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Is Jonah Just a Parable?

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No — the Old Testament Bible Book of Jonah is *not* just a parable. It relates a true and literal account of the actual historical adventures, life-lessons learned, and messages delivered by the prophet Jonah (circa 790-749 BC).

Does that mean that the story of Jonah cannot also simultaneously carry a deeper meaning than that conveyed by the historical events alone? No, again. Augustine, and many others since, consider Jonah to be a *type*, or allegorical figure, of Christ, while rigorously defending the historicity of the account itself.

Does any of this really matter anyway? You bet it does! The credibility of the Bible and its central character, Jesus, are both also on the line, along with the book of Jonah, because Jesus once cited the story of Jonah in connection with the most significant events in His own life.

In *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties*, © 2008 Baker Books, Geisler and Howe write that in Matthew 12:40 "Jesus predicts His own burial and resurrection, and provides the doubting scribes and Pharisees the sign that they demanded. The sign is the experience of Jonah. Jesus says, '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.' If the tale of Jonah's ex-

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perience in the belly of the great fish was only fiction, then this provided no prophetic support for Jesus' claim. The point of making reference to Jonah is that if they did not believe the story of Jonah being in the belly of the fish, then they would not believe the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As far as Jesus was concerned, the historical fact of His own death,



burial, and resurrection was on the same historical ground as Jonah in the belly of the fish. To reject one was to cast doubt on the other (cf. John 3:12). Likewise, if they believed one, they should believe the other."

For thousands of years the biblical account of Jonah was accepted as historical fact by the majority (though not all) of Bible scholars. Only in modern times have any significant number attempted to challenge that consensus.

But all efforts to write off the story of Jonah as a parable, as mere allegory, as a myth, or as a midrash, have met with problems of their own. Consider the following salient rebuttals:

- "Parables are simple; they treat one subject. But the book of Jonah has at least two distinct parts: his flight and his preaching. Neither does Jonah fit the category of allegory, for there is no agreement on what the values are for each of the characters and events. The very diversity of answers is enough to state that allegory is not the solution. The same judgement would hold for suggesting that Jonah is a myth."

— **Hard Sayings of the Bible**, © 1996 InterVarsity Press.

- "The reference to Jonah in 2 Kings, and the historical setting of the ministry described in this book, make it clear that Jonah is not intended to be taken as a parable but as a historic account of the prophet's ministry."

— Larry Richards in *Bible Difficulties Solved*, © 1993 Revell

- The Book of Jonah "contains no authorial comments or literary clues that suggest it is a parable." If it was a parable, it would be "far longer than any other parable in Scripture, and it is cumbersome in its arrangement. Besides this, it names an actual historical figure as its main character. All of these facts point away from Jonah being a parable." — Ra McLaughlin of Third Millennium Ministries, writing online for *Reformed Answers*.

In positive support of the historicity of the book, archaeology has confirmed the existence of a prophet named Jonah with a grave in northern Israel, and a number of ancient coins have been unearthed with the inscription of a man coming out of the mouth of a fish.

But how about that part of the story anyway? Could a man ever really survive inside a big fish for three days? Well, with God all things are possible, and the Bible says that *God Himself* "prepared" a great fish for this very purpose. If God created the fish and the man and the world in which they both lived, why could He not arrange for the man to survive inside the fish for a few days?!

Some experts have cited certain species of "great aquatic animals" (e.g. sperm whale, rhinocodon-shark or whale shark) with a digestive system and process that would make the story plausible on scientific grounds alone. But otherwise we can conclude that it was simply a miracle. And so what? Why should the story be dismissed as fiction on the grounds that it was a miracle?

As Augustine (previously cited) points out: If one questions one miracle, then one should question all miracles. And who of us would choose to go there? A materialist? Well, the credibility of materialism hangs on some rather "miraculous" whale-sized assumptions of its own!