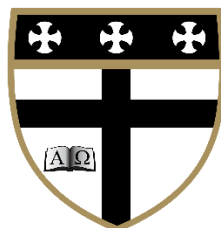


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A HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

“Jonah’s Prophecy: A Prologue to the New Testament”¹

by

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² Roderick O. Ford, *The Apostolate Papers* (unpublished research papers, 2015 to 2022). www.roderickford.org.

Introduction

The Prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai,³ is mentioned in the Book of II Kings,⁴ and is juxtaposed with the reigns of King Jeroboam II (northern kingdom of Israel) and King Joash (southern kingdom of Judah), during the 8th century, BC.

These two biblical references support the conclusion that the Prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a real person who lived during the 8th century.

However, the biblical account of Jonah's having been swallowed by, and remained for three days in the belly of, a great fish, have been given two distinct interpretations:

- A. Allegory (i.e., Symbolism; a Parable; a Sign);
- B. Historical.

When Jesus of Nazareth himself referred to the biblical account of the Prophet Jonah's being swallowed by the great fish, he called it "the sign of the prophet Jonas."⁵

Therefore, the Book of Jonah may be legitimately construed as an allegory, a symbol, a sign, or a parable— about Christ!

Both orthodox and neo-orthodox Reformed theologians have construed the Book of Jonah to be an *allegorical symbol* about the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.⁶

And the city of Nineveh, to whom Jonah was sent, is an *allegorical symbol* of the New Testament Church of the Gentiles.⁷

³ Jonah 1:1 ("Jonah the son of Amittai") and II Kings 14:25 ("Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet").

⁴ 2 Kings 14: 25.

⁵ Matthew 12:39-40 ("For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.")

⁶ Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) considered the Book of Jonah to be fictionalized allegory. See, e.g., "Jonah," Wikipedia (online encyclopedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah> ("Luther also questioned the idea that the Book of Jonah was ever intended as literal history, commenting that he found it hard to believe that anyone would have interpreted it as such if it had never been included in the Bible.")

Chapter One

A Hebrew Prophet is Sent to the City of Nineveh (i.e., Gentiles)

The story of Jonah is one of the most well known in the Bible. But perhaps what is much less known about the Book of Jonah is the fact that, in the Book of Jonah, God has sent a Hebrew prophet to preach to a Gentile people!⁸ Nineveh was a part of the Assyrian kingdom and, for the most part, the people of Nineveh were not the best of friends with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In fact, in 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel fell into the Assyrian captivity and never recovered. The period of Jonah's ministry appears to have occurred prior to this Assyrian captivity.

Therefore, it is against the backdrop of this fierce nationalistic rivalry that God calls Jonah (a Hebrew) to go and preach to the Ninevites (a city of Gentiles). How ironic!

A perfect summation of that story can be found here in the note below.⁹ Therefore, I shall not here attempt to editorialize or summarize that story in my

⁷ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 654 ("Wherefore, if that city [of Nineveh] is rightly held as prophetically representing the Church of the Gentiles, to wit, as brought down by penitence, so as no longer to be what it had been, since this was done by Christ in the **Church of the Gentiles, which Nineveh represented....**")

⁸ Moreover, these Gentiles did not practice the Hebrew religion and did not have the Mosaic laws or practice circumcision! How ironic that God would, nevertheless, offer them redemption? It is for this reason that Augustine of Hippo has described **the city of Nineveh** as prefiguring "**the Church of the Gentiles.**" St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 654.

⁹ "Jonah," Wikipedia (online encyclopedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah> :

Jonah is the central character in the Book of Jonah, in which God commands him to go to the city of Nineveh to prophesy against it "for their great wickedness is come up before me," but Jonah instead attempts to flee from "the presence of the Lord" by going to Jaffa (sometimes transliterated as Joppa or Joppe). He sets sail for Tarshish. A huge storm arises and the sailors, realizing that it is no ordinary storm, cast lots and discover that Jonah is to blame. Jonah admits this and says that if he is thrown overboard, the storm will cease. The sailors refuse to do this and continue rowing, but all their efforts fail, and they eventually throw Jonah overboard. As a result, the storm calms and the sailors offer sacrifices to God.

After being cast from the ship, Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, within the belly of which he remains for three days and three nights. While in the great fish, Jonah prays to God in his affliction and commits to giving thanks and to paying what he has vowed. God commands the fish to vomit Jonah out.

