

Dr. Gary Yates, Book of the 12, Session16, Jonah, Historicity

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This is Dr. Gary Yates in his teaching on the Book of the 12. This is session 16, Introduction to the Book of Jonah, Historicity.

We are ready in our study to begin looking at the book of Jonah.

I'm somewhat intimidated as we start this study because I realize and I understand that of all of the book of the 12 and the minor prophets, Jonah is probably the one that we are most familiar with. It's one that we've focused on from the time of Sunday school. We've heard this at a very earlier time in our lives.

So, the intimidation factor is what can we say about this book that is new or that might add something to our understanding? We're going to begin by focusing on the question of whether we should read the book of Jonah as a parable or as a historical account. We'll get into some of the questions, the evidence, and the issues related to that. Before we do that, I would like to make one final point or addendum to our discussion of Hosea. Then, we'll use this as a way to lead into our discussion of the book of Jonah.

But as we work through the book of Hosea, the message of Israel's infidelity toward the Lord, one of the things that I've come to appreciate about the book of Hosea is the way in which the prophet interweaves with his message earlier references to Old Testament traditions or Old Testament events. If you take the time to read and reflect on some of these things, it can enhance your understanding of the Old Testament. It also can help you to appreciate the force, the power, and the rhetoric of Hosea's message.

Now, the idea of critical scholarship has often been that the Pentateuch or that many parts of the Old Testament were written at a very late time in Israel's history, either in the exilic or post-exilic period. There is a good possibility of editing for the Old Testament that led to the Old Testament reaching its final form during that period. But I think the familiarity of Hosea with these traditions and things is a reminder to us that the traditions and the texts that we do see in the Old Testament do have an ancient history that goes back to the earliest stages of Israel's history.

I just want to mention a few of these. One of the things that is referenced in the book of Hosea several times is the Exodus. That's not surprising because it is the central event of God's redemption and how Israel is formed as a nation.

In Hosea chapter 8, verse 13, the Lord is going to punish Israel for their sin. He's going to remember their iniquity, and they will return to Egypt. So, part of the message of Hosea is that salvation history is about to be overturned and the Lord is going to bring judgment on his people.

But that's not the only thing that Hosea says about the Exodus. Because in chapter 11 verse 1, when Israel was a child, I called him and out of Egypt I called my son. It's a reminder of that first event and Israel's defection and disobedience to God is more severe in light of the fact that they've been ungrateful for the deliverance that God has brought them.

However, after the judgment is over, the Lord is going to do a second work of deliverance. There's going to be a second Exodus where the Lord is going to roar like a lion, and the people of Israel out of their exile will come trembling like birds from Egypt and like doves from the land of Assyria. So, there's a powerful use of the Exodus tradition in the book of Hosea.

I think this carries forward into the New Testament. The passage from Hosea 11:1 is used in the gospel of Matthew with reference to the life of Jesus. Matthew says that Jesus going down to Egypt as a child when Joseph took them there to flee Herod is a fulfillment of Hosea chapter 11 verse 1, out of Egypt have I called my son.

We might look at that and say, well, I just read Hosea 11:1. It doesn't seem to be talking about the Messiah. What is Matthew doing? Well, Matthew is engaging here in a form of typology where he references Old Testament events in the same way that Hosea does. In the same way that God called his son Israel out of Egypt, that pattern is carried forward into the life of Jesus.

Jesus as God's son, as the ultimate representation of Israel is also going to be brought out of Egypt. There's a parallel between the life of Israel in the Old Testament and the life of Jesus in the New Testament. I think it conveys the idea that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's history and the one who will ultimately enable Israel to be everything that God has wanted them to be.

As Greg Beal has noted, Matthew is not ignoring the overall context of Hosea because, as we've just read, there's a reference in Hosea to the final exodus, to the second exodus, and the life and ministry of Jesus is going to bring that about. Another Old Testament tradition that we see referenced in the book of Hosea quite effectively is the patriarch Jacob and his life. Hosea chapter 12, verse 2, the Lord has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways.

He will repay him according to his deeds. And remember that Jacob, in the book of Genesis, is not always a terribly exemplary character. He does some things that

create some problems with his dishonesty, his deception, stealing the birthright, and the conflict with his brother Esau.

