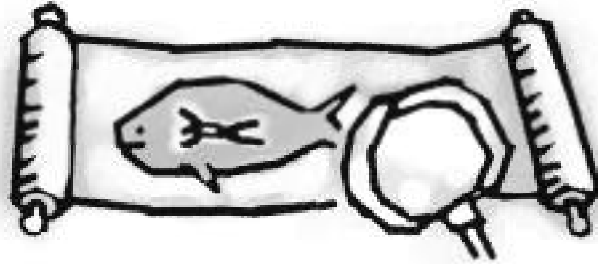


# Biblical Prophets, Modern Critics



## *Sabbath Afternoon*

**SOME GUY GETS SWALLOWED** by a big fish, spends three days and nights in its belly, and then is cast alive on the shore! We're supposed to believe this?

Of course we are. After all, the story of Jonah is included in the Bible, and if the Bible is the Word of God, then Jonah is part of that Word too. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). This includes the book of Jonah and the account of the reluctant prophet who becomes fish bait.

Some scholars seek to dismiss Jonah, and the book bearing his name, as a myth, a parable, a nice story that expresses a theological point, nothing more. They couldn't be more wrong. The book of Jonah was placed in the canon, and—as we'll see this quarter—with good reasons too. This week we'll take a look at some facts about Jonah that, purely from a scholarly perspective, show he was a historical figure who did an important work for the Lord.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** How is the book of Jonah introduced? Why were Jonah's experiences central to the book? Why do some scholars dismiss the authenticity of Jonah? How has the modern worldview impacted our Christian faith? Should the supernatural occurrences included with a prophet's life surprise us?

**MEMORY TEXT:** "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7, NKJV).

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 4.

**PROPHETIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES.**

**T**he Bible is composed, basically, of prophets and their messages. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are “major” prophets; Jonah is one of twelve “minor” ones.

“Major” or “minor,” the prophets all exhibit some similar features. Like other prophetic books, Jonah includes both a prophet and his message. However, most prophetic books are composed chiefly of the sacred messages from God delivered by the prophets. Though varying from book to book, generally just a slight amount of biographical material is included. In most cases, the focus is on the message, not the messenger. In contrast, most of the book of Jonah deals with him, personally, while the message itself consists of less than ten words. Yet, as we’ll see, the story of Jonah, and his exploits, is, in many ways, *the message itself*.

**Read Jonah 3:4. What is the essence of Jonah’s message to Nineveh?**

Though not a lot of words, they’re packed with what’s essentially the message found all through the Bible, and that is consistent with other prophets, as well—prophets whose lives and ministries are not questioned for their historicity.

**Skim through some of the “minor” prophets: Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Obadiah. What information do you learn about the prophets themselves?**

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It’s clear from reading these other prophets that only a tiny bit of information is given about them or their exploits. We learn their names, where they are from, who their fathers are, but not much else. In contrast, though we don’t know much about Jonah’s background, his experiences themselves play a central role. This is the exception with the minor prophets, rather than the rule.

**As the lesson stated, little emphasis is usually placed on the life of the prophet as opposed to the message the prophet bears. Why do you think that is so, and what point should that make for those of us who often tend to focus too much on people themselves as opposed to the Lord? See Pss. 118:9; 146:3.**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

**Key Texts:** Read the book of Jonah in its entirety.

**Teachers Aims:**

1. To explore how Jonah's experiences are central to his message.
2. To affirm the genuineness of the miracles in Jonah.

**Lesson Outline:**

**I. Jonah: Profile of a Reluctant Prophet.**

- A. Jonah, son of Amittai, is a northerner, a native of Gath-hepher in Zebulun of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. (See 2 Kings 14:25.)
- B. Jonah's family may have suffered during the Syrian invasion into northern Israel, which may explain much of his antagonism toward Nineveh of Assyria and his reluctance to warn the city. (See Jon. 1:1, 2.)

**II. The Authenticity of the Book of Jonah.**

- A. Jonah opens with a phrase translated "And it came to pass," anchoring his account to the past and establishing it as fact.
- B. "*The word of the Lord* came to Jonah" (vs. 1, NKJV, emphasis supplied) also opens the book, validating Jonah's prophetic call.
- C. In the tradition of other prophetic books, Jonah contains both warnings and a message of grace to a Gentile nation.
- D. Jesus affirms the historicity of the book of Jonah (Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29, 30, 32).

