

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 8, Jonah

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 8 on the Book of Jonah.

As we begin this week, we acknowledge how much we need you, our Lord. We ask that as we walk throughout this day, we will be in tune with your values, knowing that your presence remains with us. Even when we don't acknowledge you, we thank you that you stick close to us. We pray that the word of God that we study will always be a guide for our path, help us not to trust our emotions, which are like a yo-yo, but help us to trust Scripture, which is the eternal word of God.

As things around us crumble, are transitory, fleeting, and passing, pray that we will learn that there's really nothing more solid and dependable than you and your word. So, give us new lessons in that reality today, I pray, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Alright, today I want to continue on with our study of Jonah and some of the background material that is relevant to the prophecy. Jonah is described as being the son of Amittai, who is mentioned in 1:1. We don't know anything about Amittai. We do know when Jonah lived, that's why we believe the historical prophet, according to 2.Kings 14:25 at least, places him right smack dab in the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel.

I'll just read that text, 2.Kings 14:25. It says that Jeroboam restored the boundaries of Israel, and he gives a number of the boundaries, which I won't mention, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher. Now Gath-hepher is that little town, just a short bike ride from Nazareth, and you see Gath-hepher right up here, quite near the Sea of Galilee. So, this is Gath-hepher.

Today, if you're up in the Galilee, you can go by the traditional tell for that city. Another observation I made that was Jonah and Jesus had one thing in common. They both grew up in the tribal territory of Zebulun.

Now, we're going to come back to Zebulun and Naphtali when we talk about a prophecy in Isaiah that talks about this area as the area where the light is going to shine. And as you know, in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew points out the reason it shines is because that was the region, the region of Galilee, where Jesus spent most of his time. In previous generations, i.e., in Jonah's generation, it was a time of great darkness because that military cloud was hanging over that region, and it was about to move in.

Because if we date Jeroboam to approximately these 40 some years, 793-753, then Jeroboam comes approximately 30 years before what great event? The second most important date of Old Testament history. Great. The destruction of Samaria and the exile of the northern tribes to the far recesses of the Assyrian Empire.

So that cloud was there and the Assyrians were about to begin to move in. They started deportation policy right after Jeroboam II under Tiglath-Pileser III, who removed citizens from the northern kingdom and brought idol worshipping Assyrians down into that region. They began to intermarry and that's why you have the Samaritan problem in Jesus' day.

Traditional Jews from Jerusalem did not have social intercourse with those of a mixed religion. See, they were very separatistic and that's why the eyebrows were raised in John 4, why Jesus, a Jew, would have any kind of social contact with a woman from Samaria. So, all of this problem really had its beginning during the 8th century because people outside the land of Israel moved in and the area of Samaria was viewed as being very suspicious, particularly by the traditional Jews.

Alright, so Jonah then, apparently based on this text from 2 Kings, finds him as one of our three prophets we tie in with the northern kingdom. Quick review: Jonah was the foreign missionary, if you will, from the northern kingdom who called to go east to go to Mosul if you want to book a ticket on Iraqi Airlines. He was headed over here to the area of Nineveh, right over here near the modern Iraqi city of Mosul, Mosul.

Alright, but he headed to the open seas of the Mediterranean, and his destination was west. Go west, young man, go west. That's it.

So, he had quite a different direction in mind. I will talk in more specific detail about the nation of Nineveh. For openers, what entire book in the Old Testament is devoted to the city of Nineveh? Nahum or Nahum, that's right.

And the city of Nineveh described by the so-called compassionate, comforting prophet, that's what Nahum means. Interesting and fiddly around the roof, just a little modern aside when you come up with an award-winning musical on Broadway, and you want to come up with a nice name for a beggar, the beggar who stands there with his hand out is Nahum the Beggar. Calling people to identify with his name, be compassionate, be merciful, be kind, be comforting, Isaiah 40, 41 is Nahumu, Nahumu Ami. Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people. In the Septuagint, it's Parakeleo, which you know in the New Testament, the Paraclete is the one called alongside literally the comforter, the helper, the lawyer, the attorney, the counsel, there are different ways in which that's rendered, but literally it's the one called alongside to help.