And so that's reflected in Hosea. In the womb, he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood, he strove with God. He strove with an angel and prevailed.

He wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel and there God spoke with us, the Lord God of hosts. So, in spite of Jacob's kind of checkered past, ultimately he met God at Bethel.

He sought the Lord and there was a renewed relationship as a result of that. Hosea is encouraging the people of Israel to do the same. It's going to talk about in Hosea chapter 12 verse 12, Jacob fled to the land of Aram, and there Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep.

By a prophet, the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt, another reference to the Exodus, and by a prophet, he was guarded. In the same way that Jacob had gone away to a foreign land and God had ultimately rescued his people, God is going to repeat that history in Israel's future. What God has done for Israel in the past is a reminder of what God is going to do for them in the future.

There's a reference to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Hosea 11:8 and 9. In contrast, God gave cities like Admah and Zeboim over to total destruction; the Lord cannot do that for the people of Israel. When the Lord restores the people of Israel in Hosea chapter 2, verse 15, this promising message is given there. It says, and there I will give her vineyards and make the valley of Achor a door of hope.

So, we have a reversal here of Israel's past history because the valley of Achor is where the sin of Achan and this punishment that was carried out on Achan for his disobedience to the rules of holy war, ultimately that is going to become a place of hope because the valley of Achor will become a door of hope and there she shall answer in the days of her youth as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. Another reference to the Exodus combined with this. So, something that had a negative connotation in Israel's past is given a positive connotation.

The depths of Israel's wickedness are conveyed by a reference in Hosea chapter 9, verse 9. They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah. He will remember their iniquity, and he will punish their sin. Chapter 10, verse 9, for as in the days of Gibeah you have sinned O Israel, there they have continued.

Shall not the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah? Gibeah is the place where we have the terrible story from the book of Judges of the rape of the concubine and then her murder, and then the civil war that comes about as a result of that. That horrific event is recalled from Israel's past history as a way of talking

about their defection and their sin in the present. One more of these that I'll mention.

Referring to the idolatry of Israel, Hosea chapter 9 verse 10 says, they came to Baal Peor, and they consecrated themselves to the thing of shame and became detestable like the thing that they loved. So, a great prime example of Israel's practice of idolatry before they even came into the land is recalled here. The prophet very beautifully and effectively uses these images from Israel's past often to encourage them.

God's going to do a work of redemption for you like he did in the past, but other times to confront them that you have become just like the people of Gibeah. That's a pretty horrible comparison. You have become just like the people who worshiped and committed sexual immorality in relationship to these false gods at Baal Peor in Numbers chapter 25.

So, if we want to understand the Old Testament, if we want to understand the Old Testament prophets, it's amazing sometimes to look at all of the different ways that the Old Testament references itself. Then if we want to understand Paul or the New Testament, we realize that they do the same thing. One of the reasons sometimes that we struggle as Christians with the book of Revelation is that the book is saturated with references to the Old Testament and particularly the Old Testament prophets.

So, paying attention to these things can enhance your reading of the book of Hosea. One other thing that I want to mention about the book, there is throughout the book of Hosea a number of powerful images and metaphors that are used both for God and for the people and for the judgment that God is going to bring. We don't just notice the metaphor of Israel as the unfaithful wife and God is the faithful husband.

Here is a list of a few of those. If you want to look at these and develop them further, you can do some of this in your own study. God is compared in the book of Hosea 5.12 to moths and to rot.

I haven't heard any praise courses that use that particular analogy, but the judgment that God is going to bring upon them. God is a roaring lion in Hosea 5.14 who is going to judge his people. In chapter 11:10, a roaring lion is going to bring them back.

God is like the spring and the winter rains who will refresh Israel. It's not Baal who does that. The Lord is the father of Israel.

In chapter 11.1-4, out of Egypt have I brought my son. The two closest possible human relationships are used in the book of Hosea to talk about the closeness of Israel and the Lord in their covenant relationship. He is a devoted lover of his people.

Hosea 11:8-11 cannot give them up. He is like a lion, a leopard, and a bear who destroys. We definitely see analogies and comparisons between Hosea and the preaching of Amos.