**III. The Uniqueness of Jonah's Account.**

- A. Jonah's account differs from other prophetic books, which include scant biographical material.
- B. The action of Jonah's story contains the message.

**IV. The Miracles of the Book of Jonah: Fact or Fiction?**

- A. Modern critics dismiss the miracles of Jonah.
- B. The story of a fish swallowing a man and then spitting him out alive, however, is one of many miracles of the Bible (see Exod. 13:21, 22; Matt. 1:18).
- C. God's power transcends human logic.

**Summary:** Jonah "was to *cry* against [Nineveh]. Not reforming it by private effort . . . but by an open attack. . . . Many people cannot *cry*; they have not force of soul. . . . Is it so with us?"—Joseph S. Excell, *Practical Truths From Jonah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1982), pp. 5, 6, author's emphasis.

**“AND THE WORD OF THE LORD . . .”**

**T**he book of Jonah begins, in the Hebrew, with a phrase that is often translated “And it came to pass.” This same phrase appears in these texts: Joshua 1:1; Judges 1:1; Ruth 1:1; 2 Samuel 1:1; Esther 1:1; and Ezekiel 1:1.

Different translations of this Hebrew expression may not always reveal the use of this specific phrase (such as the King James Version, with Jonah, which simply uses the word *now*), but the identical phrase is used throughout the Old Testament to begin historical narratives. The phrase itself indicates both a continuity with what has already happened and the factual nature of the account that follows. In other words, nothing about that particular Hebrew phrase indicates, in any way, that the author means to express anything other than factual history.

**What other specific phrase does the book of Jonah open with? Jon. 1:1.**

It’s not the only time that phrase is used in a prophet’s ministry. “*The word of the Lord* came to him [Elijah], saying ‘Arise, go to Zarephath’ ” (1 Kings 17:8, 9, NKJV, emphasis supplied). “Then *the word of the Lord* came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel’ ” (1 Kings 21:17, 18, NKJV, emphasis supplied). “*The word of the Lord* came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh’ ” (Jon. 1:1, 2, NKJV, emphasis supplied).

Notice how this introductory phrase or “formula” is identical in the calling of other prophets: Jeremiah 1:4; 2:1; Ezekiel 1:3; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; and Zechariah 1:1.

This phrase alerts the reader to the biblical record of God calling a prophet in the Old Testament. In fact, to receive the “word of the Lord” was a mark of a true prophet. It also authenticates that the spoken message does not originate with the prophet but comes from God Himself. In Jonah’s case, the text states that it is “*the word of the Lord*” that comes to Jonah. This is a holy introduction. It should remind us each time we encounter it in Scripture that we need to bow before the God of heaven, with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to bless us, as we study such sacred words. It should also fill us with awe that the God of heaven still communicates with sinful humans.

**Describe what you understand the phrase “and the word of the Lord came” to mean. How do you understand that in relation to John 1:1-10? Can “the word of the Lord” come only to prophets? In what ways can we receive “the word of the Lord”?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

### Commentary.

#### I. Arguing About Fish Tales.

The book of Jonah has bothered many readers who try to figure out how a human being could survive in the stomach of a sea creature, how an entire pagan city could be converted, or what type of plant could grow big enough in just a few hours to shade a man. Those who accept the book as historical spend great effort searching for accounts of sailors who have been cut out alive from the stomachs of whales or speculate about what type of gourd could grow so fast.

There is nothing wrong with this—as long as we do not become so obsessed with proving the historicity of Jonah that we never listen to its message. Even more important than defending the Bible is learning and putting into practice what it teaches.

#### II. The Messages of Jonah.

The vital messages of Jonah include the following:

A. *It is impossible to escape God's presence.* Most of the ancient world thought each god ruled a geographical area. While Jonah acknowledged that the sovereignty of God extended over the whole earth, perhaps he thought that if he fled in the opposite direction of Nineveh, God might *overlook* him and draft another more *willing* prophet to warn the city instead. However, he soon discovered the truth of Psalm 139:

“Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast” (Ps. 139:7-10, NRSV).