Alright, so Nahum became a city ripe for judgment, as Sennacherib had made it his capital city around 700 BC.

And a little more than a hundred years after Jonah's day, that city of the Assyrian Empire would fall. Now, the book of Jonah has been subject to a variety of interpretations. What are some of the books of the Bible that seem to have the most diverse ways of interpreting them? Can you think of any others? There are three or four different approaches to Jonah that scholars have come up with.

Can you think of any others that may be problematic in the Bible in general? Doesn't have to be just the Old Testament. Probably the first couple chapters in Genesis, that's for sure. I'm not sure after chapter 3 or maybe 1 to 11.

1 to 11 is prehistory, pre-patriarchal, and a lot of gaps in the genealogy, science, and scripture come clashing. People have had different takes on the fall and the effects of the fall and whether the fall is history, allegory, or a profound point about announcing the promise of a savior. Even Mel Gibson grabbed a slice of Genesis 3, where you see that film open with that foot coming down on the head of the serpent and crushing it in the opening frame.

What other books do people debate about interpretation? Ecclesiastes is another good one. In fact, Ecclesiastes, according to some, is so cynical, so worldly, so kind of melancholy, so difficult to really get your hands on. It's not certainly highly theological, but it's made up of many different pithy short sayings, almost like proverbs in some of it.

But there's enough of it there that talks about the writer is jaded concerning life. Nothing new is under the sun. It just doesn't seem to be an upper, it's sort of a downer when you read it.

And there's always a tendency for interpreters or Bible readers to want to fix it. Scripture ought to make you feel happy. But actually, you know, there's a Bishop Stuart Blanche, he's no longer a bishop but we have his book in the library on Ecclesiastes.

He takes a totally different approach to Ecclesiastes, though it's not a feel better book. He says you want to get somebody to start reading the Bible, the port of entry, the place you tell them to begin is Ecclesiastes. He claims that's where the average person you're going to meet on the street.

They're doubting God, they have struggles with life, they're weary with the patterns of human existence, they've tried everything in life to make them happy, women, parks, music, possessions, and they are still hebel/hevel. Hebel is what Ecclesiastes uses; it's what you breathe on a cold morning; it's transitory, it's there and it's gone;

it's short-lived; it's vanity or meaningless. And so, the average person is sort of frustrated by life.

They're looking for purpose and meaning of life. So, to get them into the Bible at that point, they can relate. If you send them to the most highly theological parts of the Bible or parts of the Bible that talk about the holiness of God, it may be a bit imposing for somebody who's just asking questions: who is this God? And, of course, Kohelet just causes the sun to peep from behind the clouds a little bit at the end of the book when he talks about fearing God. This is the whole duty of man: remember your Creator in the days of your youth because you're out of this life very, very quickly, and so, therefore, God ultimately is the great integrator of life, to fear Him, that's where the real meaning of life, but he doesn't press it, doesn't talk about it a lot, mostly he's talking about the struggles of life.

I have a friend who's chosen his life's first from Ecclesiastes; wine is made for laughter, and money answers everything, the Revised Standard Version of one verse in Ecclesiastes shows you can prove anything you want from the Bible. Alright, that's a real struggling book, any other people want to volunteer? Well, getting a hold of how many hands you want to see are in the pie of Isaiah, yes, I had a professor, Edward J. Young is his name, who came to this campus to give an annual lectureship that was for credit when I was in seminary, he assigned a textbook for that course in Isaiah by a professor from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, it was called Sheldon Blank, Sheldon Blank said there may be up to 18 different Isaiahs that can be identified in the book. I'm not one that likes to cut the Bible into confetti; I like to think of the unity of the book, and while Isaiah is open to its composition and the possibilities, there may have been another prophet in exile, Deutero-Isaiah, or second Isaiah as he's sometimes called, Isaiah from the days of the prophet, who spoke as a prophet to the exiles, we'll be talking about some of the arguments for and against that particular view.