He is a healer who will ultimately restore the apostasy of Israel. Hosea 14:4, he's like the refreshing dew. Chapter 14:5, he is like a green pine.

Chapter 14:8. So, in a powerful way, not using the categories of systematic theology again but images and metaphors, we understand God's dual side as both a holy God who punishes sin and a loving God who will ultimately restore and bless. On the other hand, the metaphors that are used to talk about Israel, most of them are fairly negative to highlight their covenant infidelity. In chapters 1-3, they are the unfaithful spouse.

Chapter 4:16, chapter 10:11, and chapter 11:4, they are a stubborn heifer. They've become like the golden calf that they worship. Chapter 5:13, they are sick and covered with sores.

Chapter 6:4, their love for God is like mist and dew that vanishes away very quickly. They are like murderers and criminals. Chapter 6:7-9, they are like a burning oven.

Chapter 7:4-7, consumed in their lust for power. They are like half-baked bread, burnt on one side, raw on the other. Chapter 7:8, in terms of their faulty political strategies, they are like a dove flitting back and forth between options as they seek political solutions.

Chapter 7:11, they are like a faulty bow that a warrior takes into battle and cannot rely upon. Chapter 7:16, they are like a wild and rebellious donkey. Chapter 8:9, they're like a twig floating on the water that will simply be carried away.

Chapter 10:7, they are like rebellious children. Chapter 11:1-4, they are like mist, dew, chaff, and smoke that blows away in terms of both their fidelity of God and their stability because of the judgment that's coming. Also, there are effective metaphors of God's judgment throughout the book, again to remind the people of how horrific and terrible this judgment will be.

What's God's judgment like? It's like a flood of waters. Chapter 5:10, it's like a sword. Chapter 6:5, it's like lightning.

Chapter 6:5, it is a harvest that Israel will reap. Chapter 6:11 is a whirlwind that will destroy them. They have sown the wind, and they will reap the whirlwind.

It is the attack of a wild animal. Chapter 13:8, it is the pains of childbirth. Chapter 13:13, a very effective image.

It is like a scorching wind that will burn them. Chapter 13.5. So, there are all kinds of things going on in these prophetic books, allusions to other Old Testament events and metaphors that I think can help us to appreciate and value the literary message of the prophets. So, we are finally going to leave Hosea, and I do want to talk about another literary issue here and a historical and theological issue.

We all know the book of Jonah. We're very familiar with the story, but one of the major interpretive questions that come up: this is not just a discussion among critical scholars versus evangelical scholars, but even evangelical scholars today are going to discuss whether we should read Jonah as a historical or parable or as a combination of both in some way? Part of the issue of historicity in terms of Jonah relates to the plausibility of some of the events that are found in the story. We all know that there's a prophet swallowed by a fish and then spit out, but there are other miraculous events.

There's a storm that God all of a sudden dials up as Jonah tries to flee from God. There is a prophet who was thrown overboard and who is saved by this fish that God appoints. There's a plant that grows up in a single day and then there's a small worm that eats this entire plant.

We have animals wearing sackcloth and ashes in Jonah chapter three when the city of Nineveh repents. There are some scholars who would say these kinds of sort of over-the-top, outlandish, not just supernatural things, but it's kind of over-the-top things that may suggest that this book should be read more as a parable. What about the plausibility of God sending a prophet to a foreign nation, especially to the Assyrians? We don't see that in other places in the Old Testament.

There's no evidence from history of an Assyrian response, although why we necessarily would expect to see that would be something we're going to discuss in a minute. Why would these people have listened to Jonah? They have no history with Jonah as a prophet. They don't recognize the Lord as being their God.

Why would they listen? And so, others have argued that this whole idea of God sending a prophet to a foreign people and all of a sudden these wicked Assyrians repenting and turning to God, it's just not plausible to believe that. Some are led to see Jonah as being non-historical, more for literary types of issues. There are elements of parable in the story.

The name Jonah, Yonah, is a word that means dove. It seems to be that this indicates that he is symbolic for the nation of Israel. So rather than seeing this as a historical

event, Jonah being swallowed by a fish, and then as a prophet actually going to Assyria, perhaps this is simply symbolic of the experience of Israel.

