



**Gutenberg College Summer Institute 2015
REUNION: Tanakh and the Gospel of Matthew**

**Talk 17: Background to Jonah and Matthew 12:40
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I. Jonah

A. Background

1. Jonah the prophet is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25.
 - a) Contemporary of Hosea and Amos. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, the first king of the northern kingdom (the 10 northern tribes of Israel, 786-746 BC). This is a half-century before the Assyrians crushed Israel in 722 BC.
2. I am not aware of any historical record beyond the book of Jonah of any Jewish prophet going to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians.

B. Questions

1. Is this account the account of an actual historical event, or is this a fictional account created for didactic reasons?
 - a) C.S Lewis argues that Jonah is not a historical account but a fictional account because "he knows a story when he sees one." Is this a convincing argument?
2. Did Jonah actually die, being actually resurrected after three days? Or, was Jonah miraculously preserved alive in the innards of the great fish?
3. Did the Ninevites know that Jonah was still alive because of a miracle? Or were they unaware of the miracle that had occurred?
 - a) Was their repentance linked to the miracle that Jonah had experienced?
4. What is the fundamental message of the book of Jonah?

II. Matthew 12:40

A. Background

1. Note the sequence of events in the immediate context:
 - a) Jesus casts out unclean spirit.
 - b) Pharisees reason that it is by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that Jesus was able to command a demon.
 - c) Jesus argues that theirs is not a viable interpretation of what just happened.
 - d) The Pharisees ask for Jesus to give them a sign.
 - e) In our text, Jesus says he will not give them a sign, except the sign of Jonah.

- f) Jesus goes on to set the Pharisees unbelief against the openness and receptivity of the men of Nineveh (at the preaching of Jonah) and of the Queen of Sheba.
 - g) Finally, Jesus tells an allegory to describe what has just transpired and to explain why no more signs will be given to these Pharisees.
2. In the context of Jesus' life and ministry, a "sign" tends to be something that one could point to that offers evidence of Jesus' Messiahship. Usually, a "sign" is some miraculous work performed in connection with his word or person.
 3. Note that Jesus repeats his refusal to give a sign except the sign of Jonah in Matthew 16:4.
 4. Note the parallel passage in Luke 11:29–32. There it says, "For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation."

B. Questions

1. What does Jesus mean by his charge (12:39) that "an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign"? Does this imply that wanting a "sign" is in and of itself evil?
 - a) Why does Jesus say no "sign" will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet?
2. How does Jesus know that he will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth?
 - a) Is his knowledge derived from his understanding of the book of Jonah?
 - b) Is his knowledge based on something else?
3. To whom is "the sign of Jonah" a sign to? Was "the sign of Jonah" a sign to the men of Nineveh? Or, in his reference to "the sign of Jonah," is Jesus referring to a sign that will be given to his contemporaries?
 - a) Is Luke 11:29–32 significant in this regard?
 - b) If the former, how can a "sign" given to the men of Nineveh be given to the men of Jesus' time?
4. Is the "sign of Jonah" more significant and important than other signs that Jesus could point to as evidence of his Messiahship?
 - a) Do Jesus' citation of Jonah in Matthew 12:40 and his reference to him in 12:41 imply that Jesus took the book of Jonah to be the account of an actual historical event?
 - (1) Does Matthew's use of the book of Jonah depend upon its actual historicity?

III. Relationship of Matthew to Jonah

- A. What are the logically possible relationships that could exist between something in Jonah and a claim of Jesus in Matthew?
 1. Neither the "Prediction > Event Predicted" or the "Prediction > Necessary Concomitant of Event Predicted" relation is possible, for there are no predictions of the future made by Jonah that are not already fulfilled within the book of Jonah itself.
 2. Truth > Ordinary Instantiation of This Truth ?
 3. Truth > More Significant Instantiations of This Truth ?
 4. Event > Less Significant Foreshadowed Event ?
 5. Event > More Significant Foreshadowed Event ?