There's no question about the second half of the book does seem to speak out of the Babylonian exile as being over. And so, how that's interpreted, the unity position, or whether possibly Isaiah himself could speak in the future to that period of return, because Isaiah himself was a couple of centuries before the Babylonian exile. Revelation, of course, is a very difficult book, where people can't always agree on interpretation.

Some take it as literally as possible, some take it as figuratively as possible, or idealistically as possible, and there's one school of interpretation that basically says God wins, and all the other details are irrelevant. So, if you don't want to struggle with interpretation, choose that one. I do think there's more to get out of the book of Revelation.

But those are some good points. Another difficult part of the Bible is the last nine chapters, where this is, of course, in the prophets of Ezekiel. That's a very difficult passage to interpret.

It talks about a future temple of some sort, and God is in the midst of it, and the last word in the book of Ezekiel is Yahweh Shammah, the Lord is there in the presence of his people. But if you press it literally, there are some enormous geographical and physical changes in the land required. Some take it as an archetype of a future temple, a symbolic temple, that was never intended to be understood literally.

So, we have these parts of the Bible that are difficult for interpreters, and some of these things we have to lay out several positions, the strengths and weaknesses of them. That shouldn't deter you in terms of your confidence in Scripture, but it should make us all pause sometimes about ways of understanding Scripture. Going back to the principle I gave you, there may be a difference between what Scripture says and what I think it means.

That's always something that's daily open to revision. Why? Because I'm studying, you're studying, we're learning, we're growing. Archeology is coming up with new things.

Linguistic studies are challenging us with new manuscript readings, for the Bible, and helping us tweak here and there. When I went off to seminary, I went off with a Bible that didn't have any of the readings of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Now, whatever Bible I choose to have students read, there are places scattered through, particularly the Old Testament books, where we have improved readings scattered in various places.

Because now the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some of which publication was greatly delayed because of scholarly in-house fighting and jealousies and just the slowness of how some scholars work. Some working decades and decades, and this is mine, you're not going to look over my shoulder, I want the honor of publishing this first, and so they move very, very slowly. So, there are various reasons why we have problems with interpretation.

Just very briefly, some of the ways in which this book has been understood. Particularly when the Old Testament was exposed to the higher critical, the more scientific study of Scripture, which tends to come to the Bible as a work of literature, not as Scripture, the Word of God. And when certain processes are applied to Scripture, many of these are carried out from the presupposition of rational thinking.

Ruling out the possibility of supernatural or divine. And so, some of the conclusions, where you start is important because it does affect where you end. Remember the two great presuppositions of theology: God exists, and He has revealed Himself.

That's where we begin our study of biblical studies. Now, in terms of objections that some scholars right off the top have in scanning through the book of Jonah, things like the big fish are always a stumbling block for people. Other people have had some problems with how an entire city could so quickly respond to a visiting evangelist's message, and so many of them seem to respond in repentance from the White House right down to average Larry Layman.

The whole country, from the top to the bottom, in terms of power. The king declares a fast. And so that was a rather remarkable conversion of many, many pagan people outside the covenant family of Israel in a very short period of time.

Could such a thing have happened? Those are just two of a number of different questions that scholars have raised about the book. The result of that has been some have held to a fictional reading of the book, so they don't read it in any sense as biography, the stories of a man, which actually happened, but rather they see it as a short story told to convey mainly a moral lesson. And that's what fiction is.

And here, the moral is invented. And the activities of this legendary character, he's unknown, with certain miraculous elements and experiences, maybe borrowed from a couple of earlier prophets up there towards the north who operated. Who were those two prophets that take up quite a chunk of scripture? Elijah and Elisha had miraculous things going for them.