They have been swallowed up in exile and are going to be forced to live among these pagan people. There is a significant amount of satire in the book. One of the things that I want to talk about and develop as we get into this a little bit is that I believe in many ways that Jonah is described as the anti-prophet.

If you want to pick the exact opposite example of what a prophet should look like, what a prophet should do, or how a prophet should respond, Jonah is the man. When God calls Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh, Jonah does something that we don't see other prophets in the Old Testament doing. Jonah is so resistant to his prophetic calling that he would rather be thrown overboard than actually have to preach to a bunch of pagans.

So, there's a great deal of satire. At the end of the book, Jonah doesn't care about the people of Nineveh and their fate or their well-being. He's more concerned about the sunburn that he's going to get on top of his head.

So, do these literary elements require us to view this simply as a parable? I just want to make the point as we're working through this, the book definitely is a work that reflects a great deal of literary artistry. I love that about the book. It's one of the things that I appreciate.

But literary artistry and sophistication in the way that the story is told or the story being crafted in a literary way does not preclude the possibility of historicity. I don't think that we have to see those things in conflict with each other. The Gospels are very artistic literary creations in presentations of the life of Jesus that does not argue against their historicity.

One of the other historical issues that comes up is that often there are statements in the book that are viewed as either being imprecise or inaccurate. For example, there is no reference or mention of the specific king of Nineveh that's involved here, although I'm not sure that we should necessarily expect that. In the story of the Exodus, in the book of Exodus, we learn about the Pharaoh.

We don't know his name. One of the issues that historians and archaeologists have argued about a great deal is who is the Pharaoh of the Exodus? We wouldn't necessarily expect this foreign king to be identified. There is no historical superscription in the book.

There are potential historical inaccuracies. The city of Nineveh was not the royal capital until later during the time of Sennacherib. Why is the king of Assyria there? There seems to be a Judah orientation to the story.

Jonah, the port that he goes out from, is Joppa. He prays toward the temple in Jerusalem. Why would this be true of a northern Israelite? So, there are some historical issues.

However, as we take a minute here just a little bit to talk about the historical setting, I believe that there is a very plausible setting for the story of Jonah that, to me, adds to the credibility of the story. We'll talk about that. Another issue that has been raised, and I think one of the reasons that we often have this discussion, and there's been this talk about that, is that in the past, often conservative people who have wanted to defend the story as being historical.

I think we do have some examples of what I would call overreaching apologetics. Some of the historical examples of people who have survived being swallowed by either fish, whales, or sea creatures, those analogies are interesting. Stories of sailors or fishermen who have fallen overboard and actually been cut out of the bellies of fish, I mean, reflect that this does happen.

However, those stories in many ways do not really parallel what we see happening with Jonah. Most of those people were near death when those experiences happened. Jonah, when he's spit out of the fish, he's immediately spit onto the dry land and he heads pretty quickly to the city of Nineveh.

So, there may be some examples there of overreaching apologetics. I think sometimes there can be the problem of dogmatic certainty. Is it possible that Jonah is simply a parable? Yeah, that is a possibility.

I don't think this is a test of orthodoxy. I do know a number of evangelical friends and Old Testament scholars now who are very evangelical, who believe in the authority of scripture, who affirm the doctrine of inerrancy, but who, because of some of the literary reasons that we've talked about, would see this as more of a parabolic story. My response to that is that I'm not sure that we see enough clear indicators or genre markers that would say this definitely should be read as a parable.

So, I'm not convinced that those indicators are as decisive as sometimes they seem to be for certain scholars. We do know from 2 Kings chapter 14 verses 23 to 25, we do know that Jonah was an historical figure and he was a prophet during the days of the reign of Jeroboam II. In fact, Jonah was the prophet who had prophesied to Jeroboam II about the expansion of his territory and the enlarging of his borders.

God had sent Jonah to fulfill that role, to proclaim that message to Jeroboam II. And so in that instance, and in that case, Jonah is presenting a very positive message to the people of Israel. It's going to say in 2 Kings chapter 14 verse 25, that Jeroboam II restored the border of Israel from Laboth-Hamath as far as the Sea of Arabah,

according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-Hepher.