B. *It is impossible to escape God's tasks.* God called Jonah to preach to the Ninevites. Fleeing across the sea and being swallowed by the great fish did not remove that divine mission.

C. *It is impossible to escape God's love.* God's love accompanied Jonah into the depths of the sea and as he reluctantly preached to a despised people.

D. *It is impossible to understand the depth and breadth of God's love.* Many are willing to accept that the Lord loves people like themselves. But people as terrible as those of Nineveh?

The book of Jonah illustrates what God meant when He declared to Moses that He was “ ‘a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love . . . for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ ” (Exod. 34:6, 7, NRSV). Even

*Tuesday*

*September 30*

**MORE HISTORICAL POINTERS.**

**Skim over the following texts. What is happening here that parallels the story of Jonah? Who is the Lord warning here?**

**Isa. 13:1** \_\_\_\_\_

**Jer. 25:20-27** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ezek. 21:28-32** \_\_\_\_\_

**I**n these cases, and others, the Lord is specifically trying to reach Gentile nations with warnings about what their sin and iniquity will bring. The book of Jonah, which is also focused on a non-Israelite nation, is, in this sense, no different from some of the other messages in the Bible that do the same thing. Thus, whatever else it is, the book of Jonah has a crucial message about God’s grace, extending beyond the borders of ancient Israel and Judah. This is, contrary to the arguments of some critics, more evidence for its authenticity.

**Look at the following texts: Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32. Who is speaking, what is being said, and what do these words tell us about the historicity of Jonah?**

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Look at how the Lord not only speaks of the reality of Jonah and of his experience in the “whale’s belly” (the Hebrew reads, “big fish”) but how closely He ties His own mission to the experience of Jonah. Certainly, as far as Jesus is concerned, there is no question regarding the historicity of Jonah.

**There are many who profess to be Christians yet who dismiss some stories in the Bible, such as Jonah, as nonhistorical. What are the implications of that kind of thinking? For example, as we just saw, Jesus clearly believes in the story of Jonah. Those who don’t believe that story must, then, dismiss the words of Jesus. And if we can’t trust what Jesus says here, why trust Him in another place? And if we can’t trust the words of Jesus, then what in the Bible can we trust? What other dangers can you see from this notion of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible we accept or reject as historical?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

though he did not like that fact, Jonah recognized that God was exactly that kind of deity (Jon. 4:2).

The prophet became angry when the Lord accepted Nineveh's repentance. Yet, even then the Lord continued to love *him*.

E. *Except for the sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31), it is impossible to do anything for which we cannot receive God's forgiveness, if we are willing to ask for it.* God forgave the people of an empire that was more cruel than many dictatorships of modern times. God, however, accepted their repentance. Furthermore, He forgave a prophet who did not want Him to do so.

### III. An Object Lesson of Global Mission.

It took many years for Seventh-day Adventists to sense the full implications of the gospel commission (Matt. 28:19). The pioneers assumed that witnessing to North America was sufficient. But then we started to reach out to Christians in other lands. Next we began to evangelize non-Christians until we had a presence in most countries of the world. Now we seek to penetrate every people group.

However, do we yet fully grasp the full extent of our calling? Many

## INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

**Texts for Discovery: Matthew 12:39-41, John 1:1-10, 1 Corinthians 2:14.**

1. The experiences of Jonah play an essential role in the message of the book of Jonah. List and discuss other biblical characters whose experiences show their message rather than tell it.
2. Have someone in your class read John 1:1 from two different versions. Have this person insert Jesus' name each time it says "word." Reflect on how this enhances your understanding of the passage.
3. There are some dynamic preachers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church whom people flock to hear. Do we desire to hear what they say because of who they are or because of their message? What makes one preacher any
4. Read Matthew 12:39-41. What parallels exist between Jonah and Christ? Why do you think the Ninevites listened to Jonah and instantly believed, while many people who heard Jesus refused to believe?
5. We may not be able to fathom the mystery of God, but we can believe by faith. Using 1 Corinthians 2:14, how would you explain faith to someone who believes in only part of the Bible or who discounts what he or she cannot understand?

*Wednesday*

*October 1*

**THE MIRACLES IN JONAH.**

**M**odern critics tend to dismiss the historicity of the book of Jonah, especially because of the miraculous happenings found there.