In fact, Elisha has about twelve miracles attributed to him. So this fiction of youth holds that maybe some of these miraculous elements and experiences were borrowed from parallel accounts and applied to Jonah. I have some rather serious problems with that as fiction.

The reasons for which I'll point out in a minute. There's the allegorical approach, which sort of sees the story of Jonah as an extended metaphor in which certain details of the story spiritually illustrate different aspects of the life of Israel. Just like there are scholars who would tell you that Israel had a wilderness experience, so Jesus had a wilderness experience.

Israel comes out of the wilderness and goes through the water and so Jesus has a baptismal experience. And then Israel receives teaching on a mountain and so Jesus gives his teaching on a mountain. And so, there are sort of parallels corporately within Israel's life that those echoes now are picked up as it were in the Israelite experience.

Jonah in this allegorical way of understanding the book represents Israel. Many of those that hold this view would say the book is a lot later than the 8th century B.C. and probably this book is really written in the post-exilic period. The book was

written because the allegorical view typically will tell you that the great fish is identified with Babylon that swallows Israel up for some 70 years.

And after the Babylonian exile experience where Israel was held in captivity, so in Jonah the three days of captivity in the fish led to the vomiting out of Jonah and coming to that dry land that stands for return from exile. So that's one way in which scholars have seen an allegorical approach to the book. Others have used the word parable for the book.

I think that's a stretch on a number of reasons. The parabolic of course is quite similar to yet a simpler version than the allegorical approach. It's intended to teach a spiritual lesson.

The parabolic approach has at least one main point. Those who see the story as a parable often see this book as being again a post-exilic writing. The primary point of this post-exilic parable is to protest against the exclusivistic nationalism that failed to reveal a universal dimension to divine grace.

So, if you're protesting exclusivistic nationalism, and here's a prophet that goes all the way east to show God's international love, scholars would say that the parable is meant to teach that God loves people everywhere and calls them to international morality. While the primary point of this parabolic approach is to protest against the exclusivistic parable, it assumes again the story comes out of the post-exilic period of Israel's history. One of the greater problems looking at that is a literary account.

Can anyone tell me a parable in the Bible that's three or four chapters long? That's certainly a parable is one of the difficult parts of seeing it as a parable. The length of the story and the complexity of the narrative to reduce all of that to one simple lesson. Now in terms of hermeneutics and Bible interpretation, one of the first things you learn about the parabolic genre, if you study them in the Gospels, is don't ask a parable to get up and walk on all fours.

If you press too many of the details of the parable you can get into big, big trouble. So, look for the main idea in the parable. That's good, sound advice rather than looking for significance in every main word or idea.

Historically, the historical view has been upheld in understanding the story of Jonah. I say it has been upheld because in both the Jewish and the Christian communities, until the rise of rationalism, until the rise of the historical, scientific study of Scripture, prior to the modern era, the traditional view was how the book was understood. And so Jonah would be viewed as an actual historical character, likely coming from that time period of Jeroboam II.

If he comes from Gath-Hepher, we know he's a Galilean prophet. And supernatural events are not odious to the narrative of Scripture. They're already abundantly present in the life of Moses, who experienced burning bushes, who experienced, take that thing in your hand and throw it down, pick it up again.

Things in the life of Moses included a 40-year everyday miracle in the wilderness that sustained a motley, complaining group of people. The manna was a miracle. The water from the rock was a miracle.

There are many things associated with the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, Moses, that were supernatural. And as I've already indicated, the two prophets Elijah and Elisha, both were associated with some extraordinary events. So, in the story of Jonah, we have God intervening.

God prepares a fish. God prepares a fish. God speaks to the fish.

God sends a plant. God attacks the plant. And there are a number of things attributed to God's intervention in this particular story.

Those who interpret the book historically often point to the way Jonah, the prophet, is treated, dealt with, or understood in the New Testament. And what do you find in the New Testament? Well, that first passage, Matthew chapter 12, verses 39 and following. Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.