We don't have a superscription at the beginning of the book of Jonah, but we already have another statement here in scripture about Jonah as a real historical figure. I think it adds to the irony of Jonah being the individual who is selected to go and preach this message that leads to God showing compassion to Israel's enemy. It's ironic that he was the one who had preached this positive message to Israel in part due to the fact that the Assyrians were in decline during the reign of Jeroboam II.

So, Jonah clearly is a real historical figure. So, that would seem to lend itself toward us seeing what happens to him in the book of Jonah as a real historical narrative and account. I do believe that there is an issue of biblical authority involved here.

If a person rejects the historicity of Jonah simply on the basis of supernatural elements that are in the story, then there are going to be problems with many other narratives and stories in both the Old and the New Testament. If we have a problem with God doing supernatural events in connection with the life of a prophet, then what do we do with the stories of Elijah and Elisha that are filled with miracles and some of them even really more significant and spectacular than the miracles that are done in the story of Jonah? If we are simply going to out of hand dismiss supernatural elements, what about the miracles of Jesus? What about the stories of the Exodus? Again, throughout the Bible, we serve a supernatural God. I do think that we have to be careful as we read the Bible, be careful that we do not bring our modern lenses into the text to the point that we dismiss out of hand the supernatural elements that are there.

When the Bible gives us canonical testimony that a prophet was able to prophesy something that was going to happen 150 years or 400 years in advance, there is often a tendency to say, well, that's not the way that prophecy typically works. That seems implausible. Let's find a critical explanation for why that happened.

So, I do believe that there is an issue here. If we're going to dismiss supernatural elements from the story of Jonah, what do we do with the rest of Scripture? One of the things that specifically lends us to seeing this as a historical account is not just the fact that Jonah himself is a historical figure. We know that from 2 Kings chapter 14, verses 23 to 25, but the book of Jonah is found within the Book of the 12.

As best we can tell, these other prophetic books portray the ministry and mission of real prophets in Israel and Judah. We have a prophet like Amos who really left Judah, went to Israel, and proclaimed this message. He's a real historical figure.

It would seem to lend itself to the idea that this book talking about the ministry of Jonah is recounting for us something that actually happened, a message, a sermon,

and a mission that this prophet actually carried out. We also know that in the New Testament, we have reference to the story of Jonah in the preaching of Jesus. Matthew chapter 12 verses 39 to 41.

I'm just going to read these verses and then make a couple of comments here. In chapter 12, verse 39, the scribes and the Pharisees want a sign from Jesus in spite of the fact that he's performed many of them already. And so, Jesus responds and says to them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For just 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 at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Verse 42, the queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And behold, something greater than Solomon is here. So, it appears again, in my estimation, Jesus here, as he does with many other events and stories in the Old Testament, is confirming that the story of Jonah is real.

He integrates it, he includes it with the story of the queen of Sheba, which is found in a historical narrative in the book of Kings. Jesus seems here to provide confirmation for the story of Jesus. And that adds weight for me to the argument that we should read Jonah as historical.

But I think we must also, just to be fair to the other side here, Jesus could simply be referencing or alluding to a well-known story. I don't think that's the best way to understand this, but Jesus could simply be making an allusion or a reference to a well-known story from Israel's history. It seems like though, what we have here is a pattern that characterizes Jesus' teaching of the Old Testament.

He accepts these stories as being factual. He accepts the story of Adam and Eve from the book of Genesis, a number of other Old Testament events, the story of Noah, and the flood. And I think we have the same thing going on here with the book of Jonah.

There is also a longstanding tradition in Jewish and Christian tradition that the book of Jonah should be read as a historical account. And so, for all of those reasons, and hopefully not doing this in a way that tries to do this with dogmatic certainty or make this a test of orthodoxy, I do believe that the best reading of Jonah is to read it as a historical account. Again, without specific genre markers and genre indicators that would say this book is simply a story or a parable, I think that's the most likely way that we should read this book.