God again commands Jonah to travel to Nineveh and prophesy to its inhabitants. This time he travels there and enters the city, crying, "In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown." After Jonah has walked across Nineveh, the people begin to believe his word and proclaim a fast. The king of Nineveh puts on sackcloth

own words. Instead, I have provided a quick outline of the Book of Jonah, as follows:

The outline of the Book of Jonah¹⁰

1. Jonah flees his mission (chapters 1–2)
 - a) Jonah's commission and flight (1:1–3)
 - b) The endangered sailors cry to their gods (1:4–6)
 - c) Jonah's disobedience exposed (1:7–10)
 - d) Jonah's punishment and deliverance (1:11–2:1;2:10)
 - e) His prayer of thanksgiving (2:2–9)

2. Jonah reluctantly fulfills his mission (chapters 3–4)
 - a) Jonah's renewed commission and obedience (3:1–4)
 - b) The endangered Ninevites' repentant appeal to the Lord (3:4–9)
 - c) The Ninevites' repentance acknowledged (3:10–4:4)
 - d) Jonah's deliverance and rebuke (4:5–11)

and sits in ashes, making a proclamation which decrees fasting, the wearing of sackcloth, prayer, and repentance. God sees their repentant hearts and spares the city at that time. The entire city is humbled and broken, with the people (and even the animals) wearing sackcloth and ashes.

Displeased by this, Jonah refers to his earlier flight to Tarshish while asserting that, since God is merciful, it was inevitable that God would turn from the threatened calamities. He leaves the city and makes a shelter, waiting to see whether or not the city will be destroyed. God causes a plant (in Hebrew a *kikayon*) to grow over Jonah's shelter to give him some shade from the sun. Later, God causes a worm to bite the plant's root and it withers. Jonah, exposed to the full force of the sun, becomes faint and pleads for God to kill him.

But God said to Jonah: "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" And he said: "I do. I am angry enough to die."

But the LORD said:

"You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight, and died overnight.

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

— *Jonah 4:9–11 (NIV)*

¹⁰ Ibid.

Chapter Two

Allegory or Historical Fact?

The great challenge to the historicity of the Book of Jonah are the miraculous works contained therein. I agree with Augustine of Hippo that if the miracles within the Book of Jonah can be questioned, then all biblical miracles can be questioned. After all, the central theme of the Bible is that the LORD Jehovah is the all-powerful sovereign and does whatsoever he wills through divine Providence. Extending this logic to the Book of Jonah lead us to the inevitable conclusion that, “with God all things are possible.”¹¹

Be that as it may, the undersigned author believes that the Book of Jonah may be interpreted as an ahistorical, allegorical parable about Christ. In the Gospels (Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11: 29-32), Christ utilized the Book of Jonah as a parable about his own life and ministry, stating:

This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation....

The men of Nineve shall rise up in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.¹²

For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.¹³

Hence, the Early Church had concluded that, whether the events in the Book of Jonah are historical or allegorical fiction, they nevertheless constitute a “sign” of the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For example, in *The City of God*, Augustine of Hippo alludes to this, stating:

¹¹ Matthew 19:26.

¹² Luke 11: 29-32.

¹³ Matthew 12: 40.

The prophet Jonah, not so much by speech as by his own painful experience, prophesied Christ's death and resurrection much more clearly than if he had proclaimed them with his voice. For why was he taken into the whale's bell and restored on the third day, but **that he might be a sign** that Christ should return from the depths of hell on the third day?¹⁴

Thus, for Augustine, the argument could go either way—historical fact or fictitious allegorical parable—and still lead us to the same fundamental theological truth about Christ, as the following article states:

Augustine of Hippo

The debate over the credibility of the miracle of Jonah is not simply a modern one. The credibility of a human being surviving in the belly of a great fish has long been questioned. In c. 409 AD, Augustine of Hippo wrote to Deogratias concerning the challenge of some to the miracle recorded in the Book of Jonah. He writes:

The last question proposed is concerning Jonah, and it is put as if it were not from Porphyry, but as being a standing subject of ridicule among the Pagans; for his words are: "In the next place, what are we to believe concerning Jonah, who is said to have been three days in a whale's belly? The thing is utterly improbable and incredible, that a man swallowed with his clothes on should have existed in the inside of a fish. If, however, the story is figurative, be pleased to explain it. Again, what is meant by the story that a gourd sprang up above the head of Jonah after he was vomited by the fish? What was the cause of this gourd's growth?" Questions such as these I have seen discussed by Pagans amidst loud laughter, and with great scorn.