And he answered A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign. But none will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the 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 because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. What you have in that first passage is obviously a reference to the actual repentance of the people of the city of Nineveh to whom Jonah went. And Jesus even ends that little pericope by saying and now one greater than Jonah is here.

Would Jesus compare himself with a phantom? With a fictional character that never existed? Jesus considered the story of Jonah to apparently be historical in comparing his own death, burial, and resurrection. As the Son of Man must be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, He compares his own death, burial, and resurrection to Jonah's experience. Matthew 12:40. If one assumes Jesus merely used the details of a popular story current in His day to drive home a point to His audience, then many would argue that the authority of Jesus might be at stake, providing one side of the comparison is fictional and the other rooted in history.

In addition, if he really wants his own generation, which Jesus is challenging with their hard-heartedness and indifference, unless the repentance of Nineveh to which Jesus points really happened in time and space, then his appealing to his own generation to repentance would seem to hold, at best, questionable credence. The purpose of the book of Jonah is to suggest two possible main purposes. One I've already touched on is God's international love.

Now, this is an important theme in the Old Testament. This is not a private praise the Lord club. This is between Israel and God.

God is already in His plan, broadening the lens and calling people outside the family of Israel. We have in the Messiah's bloodline a Ruth, who is a woman from the fields of Moab, directly east of the Dead Sea, who comes into the Messianic family, who bears a baby named Obed, who bears Jesse, who bears David. We have this book, and the immediate purpose seems to show that God indeed was calling Israel to be labor goyim, that is, for a light to the nations.

That's to use Isaiah's language in Isaiah 49:3 and 6. Israel was called to be a light to the nations, or a light to the Gentiles. A commission only later given to the church. Israel was the first to have that calling.

Acts 13:47 points out how the church now comes into this calling of being a light to the nations. And though election and covenant were established with a particular people, God's mission for Israel, contrary to Jonah's wishes, he was the quintessential patriotic person who wanted to give nothing away that was good to that hated nation on his east that was flexing its military muscle and threatening to come in and become the enforcer of those people who lived astride the Mediterranean. So, what we have here then is that God's intentions were never that narrow, never intended to be exclusivistic, focused on one sole nation.

And so, one of the main reasons I think we have this book in the canon is to show that God's love embraces the whole earth, and even God's own prophets were slow to acknowledge that. Or what does the Gospels line? How does that go? I have sheep not of this fold. And the reason most of us are here today in class is because Abraham's family was expanded.

We're part of the expanded version of Abraham's family because the covenant was enlarged by God's mercy because of people coming to him to respond in faith and obedience to that biblical message. So, all people, the whole earth, God has compassion on. And you notice God's compassion about this very feared enemy.

I think we who live in America have to be very, very careful that we never lose compassion toward other people in the world. We may hate what they stand for and

some of their terrible threats to other people, and yet we must acknowledge these are people that God loves, that He cares for, and that He desires to be touched with His love. And that's why we have this book and that morality in the Old Testament is international.

When we study the first couple chapters of Amos in this course, you're going to find out that all the nations surrounding Israel are being judged for their lack of ethics and morality and how they treated people. There is built into the Bible a morality that God intends for the entire earth. All people must repent of their sin and receive His grace.

And God's love moves over borders, over ethnic borders. So, the prophetic message of love must reach the godless enemies of Israel. And to use the words at the end of Jonah, not just the Ninevites, but even their beasts, which were part of the community, came to be touched by this whole thing.

They are objects of God's concern. Christianity did not invent missions. In fact, if you read Matthew's Gospel, he alludes to Jews who would cross the whole Mediterranean Sea to make contact with the other.

A convert, Samuel Sandmel, in his book on Judaism and Christian origins, says the reason the early church was very missionary minded was because of the prior very strong missionary impulse found in Judaism. And the notion of starting in Jerusalem, going to Samaria, going to the outermost parts of the world, that was not a new idea. And when the fledgling messianic community was called to do that, Judaism had already broken the ice.