Okay. Now we mentioned as part of this, and really to sort of wrap up this discussion about the historicity of the book, that one of the issues that comes up is, I mean, let's think about this. Is it really plausible that a prophet could go to a foreign land, especially a people as powerful, a city as noteworthy as the city of Nineveh? Is it really plausible to think that these people would have listened to him? Is it even plausible to think that Jonah really made this journey of several hundred miles to go and preach to the people of Nineveh when we don't see other prophets in Israel actually carrying this out? Whenever we have oracles toward other nations, generally in these other prophetic books, what we normally see is the prophet was preaching this message about this other nation or about this other kingdom, but he was preaching it to the people of Israel and Judah.

The purpose of those messages was more for God's people than for the nations that they were about. All right. Let's look at the specific historical setting of Jonah's ministry.

Remember during the time of the reign of Jeroboam II on the basis of 2 Kings 14:25 to 27. Back in our discussion of the book of Amos, we talked about the historical background of the Book of the 12 and as we talked about the context of the ministry of the minor prophets who ministered during the Assyrian period. Remember that Israel had enjoyed this time of great prosperity under Jeroboam II.

One of the reasons for that is that the Assyrian kingdom and the Assyrian empire had put pressure on Israel in the ninth century; during the time of Ahab, there had been a battle between the Assyrian king and a coalition of kings from Syria-Palestine that included Ahab. Jehu, in 841 BC, 12 years later, had been forced to pay tribute to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser. There was pressure put on Israel in the ninth century, but during the time of Jeroboam II, Israel enjoyed prosperity because the Assyrian empire had gone into decline.

That lasted from 825 BC until the rise of Tiglath-Pileser in 745 BC. So, we can put the ministry of Jonah during this time of Assyrian decline. During the reign of Jeroboam, and one of the dates that have been suggested for the ministry of Jonah, is that Jonah likely went to Nineveh and preached there sometime between the years 772 and 760 BC.

So, his ministry to Nineveh and his ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II may have occurred just prior to the time when God sent Amos to the northern kingdom to begin to prepare them for the judgment that was going to come. So, this was a time of Assyrian decline. This was a time, perhaps as we look at some of the specifics of this event, where because of the decline they had gone through and because of some of both the military and economic crises that they were facing, it's possible that even a city like Nineveh and even a powerful people like the Assyrians would, in

some sense, have been prepared for the message that Jonah was bringing them by the events that had taken place.

Here's a couple of those things. There were famines and popular uprisings during the reign of the Assyrian king, Ashurdan III, who reigned from 773 to 756. It fits very well with the time period that we suggested for Jonah.

The economic crisis and the food shortages and famines and things like that were so severe that at some points records indicate that inflation in Assyria at this time was 400%. So, in cities like Nineveh, where there were significant food shortages, those prices and those things may have indicated to the people that the gods are displeased with us in some way. There was an earthquake and a solar eclipse.

The solar eclipse took place on June 15, 763 BC. Again, we're using our imaginations here and we're talking kind of creatively. The Bible doesn't connect these things or make reference to this, but a solar eclipse was often a portent of some type of natural disaster or national disaster or military defeat or displeasure of the gods.

It would have served as an omen of divine anger or displeasure. So, if those things had happened either in connection with or immediately before or prior to the coming of Jonah and he preached this message in 40 days, Nineveh is going to be overturned. There are perhaps some things that led those people to be accepting of that message.

They may have known about this solar eclipse. They may have heard even omens of national disaster from their own prophets. They were dealing with the economic crisis.

Along with this, Assyria, unlike what they had been doing in the ninth century, was no longer able to go out on military campaigns because they were dealing with power to the north, the power of Urartu. The growing power of this enemy directly to the north of Assyria, again, could have created problems and could have led to the idea that the Assyrians needed to get right with their own gods. Also, trying to think about the plausibility of a group of people listening to a prophet coming to them from a foreign land, a guy named Jonah that they don't know, talking about Yahweh, the god of insignificant people, the Israelites.

Why would they respond? Well, there are some connections between Nineveh and the worship of either fish deities or those kinds of things that might play into this story as well. The name of the city Nineveh is related to the Akkadian word Nunu. So, there may be some idea that the name of Nineveh is something like fish town.

The first extant reference to Nineveh from 2100 BC includes an image of a fish within a city enclosure. So, there's some kind of connection between the city of Nineveh and fish or fish deities. The chief deity of early Nineveh was Nanshi, a fish goddess.