**Do a quick read through the story of Jonah and write down the supernatural things that happened there.**

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It is important to notice that the miraculous events in the book of Jonah are referred to always very briefly and in a low-key manner. They are not the great focus of the story. The “great fish” is mentioned in only three verses. The supernatural events are referred to as though one should not be surprised at all with God’s power in the natural world.

**A man swallowed alive by a big fish only to be spat out alive three days later, however miraculous, isn’t the only miraculous story in the Bible. Look up these texts and the stories surrounding them. What miracles do they depict?**

**Gen. 21:2** \_\_\_\_\_

**Exod. 13:21, 22** \_\_\_\_\_

**Dan. 5:5, 24-29** \_\_\_\_\_

**Matt. 1:20** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mark 6:44** \_\_\_\_\_

**How can these accounts be explained other than by the supernatural intervention of God? Thus, how foolhardy to dismiss any part of the Bible because of supernatural acts that go beyond what our basic logic, reason, and science tell us. If anything, these stories should show us just how limited our science, our logic, and our reason can be when it comes to the things of God.**



## TEACHERS COMMENTS

assume that only a few will be saved. True, the Bible cautions us that not all will accept God's salvation. Through His parable of the soils (Luke 8:4-15), Christ explains that people will respond to the gospel in different ways. But unlike some doctrines that teach that God predestines some to be saved and others lost, Scripture declares that anyone may receive salvation if he or she is willing. See, for example, John 3:16. Thus, if every human being is a potential recipient of salvation, the number of those who accept it may be far greater than we imagine. If we believe only a few will be saved, it will limit our witness. In the book of Jonah, however, an entire *wicked* city responded, much to Jonah's disappointment (Jon. 4:1, 2). Let us not be modern Jonahs.

### IV. The Prophet of the Second Chance.

Jonah is the only prophetic book that is primarily about its prophet. The other prophetic books consist mostly of God's words to His people as given through His human agents. However, aside from the narrative account, the book of Jonah contains only a brief warning from God (Jon. 3:4), a prayer the reluctant prophet makes (Jonah 2), and some divine comments on Jonah's poor attitude (Jon. 4:9-11).

Another unusual feature is that God gives Jonah his divine assignment twice. Even though Jonah fails the first time, God does not give

## WITNESSING

Six-year-old Danielle often becomes a messenger at her house. "Go tell your mother to come here," her father requests. Danielle skips off to tell her mom, and just as she expects, her mother replies, "Go tell your father to come here." Danielle does not seem to mind playing along until someone gives in.

A prophet is God's messenger. However, delivering a message may not be so much fun for a prophet. This was the case with Jonah. Like many of us, Jonah took his eyes off the message, "the word of the Lord" (Jon. 1:1).

There are many today who question the authenticity of the book of Jonah, but there is a message in this story for all of us. God's Word shall not return to Him void (Isa. 55:11). When God speaks,

something will happen. We choose whether to obey or not, and we are held accountable for our choices.

When we cease to focus on the message, we neglect our responsibility to do the Lord's will. In most cases, the messenger is a sinful human being, but she or he is, nevertheless, a vessel the Lord uses to tell others what He wants them to know.

In our witnessing, we should speak of the importance of obeying God's Word. We freely make choices in life, yet we cannot escape the consequences of those choices. It is God who decides whether or not things will turn out the way we plan. "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9, NKJV).

**THE MIRACLES IN JONAH (CONTINUED).**

**A**mong ancient Jewish writers, the authenticity of Jonah was not questioned. Even Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived around the time of Jesus, viewed Jonah as historical and incorporated the story into his history of the Jewish people. The historicity of Jonah is further established by the fact that it's flanked by two unquestioned prophetic books. Also, it has always been included in the minor prophets. The fact that many generations of earlier biblical scholars were convinced that the author of Jonah was not writing fiction is impressive.

**It has been only relatively recently that the historical accuracy of the book has been questioned. Why do you think that is so? What is it about the modern era and the success of science that would cause people to question the story of Jonah?**

Years ago, Thomas Jefferson decided to edit the Gospels. In them he expunged from the texts anything he believed went contrary to reason, common sense, and rational thought. The result was the Jefferson Bible, a version of the Gospels in which the virgin birth, the miraculous healings, the raising of the dead, Christ's claims to divinity, the Resurrection, and Christ's ascension to heaven were—among other things—edited out. According to Jefferson, these things could not be true. Why? Because, in his thinking, they went against common sense and reason.