—(*Letter CII, Section 30*)

Augustine responds that if one is to question one miracle, then one should question all miracles as well (section 31).

Nevertheless, despite his apologetic, Augustine views the story of Jonah as a figure for Christ. For example, he writes: "As, therefore, Jonah passed from the ship to the belly of the whale, so Christ passed from the cross to the sepulchre, or into the abyss of death. And as

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 635.

Jonah suffered this for the sake of those who were endangered by the storm, so Christ suffered for the sake of those who are tossed on the waves of this world."

Augustine credits his allegorical interpretation to the interpretation of Christ himself (Matthew 12:39–40), and he allows for other interpretations as long as they are in line with Christ's.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) considered the Book of Jonah to be fictionalized allegory. See, e.g., "Jonah," Wikipedia (online encyclopedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah> ("Luther also questioned the idea that the Book of Jonah was ever intended as literal history, commenting that he found it hard to believe that anyone would have interpreted it as such if it had never been included in the Bible.")

Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509 -1564) considered the Book of Jonah's representation that Jonah has been swallowed by a great fish to be an allegorical representation of Jonah's suffering and torment (Jonah 1:17), stating:

What the Prophet here briefly relates ought to be carefully weighed by us. **It is easily passed over, when we read in a few words that Jonah was swallowed up by a fish, and that he was there three days and three nights:** but though Jonah neither amplified or illustrated in a rhetorical manner what is overlooked by us, nor adopted any display of words, but spoke of the event as though it were an ordinary thing, **we yet see what the event itself really was:** Jonah was cast into the sea. He had been previously not only a worshipper of the true God, but also a Prophet, and had no doubt faithfully discharged his office; for God would not have resolved to send him to Nineveh, had he not conferred on him suitable gifts; and he knew him to be qualified for undertaking a burden so great and so important. As Jonah then had faithfully endeavored to serve God, and to devote himself to him through the whole of his past life, now that he is cast into the sea as one unworthy of the common light, that he is cut off from the society of men, and that he seems unworthy of undergoing a common or an ordinary punishment, but is exiled, as it were, from the world, so as to be deprived of light and air, as parricides, to whom formerly, as it is well-known, this punishment was allotted — as then

Jonah saw that he was thus dealt with, what must have been the state of his mind?

Now that he tells us that he was three whole days in the inside of the fish, it is certain that the Lord had so awakened him that he must have endured continual uneasiness. He was asleep before he was swallowed by the fish; but the Lord drew him, as it were, by force to his tribunal, and he must have suffered a continual execution. He must have every moment entertained such thoughts as these, “Why does he now thus deal with thee? God does not indeed slay thee at once, but intends to expose thee to innumerable deaths.” We see what Job says, that when he died he would be at rest and free from all evils, (Job 14:6.) Jonah no doubt continually boiled with grief, because he knew that God was opposed to and displeased with him: he doubtless said to himself, “Thou hast to do, not with men, but with God himself, who now pursues thee, because thou hast become a fugitive from his presence.” As Jonah then must have necessarily thus thought within himself of God’s wrath, his case must have been harder than hundred deaths, as it had been with Job and with many others, who made it their chief petition that they might die. Now as he was not slain but languished in continual torments, it is certain that no one of us can comprehend, much less convey in words what must have come into the mind of Jonah during these three days....¹⁵

Calvin thus entertains the idea that Jonah’s having been swallowed by a great fish might have been an allegorical description of the torment and suffering which Jonah experienced.

In any event, the Book of Jonah is a Christological parable. It directs us to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

¹⁵ Calvin’s *Commentaries on the Bible* (Jonah 1:17).

Chapter Three

Did the God of the Hebrews Care about Redeeming the Gentiles (i.e., the Ninevites)?

The great challenge to modern-day Jews and Christians is the exemplification of God’s love and offer of redemption to the Gentiles (i.e., the Ninevites who were part of the Assyrian empire) in the *Book of Jonah*.

This would place the “remnant” of Jacob outside of the House of Jacob itself—but, instead, place that “remnant” as being disbursed amongst the heathen Gentile nations.

The Assyrian empire, which had existed from the 21st-century, BC to the 7th-century BC, looms large in Augustine of Hippo’s *The City of God*, because he juxtaposes it next to the Roman empire in terms of its importance, stating:

Now, among the very many kingdoms of the earth into which, by earthly interest or lust, society is divided (which we call by the general name of the city of this world), we see that two, settled and kept distinct from each other both in time and place, have grown far more famous than the rest, first that of the Assyrians, then that of the Romans.¹⁶

Augustine then traces the history of the “city of this world,” beginning with the Assyrian empire and juxtaposes that history with the history of the “city of God,” beginning with the patriarch Abraham.