So, we may have some sort of connection between the experience of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish and the association of Nineveh with the worship of fish deities. Some people again would look at this and say, well, this is an example of why we should read the parable or something like that. I think if we're looking at it as a historical event, it may be another reason why Jonah's message could have carried weight to these people.

Did he explain to them the experience that he had gone through? What kind of appearance did Jonah have after he'd been in the fish for three days? But if somehow he were able to relay that experience to the people or to convince them that this has actually happened, again, it would have been another way that the pagan background and the deities they worshipped or the experiences that they had gone through, it might have been another way that the Assyrians would have been prepared for this message and may have been accepting of it in ways that would not have been true at other times in their history. We also have to think about the fact that what we may see in terms of the response of Nineveh may not actually be as great as it is often portrayed in popular preaching. The preaching of Jonah in Nineveh may not be a great example of a national revival.

In fact, Daniel Timmer and some other Old Testament scholars raise the issue of whether we actually even have a true conversion on the part of the Ninevites. We may simply have a group of people who hear the warning of a coming disaster, repent of that and seek the favor of the God. But there is no clear indication that they announced their polytheism.

There is no indication that they gave exclusive confession of Yahweh as the God of Israel. They believed the message and they sought God's favor and God gave that to them in a gracious way. But we may not have a national conversion of the people of Assyria.

We do not know how much this response to God, this repentance, how much this actually impacted the rest of the land of Assyria or the other nations or the other parts of the nation or the provinces or districts or cities that were there. Was this simply confined to the area of Nineveh? How long did the response last? We know that within just a few short decades, Assyria has returned to its violent, oppressive, brutal, imperialistic ways. This may have simply been a temporary glitch that would not necessarily have been noted in either the royal records or any of the historical accounts that we have in Assyria.

I think to expect some type of outside confirmation of a great revival is actually a misreading of the book of Jonah itself. Okay. A couple of other issues.

The city of Nineveh is described a number of times in the book as a great city. Chapter 1 verse 2, chapter 3 verse 2, chapter 4 verse 11. And in chapter 3, it even says that it was a great city, La Elohim, toward God or before God.

I think maybe reflecting just the idea of its importance to God. It is a great city, but there appear to be some ways that it is described as a great city that some interpreters, commentators, and people who have interacted with the book view as being an exaggeration and historically inaccurate. For example, in chapter 3, verse 3, it says that Nineveh was a city and it was a city of a three-day journey.

The exact wording in Jonah 3:3, it says this, Jonah began to go into the city a day's journey and before that in verse 2, now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days journey in breadth. This seems to be an exaggeration. One could walk in a three-day journey, something like 40 to 60 miles.

That wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility. John Walton says that the circumference of the city of Nineveh was three miles around and that the entire area of the city was about 300 acres, 1.5 square miles. So, is it an exaggeration to say that it was a three-day walk? However, what we have here talking about the three-day walk in chapter 3 may be an idiom.

It may simply be an imprecise way of maybe in a hyperbolic or exaggerated way talking about the greatness of this city. It also could indicate it was a three-day journey in terms of this is how long it would take Jonah to carry out his preaching ministry and his mission. As he went to the various city gates, as he went to the prominent streets and places and marketplaces, maybe the area outside the temple and communicated this message, it would take him three days to go from place to place, to go to these various parts of the city and proclaim the message.

It does not necessarily convey the idea that it took you three days to walk across it. So again, this may simply be an idiomatic statement. It's not an argument against the historicity of the book.

There is a reference in chapter 4, verse 11, to the population of the city of Nineveh. The Lord says to Jonah at the end of this book, and the book closes with this rhetorical question: Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle? And so, this is a large city, 120,000 persons. Some people have argued talking about people who do not know their left hand from their right hand may simply be a reference to 120,000 children.

However, the way that the people are being contrasted to the animals, this seems to be referring to the number of the people as a whole. So, what do we do with this number? Is it accurate? Does it represent something that is historically plausible? Again, I think there are several things that we have to think about. Again, large numbers in the Old Testament are often used in imprecise ways.

