

“Jonah Resurrected?”

“Someone approached me over the weekend - at a Christian Women's Conference - and asked me a question about Jonah. The question concerns whether or not Jonah was alive in the belly of the fish for the three days or if he was dead and his body was just being preserved for the three days...I have always been taught that he was alive, but I can see where the dead view could be believed as well. At this point, I am somewhat torn. As always, I appreciate any insight you can provide.”

This teaching is being promoted by TV preachers/teachers like Perry Stone. The passage that is used to support this teaching is Jonah 2:2-7 (Hebrew is 2:3-8). If this is an area of interest/concern to you feel free to read my treatment below.

Of primary importance is the fact that this text is POETRY, not historical narrative. As poetry, it is HIGHLY figurative. As examples of this, consider the fact that the passage states that he descended to the “roots of the mountains,” v. 6a, and that he was covered by the earth, “The earth...was around me,” v. 6b, when in reality he was under the water, not under the mountains or the dirt. Such is often the case with poetry, both now and then (even in popular speech, we say things like “eat your heart out” and “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse,” neither of which do we mean to be taken literally). It is why we speak of “poetic license” in describing the leeway that writers of poetry are given to misuse grammatical conventions and describe things, people, and experiences in something less than straightforward, historically accurate, descriptive speech. In a similar manner, the heavens were created by the COMMAND of God (Gen. 1:1-8), but Psalm 8:3 says they are the “work of [God’s] fingers.” In Psalm 22:6, David says, “But I am a worm, and not a man,” and yet we know that is not literally the case; rather, it is describing the depth of despair to which he had been brought by his current circumstances.

I personally have no problem with people being resurrected other than Jesus—it happened in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. Jesus raised several people from the dead prior to His death, burial, and resurrection. The apostles Paul and Peter were used as instruments to raise people from the dead in the Book of Acts. I DO, however, have a problem with people taking a passage intended metaphorically by the author and making it a literal, physically and historically accurate description. The goal of all interpretation is to get the intended meaning of the original communicator. To aid in this, there are almost ALWAYS contextual clues in the immediate vicinity (this is called “immediate literary context” by interpreters of ancient texts) that clue the reader/listener into whether the original communicator intends to be taken literally or figuratively. When we follow this time-tested, we can be assured that we are receiving *GOD’S intended meaning* rather than *the word of man*, and while it may not be of earthshaking importance with respect to the current issue, at some point, handling Scripture with such flippancy will ultimately result in faulty doctrine or practice regarding some essential of the faith. For that reason, we turn our attention to a careful and prayerfully more appropriate treatment of the relevant biblical texts.

Jonah 2:1 states that Jonah was praying “to the LORD from the stomach of the fish.”

Therefore, the following poetic section is reflective of that reality of mental awareness, cognitive processes, normal communication, etc., that constituted Jonah’s reality while inside the fish. In the midst of the poem, Jonah again describes himself as communicating to God through prayer, “I said...” (v. 4). Interestingly, where the NASB reads, “...to the point of death” (v. 5a), the Hebrew uses the preposition *ad*, which normally means “up to the point of.” This is important because of the space that it indicates that existed between Jonah’s current condition and the state of death, and it demonstrates that he was NOT DEAD.

The phrases “from the depth of Sheol” (v. 2) and “brought my life up from the pit” (v. 6c) are two poetic ways of expressing the same thought and should not be taken to mean that he was literally dead and in “hell”—these same phrases are used to describe numerous others in Scripture (Job 33:24, 28, 30; Psa. 18:5; 30:3; 40:2; 86:13; 103:4; Jer. 48:44; Lam. 3:55-58; Amos 9:2, etc.; note that all these instances are in POETIC sections), and surely not all these people literally died a physical death and were literally raised physically from the dead and physically brought back to earth from HELL!

In Jonah 2:7, the author dips deeply into Hebrew vocabulary to describe Jonah’s condition by using a verb that occurs in this form only 7 times in the entire Hebrew Bible. The NASB reads, “While I was fainting away” (the KJV reads similarly) and Hebrew lexicons (dictionaries of ancient biblical usage) use the words “faint, languishing, feeble” to reflect the meaning of the Hebrew. Genesis 30: 42 is the first place in which this form appears, and here the reference is to unhealthy (but clearly not dead) herd animals. In Psalm 142:3 and 143:4, the word suggests that the writer was overwhelmed or faint, as do Psalm 107:5 and Lamentations 2:12 (in these last two instances, physical weakness due to malnutrition). In Psalm 77:3, the word appears in parallel (synonymous) position to the adjectives “disturbed/bothered” and “troubled” (v. 4).

After failing to exercise sensitivity to the literary context and word usage of the Old Testament text, some of these modern interpreters attempt to support their assertions with Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:40, “JUST AS Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” To this I respond in three ways. 1) the “JUST AS” cannot be taken to mean “in every respect/detail, like...” Why? Here are just a few dissimilar details between Jonah’s and Jesus’ experience: Jonah was put in the belly of the fish by a storm and by God, whereas Jesus was buried by people; Jonah’s “tomb” was not sealed or guarded; Jonah did not die from wounds received by human execution, etc.—by now you get the point. Jesus’ “JUST AS” was limited to a *basic similarity, not to a detailed, point-for-point duplication*, an observation that leads me to my second response.

2) The extent of Jesus’ intended analogy is actually given *by Jesus* in the same verse that purveyors of this bizarre teaching use to support their position. What Jesus said was, “JUST AS Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster,

so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights...” In other words, the connection Jesus was drawing between Himself and Jonah was that of *TIME FRAME*, not some extended analogy that had to include every detail. No teacher that is currently promoting this interpretation would argue, for example, that Jesus was in the belly of the earth *for the same reason* that landed Jonah in the belly of the fish (rebellion and disobedience to God)!

3) My third response is to direct those who focus on the “Just as” of Jesus in Matthew 12:40 to its parallel passage in Luke’s gospel. There Jesus says “For JUST AS Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation” (Luke 11:30). In this text (and BOTH Matthew and Luke are reporting what Jesus said as *His authoritative* interpretation of the Jonah story), the “Just as” refers exclusively to the function of both as “signs”. To Jesus, the similarity (His intended point of reference in saying “Just as”) is that both His and Jonah’s “entombment” were to serve as a “sign” to their respective generations.

Another way to approach this subject is to ask the obvious—“Are there any crystal clear and undisputed passages in Scripture in which it is clearly the author’s intent to communicate that the prophet Jonah literally died and was physically raised from the dead? To that question, we have to answer “NO”, because there are no such passages. And remember that this is DESPITE the fact that the Jonah’s situation is discussed by Jesus in Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32. In neither passage does He come to the same conclusion now championed by some modern teachers. I think we’d all be safe to follow Jesus’ lead rather than theirs. What do you think?

W.E. Nunnally, Ph.D.
Professor of Early Judaism and Christian Origins
Department of Theology
Evangel University
Springfield, MO