**What does the story of the Jefferson Bible tell us about the limits of logic and reason in attempting to understand the ways of God? How does the answer help us respond to modern attacks on the authenticity of the story of Jonah?**

**How do these following texts help us understand that Jefferson's problems were the same problems many modern critics of the Bible have, as well? Job 11:7; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2:14; 3:19; Heb. 10:38. Most important, how can the points brought out in these texts help protect us from the kind of skepticism so common today?**

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## TEACHERS COMMENTS

up on him—just as He does not give up on Nineveh or anyone else. The Lord holds forth His offer of salvation to us our whole lives.

Equally important is the fact that God continually summons His people to their task of witnessing. Just as He repeatedly called Israel despite their continued failure, so He repeatedly longs for us to be His hands, feet, and voices in this world. If we have ignored or fled God's calling, Jonah's experience teaches us that God is willing to give us second chances.

## LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

**Icebreaker:** Six bees and six flies are placed inside a bottle. The bottle is turned on its side, its base facing sunlight streaming in through a window. At the other end, the mouth of the bottle remains open. The bees, however, persist in finding their way to freedom through the sealed base of the bottle. The light shining through the base convinces them no other way out exists. They press against the bottom, closing themselves off to all other possibilities of freedom, until they die of hunger or exhaustion. The flies, on the other hand, escape the bottle within two minutes. They buzz around until they find the open mouth that takes them to freedom.

### Thought Questions:

1. Consider the bees and the flies in the bottle. While the flies find freedom in their simple exploration of the bottle, the bees remain prisoners of their own insistence. How does this compare to the way some of us flounder through the Bible, weighted down by our own insistence to believe what we want

over what God is telling us? Using this illustration, what guidelines can you set for personal and for group Bible study?

2. Jonah's personal experience is far from a fairy tale—it is a nightmare! The lesson asks why Jonah's personal experience is central to the book. Think of at least two ways in which his experience parallels the corporate church. How does Jonah's story, his personal rebellion against God, draw the reader to the bigger picture of God's involvement in the lives of human beings? In a church's life? In the world?

### Application Question:

Share experiences with the class in which your stubbornness not to do God's bidding was no match for God's power and persistence. Imagine how He must feel when we do things our way, instead of according to His will; then answer this question: Why is God unwilling to give up on the human race?

**FURTHER STUDY:**

**R**ead 2 Kings 14:23-25. This reference provides the information that Jonah ministered God's Word to King Jeroboam II of Israel (782/781–753 B.C.). During the reigns of his immediate predecessors, the Aramean states headed by Damascus had made savage attacks on Israel, inflicting terrible suffering on the population (2 Kings 13:3-5; Amos 1:3). Jehoash (798–782/781 B.C.) succeeded in recovering the cities of Israel (2 Kings 13:25), and Jonah predicted that Jeroboam would restore Israel's borders to their Davidic limits.

The prediction was fulfilled (2 Kings 14:25-27). Israel prospered once more but not for long. Both Hosea and Amos severely rebuked the northern kingdom as early as Jeroboam's reign (Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1). But whereas Amos was a southerner from Tekoa, not far from Bethlehem, Jonah was a northerner. It would not be surprising to learn his family suffered during the Syrian incursions into Israel. This might explain some of his intense antagonism toward Nineveh of Assyria, an even more menacing country at the time than Syria.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- 1. Think about what would happen to Christianity if, indeed, Jefferson's Bible provided the most accurate historical account of the Gospels. What then would we be left with? What hope would we have? What are the implications of the thinking that would limit the Bible—any part of the Bible—to the confines of modern science and reason? Why have so many people who have gone down this road ultimately abandoned their faith entirely?**
- 2. Look again at these texts: Job 11:7; 1 Cor. 1:21; 2:14; 3:19; and Heb. 10:38. Are they saying that worldly wisdom or reason or science is bad or that they cannot of themselves lead us to the things we really need to know? See John 17:3.**

**SUMMARY:** God had a good reason for putting Jonah in the Bible. And with the book, He shows us that He is more than willing to do the unexpected in order to fulfill His purposes for us.