“At Abraham’s birth, then,” writes Augustine, “the second kings of Assyria and Sicyon respectively were Ninus and Europs.... But when God promised Abraham, on his departure from Babylonia, that he should become a great nation, and that **in his seed all nations of the earth should be blessed**, the Assyrians had their seventh king....”¹⁷

We are to construe, then, the prophetic ministry of the Benjamite Jonah to the Gentile city of Nineveh as the sign of God’s divine grace to Gentiles. Thus,

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 610.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

Augustine of Hippo writes: “[w]herefore, if that city [of Nineveh] is rightly held as prophetically representing the Church of the Gentiles, to wit, as brought down by penitence, so as no longer to be what it had been, since this was done by Christ in the **Church of the Gentiles, which Nineveh represented.**”¹⁸

For this reason, Jonah’s prophetic message to these Ninevites exemplify and reaffirm the Prophet Joel’s contention that:

And it shall come to pass, that **whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered:** for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call.¹⁹

And, it bolsters the Apostle Paul’s contention that “there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek.... For **whosoever** shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”²⁰

Therefore, the Book of Jonah is a prophetic statement against the self-interests of Jewish exceptionalism and exclusivity.²¹

The Book of Jonah also demonstrates that God’s redeeming love had always been extended— even before the coming of Christ— to Gentile peoples, such as the Ninevites and the Assyrians.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 654.

¹⁹ Joel 2:32.

²⁰ Romans 10: 12-13. (quoting Joel 2:32)

²¹ Christian theologians had long ago surmised that that Prophet Jonah’s attitude towards the Ninevites reflected the Jew poor attitude toward the Gentiles. See, e.g., “Jonah,” Wikipedia (online encyclopedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah>, stating:

Other Christian interpreters, including Saint Augustine and Martin Luther, have taken a directly opposite approach, regarding Jonah as the epitome of envy and jealousy, which they regarded as inherent characteristics of the Jewish people. Luther likewise concludes that the kikayon represents Judaism, and that the worm which devours it represents Christ. Luther also questioned the idea that the Book of Jonah was ever intended as literal history, commenting that he found it hard to believe that anyone would have interpreted it as such if it had never been included in the Bible. Luther’s antisemitic interpretation of Jonah remained the prevailing interpretation among German Protestants throughout early modern history. J. D. Michaelis comments that “the meaning of the fable hits you right between the eyes”, and concludes that the Book of Jonah is a polemic against “the Israelite people’s hate and envy towards all the other nations of the earth.” Albert Eichhorn was a strong supporter of Michaelis’s interpretation.

Conclusion

The Assyrian empire was the first great empire in world civilization,²² having lasted from the 21st-century to the 7th-century, B.C. Nineveh was one of its great cities and, from the period 705 to 612 BC, served as the capital of the Assyrian empire.

The Prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai, is mentioned in the Book of II Kings,²³ as well as in the Book of Jonah, and he was likely a real, historical person.²⁴ However, the Book of Jonah may be construed to be either an a historical account of real events or a satirical rendition of prophetic allegory.

Regardless, Reformed theology allows for some latitude in the interpretation of the Book of Jonah, so long as that interpretation does not contradict that of Christ's given in the Gospels.²⁵

Therefore, the Prophet Jonah's prophetic message to the city of Nineveh (i.e., Gentiles) prefigured the future "internationalization" of Hebrew religion through Christianity. Within the Book of Jonah, the city of Nineveh should be seen as being representative of "the Church of the Gentiles."²⁶

And, finally, the Prophet Jonah's 3-day entombment inside of the belly of the great fish should be seen as being representative of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.²⁷

THE END

²² "The Assyrian Empire: The First True Empire," <https://www.banknoteworld.com/blog/assyrian-empire-the-first-true-empire/> ("With vast territories stretching from modern-day Iran to Egypt, a centralized government and network, a powerful military, advanced writing systems, buildings, and irrigation systems, the Assyrian Empire was considered to be the first true empire.").

²³ 2 Kings 14: 25.

²⁴ See, e.g., "Jonah," Wikipedia (online encyclopedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonah> ("While the Book of Jonah itself is considered fiction, Jonah himself may have been a historical prophet....")

²⁵ Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11: 29-32.

²⁶ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 654.

²⁷ Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11: 29-32; St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 635.

THE END