The 600,000 children that come out of the land of Egypt, there's all kinds of discussion about whether we should read that as literal or as hyperbolic. In the Syro-Ephraimite War, it tells us in Chronicles that in the civil war that went on between Israel and Judah, there were a hundred thousand people that were killed in a single day. That's a pretty astronomical number.

The word thousands often could be translated in another way other than simply giving us a number. So, we may simply have a large hyperbolic, exaggerated number, but actually, the number 120,000 seems to fit well as a population for Nineveh when we compare this to other historical records. There is a text from Kala in Assyria in 865 BC that refers to almost 70,000 people visiting that city at the time that it was opened by the king.

So, if there were 70,000 people in Kala, the possibility of 120,000 people being in a great city like Nineveh seems to be possible. Later in the seventh century when Sennacherib makes this the royal place, the population of Assyria seems to be 300,000. We also realize that the number 120,000 may not just include the people that live specifically within the city limits of Assyria and the environments of the town itself.

It may refer to the province and the district. That province extended from Kalu, 20 miles south of Nineveh, to Khorzabad, 10 to 15 miles north. So I think there's real plausibility with this number of 120,000.

Now another issue, and the last one that we'll address here, is that there's the problem or there's at least the issue and the question about what do we do with the appearance of the king of Nineveh? Chapter 3, verse 6. Remember that the king of Nineveh is the one who calls the fast and who responds to the message here in a pretty significant way. First of all, the terminology king of Nineveh is similar to what we have in other Old Testament passages. First Kings 21.1 refers to the king of Israel as the king of Samaria.

Second Chronicles chapter 24, verse 23, refers to the king of the Arameans as the king of Damascus. So, associating the king with a key city, that follows what we see elsewhere in the Old Testament. The problem here that a number of scholars have raised is that Nineveh did not become the royal capital until later in Assyria's history.

Sennacherib was the king who did this and he expanded the greatness, made it a much more spectacular city, kind of the city that we think about when we think of Nineveh in history. There are two or three plausible solutions to this. Number one, the word king here, melek, could be used to be talking about the governor of the province or the administrative ruler who is over the district that Nineveh was a part of.

We may not actually be talking about the supreme Assyrian king. But even though it's not the royal capital in the way that it was during the days of Sennacherib, there is the possibility, at the very least, that Nineveh was a royal residence that the king stayed at during certain times. Going back to a very early time in Assyria's history, back to the reign of Shalmaneser I in the years 1275 to 1250 BC, Shalmaneser I expanded and enlarged the city of Nineveh.

That seems to reflect its importance in the fact that it may have been used as a dwelling place for the king. It had definitely and certainly become an alternative royal residence by the time of Tiglath-Pileser I, again, more than three to four hundred years before the time that Jonah would have been there. So, this was not the definitive royal capital city in the way that it was later in Assyria's history, but it was possibly at least a royal dwelling place.

So, the fact that the king is here is ultimately not a problem. I think we can work through these historical issues. I think the genre issues do not preclude the possibility of historicity.

I think that the arguments that we've used looking at Jonah as a historical figure, for all of these reasons, my conclusion is we should read this as a historical account. To close the discussion, Douglas Stuart, in his commentary on the word biblical commentary, says that if the events described in the book actually happened, the audience's existential identification with the characters and the circumstances is invariably heightened. I think the surprise and the shock value of the Assyrians being one of the people that listened to God in the book of the 12, in contrast to the response that the prophets get from the people of Israel or Judah, adds to the weight and the seriousness and the message of this book.

It reminds us in a greater way of God's real concern for these people. And so, we've worked through the issues of whether Jonah is a historical account. Is it a parable? I think there are elements of both, but we're going to look at Jonah as a real prophet and the mission and the preaching to Nineveh as a real mission that he carried out. In the videos that come and in the second, the ultimate authority of Jonah is based on the message that's there.

And we want to look at what that message is and what is it that the book of Jonah was communicating to the people of God in the Old Testament. And what's the

ongoing application of this message to the people of God today? We're going to have the opportunity to look at that as we move forward and as we continue our study in the book of Jonah.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his teaching on the Book of the 12. This is session 16, Introduction to the Book of Jonah, Historicity.