They were to be *la'or goyim*, a light to the nations. And that was already happening. Now, there's a second purpose of the book.

And it's...yeah, go ahead. Well, that's a great question: Why have they stopped today? The reason they stopped today is that about two centuries before the end of the medieval period, during the 1200s, the church issued a statement that anyone found seeking to be involved in this matter of going after Christians would have their property confiscated, and they would have to bear very severe penalties imposed on them.

So, the Jewish people primarily dropped this notion because they were the minority in the larger, quote, Christian world. And it was really economic pressures and physical dangers. Even to this day, if you ask a Jewish person what their thinking is about missions, most of them will tell you missions is associated with violence, hatred, forcing against people's wills, and a different religion by the majority religion.

And that's why we're against missions because it's equated with violence, imperial takeovers of other people, and enforcing laws on them. So, they end up in a shtetl or a ghetto. The word shtetl, while we use it in the Jewish community, particularly during the medieval period and leading up into the modern period, comes from a German word that means little city, shtetl.

And that's what happened to the Jews. They were placed into compounds and so forth and denied certain civil rights and human rights. And the Jews were taken out by the host population.

So, Judaism backed off on this idea. There have been two or three attempts in the modern world to revive the idea, in my lifetime at least, that I know of, and I know several rabbis. One who is in charge of this for the Reform Movement, which called for opening reading houses in cities, providing literature, not to go after people who are already affiliated with another religion, but to go after the tens of millions of unaffiliated people, particularly in America, that have no religious attachment.

And Alexander Schindler was one associated with that. Now, quickly, let me move on to a second purpose, the Christological. I think this was a distant purpose in the particular book.

You never know what the Holy Spirit is going to do and how the Holy Spirit is going to work. But in God's purpose, Jesus, and through the use of typology, Jesus points to his own entombment in the grave and his release from the clutches of death. He points to Jonah's parallel entombment from inside the fish as an illustration of the very heart of his own redemptive activity.

It becomes a dramatic prophetic portrait for the Christian of his Lord's death, burial, and resurrection. And again, that's what Matthew 12:40, in doing this midrash, this interpretive explanation, if you will, on that particular story. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

One is a type of the other. It illustrates it. Jonah, then, is a type of the other.

And of Christ. But Christ, in what he does, is always greater than the Old Testament events or circumstances that are drawn on. And while personally, myself, I am very conservative about how one should use types, the New Testament writers, read John 3:14, 15, 16, 17, and 18.

As a serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross. And so that bronze serpent on a pole to which people looked and lived when they were snake bitten with deadly venom. So, there's a greater sense in which

when people look up, they can live when they've been bitten, as it were, with the bite of death because of somebody's own death.

And through that death, where one was lifted up on a cross, brings life to those who will look to it. They receive that healing. One is always greater than the other.

One is a picture of the other. And so I think for the purposes of God, we have this portrait of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. And then the last thing I would say today is the sign of Jonah in Matthew 12:39. In again Matthew 16:4, what is the sign of Jonah? The sign of Jonah is the preaching of Jesus that called people to repentance.

Preaching granted the fullest authority and highest attestation through His miraculous escape from the clutches of the grave. That's the sign, the preaching of Christ, which brought people into the kingdom. So, the sign of Jonah is the sign of Jesus and the sign that God is alive, calling people to Himself, and that, in a remarkable way, credentials Jesus for the very power of God that worked through the prophet Jonah is now alive in Jesus.

In fact, I think the book of Jonah is one of the very surprising little books of the Old Testament that gives some credibility to who Jesus is. Because all these miracles attributed to Yahweh in the Old Testament, the bringing of a storm, the calming of a storm, nature miracles, the plant, in the gospels in the Old Testament, it was Yahweh that did these things. So, in the New Testament, Jesus has control over nature, the calming of the storm, the multiplication of bread and fishes, and so forth.

So, there is a very strong connection between what Yahweh does and now this one in Jesus of Nazareth does the same thing.

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