonah was composed, we discover one of the fourteen books of the Apocrypha, the Book of Tobit, makes mention of Jonah. The Apocryphal books are those included in the Catholic Bible but not in the Protestant Bible. They were early considered "suspect" for one reason or another and were not regarded by the Jews as canonical. However, they do have historical and literary merit for biblical studies. Tobit, addressing death-bed comments to his son, Tobias, says: "Go into Media, my child; for I surely believe all the things which **Jonah the prophet spake of Nineveh**, that it shall be overthrown."{3}

Two Jewish writers of the first century A.D., Philo, the philosopher, and Josephus, the historian, also consider Jonah to be an historical book. And one of the most prominent biblical scenes found in the Catacombs of Rome is of Jonah and his Fish . . . no doubt for the hope of resurrection symbolized by the book, and confirmed by Christ.

Jesus

In Matthew 12:39-40 Jesus says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonas; for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whales's belly, so shall the son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Here Jesus refers to Jonah and his experience as historical. Critics have offered the explanation, based on their "no miracles" presupposition, that Jesus (actually aware that it was really a myth) merely *accommodated* Himself to the naïve perspective of His first century, unsophisticated hearers, as someone might refer to King Lear or Don Quixote.

But this is not the *only* mention of Jonah by our Lord. He goes on to say in Matthew 12 about Nineveh: "The men of Nineveh

shall stand up with *this* generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (v. 41).

Here Jesus is comparing and linking the real people listening to His words ("this generation") with the generation of Jonah's day and foresees the Day when both groups will be evaluated and *judged* on the basis of how they responded to the divine light given them in their day! The *context* does not allow an inference that one generation is parabolic and the other historical. It does not allow for the "accommodation" theory of the modern critics. With these words in Matthew 12, Christ clearly confirms the historicity of the book of Jonah.

Whale or Fish?

The Bible doesn't say that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Only the King James Version of 1611 does that. Jonah 1:17 says "God prepared a great fish (*dag gadol*)," not a great whale. And the Matthew passage (12:40) in Greek refers to the animal as a "sea monster" (*ketos*), not a whale. It may or may not have been a whale. Let's explore the possibilities, beginning with the question of "*Could* it happen?" Are there marine creatures capable of swallowing a human being?

Whales

There are two basic types of whales if differentiated by their mouth and throat structures: *baleen*, and *non-baleen* (toothed whales).

Baleen whales are by far the most numerous species in the oceans and include the Blue, Gray, Humpback, and Right (Bowhead). All of these whales are distinguished by the presence of a baleen "curtain" or "strainer" in their mouths. They have a very small throat (like a funnel) and feed by straining krill, plankton, and small crustaceans as they swim through the water with their mouths open. It would be

impossible for any of these whales to swallow a human, so they can be ruled out.

The "toothed" whales can be given some consideration. These include the dolphin, porpoise, Beluga, Narwhal, Orca (Killer whale), none of which is large enough to swallow a whole human being, and the Sperm whale, which definitely *is.*

The Sperm whale is the largest of the toothed whales, adult males measuring over sixty feet in length (walk into your garage and multiply the length by four!). They are most prominent in the Pacific Ocean, but not unknown in the Atlantic and a favorite of Norwegian whalers. This whale's diet consists of giant squid, large sea-bottom and mid-water sharks, skates, and fishes.{4}

The Sperm whale has a *huge* capacity in its gullet to store food. In his book, *Sixty-three Years of Engineering,* Sir Francis Fox tells of a manager of a whaling station who indicates that the whale can "swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter, and that in one of these whales they actually found 'the skeleton of a shark sixteen feet in length.'{5}

In the *Daily Mail* of December 14th, 1928, Mr. G. H. Henn, a resident of Birmingham, England recounted the following story:

> *My own experience . . . about twenty-five years ago, when the carcass of a whale was displayed for a week on vacant land in Navigation Street, outside New Street station . . . I was one of twelve men, who went into its mouth, passed through its throat, and moved about in what was equivalent to a fair-sized room. It's throat was large enough to serve as a door. Obviously it would be quite easy for a whale of this kind to swallow a man."{6}*

This could only have been a sperm whale. On the coast of England, Mr. Frank Bullen in his book, *The Cruise of the Cachalot* (another name for the Sperm whale), notes that the

sperm whale always ejects the contents of its stomach when dying. He himself witnessed such an incident and described the huge masses of regurgitated contents, estimating their size as about "eight feet by six feet into six feet, the total equal to the bodies of six stout men compressed into one!"{7}

It is argued that Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean. But who is to say that was the case 2800 years ago? There are a lot of marine creatures not found today due to the intense, world-wide fishing pressure of the past 300 years. If a Sperm whale beached itself on the west coast of England in this century, who's to say a Sperm whale might not have found its way into the Mediterranean? We know all whales migrate toward warm water to bear their young. One would also suspect that if a Sperm whale did find itself east of Gibraltar, it probably would not fare well in the shallower depths and could well be very hungry! [One story has circulated for years about the whale ship *Star of the East*, which lost a sailor named James Bartley. The story is that he was swallowed by a large sperm whale, and found alive inside the whale's stomach when it was killed and brought aboard. Mr. Bartley was found unconscious and with his skin bleached by the whale's gastric acid, but alive nonetheless. We have just discovered that this is, regrettably, an urban legend, and therefore cannot be used to support our argument. Here is a link to the debunking of this urban legend: http://www.ship-of-fools.com/Myths/04Myth.html]

Other Prospects

Baxter also notes a more recent incident:

We have come across the following news-item in the Madras (India) *Mail* of November 28th, 1946:

> *Bombay, November 26. — A twelve-foot tiger shark, weighing 700 lbs., was dragged ashore last evening at the Sasson Docks. When the shark was cut open a skeleton and a man's*

> *clothes were found. It is thought that the victim may have been one of those lost at sea during the recent cyclone. The shark was caught by fishermen thirty miles from Bombay.*

The Tiger is a medium-size shark. The Great White is much larger, over thirty feet in length and weighing four tons. This shark has attacked swimmers all along the Atlantic seaboard on both sides of the ocean.

Which bring us to another important point: It *is* possible that Jonah actually *did* die. There are several indications in chapter 2 (vs. 2, 5, 6). There are also several miracles recorded in this book: God preparing the great fish, the hearts of the people of Nineveh, the gourd plant, the east wind. If Jonah did die in chapter 2, another miracle involving his resuscitation after the watery sojourn would not be anymore difficult for God to perform than the other miracles in the book. God chides Abraham when he doubts a child could come forth from the deadness of Sarah's womb and says, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). In Genesis or Jonah the answer is the same: "No."

If Jonah actually did die, this simply records one more person among the several in Scripture who were resuscitated for God's intended purpose, and it makes Jonah a still more remarkable type of Christ and His resurrection . . . which is without a doubt the *main* reason this little book is included in the Sacred Canon!

The main *personal* application of the Book of Jonah is simply this: **Before God can *use* the prophet, He must first *break* the prophet!**

"And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm strengthen, and establish you. . . . Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time." (1 Pet. 5:10, 6).

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