

## Greater than Jonah. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 23 October 2013.

As you know, we are part way through a series of meditations which focus on the supreme 'greatness' of our Lord Jesus.

When I introduced the series a little over a month ago, I said that, God willing, we would discover that our Lord Jesus is great in all His offices ... the great prophet, the great priest and the great king ... that He is greater than the temple, greater than Jonah, and greater than Solomon ... greater than Jacob and greater than Abraham ... greater than all the prophets ... greater than the angels ... and greater than all the sacrifices of Old Testament days.

This week it falls to me to look with you briefly at the Saviour as 'greater than Jonah'. And my Bible reading – which comes from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke<sup>1</sup> – runs as follows :

Then certain of the scribes and Pharisees said, Master, we would see a sign from you.

But He answered and said 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 even as Jonah became a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the stomach of the great fish, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

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

The first point which I note is that our Lord taught plainly that both Jonah himself and the men of Nineveh were genuine historical people ... that the Old Testament account of the experiences of Jonah does not fall into the category of fairy tale or fable, but is literal, solid history.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, we discover from one of the history books in the Old Testament that Jonah came from Gath-hepher, a small town in Israel,<sup>3</sup> which, as it happened, lay only about two miles from that of Nazareth, where, of course, some eight centuries later, our Lord Himself spent most of His life on earth.<sup>4</sup>

In our reading, Jesus said of Himself, that 'a greater than Jonah is here'. And I suggest that our Lord was greater than Jonah in at least four respects.

First, He was greater in His person. The Old Testament history book which mentions Jonah says that King Jereboam II of Israel 'restored the border of Israel ... according to the word of the Lord ... which He spoke by His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher'.<sup>5</sup> Jonah, that is, was classed as God's 'servant' – in itself a highly privileged position – but nothing to be compared to that of our Lord, who was, as we know well, God's one and only Son.

Second, the Lord Jesus was greater in His experience. 'Jonah was three days and three nights in the stomach of the great fish', our Lord said, but He, the Son of Man, 'would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'. That is, although Jonah was miraculously preserved for some long time in, figuratively speaking, the 'tomb' of the sea-monster's stomach, our Lord, having actually died, spent some long time in the literal tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

And so, although it was clearly miraculous that Jonah emerged unharmed from the insides of the great fish – albeit later to die when his time came – this was nothing compared to the bodily resurrection of our Saviour, who now lives, nevermore to die. We hear His word again, spoken in the last book of our New Testament, 'I am the living one: I became dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore'.<sup>6</sup>

In passing we should note that the correct translation of our Lord's words does not specify that the 'great fish' which swallowed Jonah was a whale.<sup>7</sup> Nor does the Old Testament account of the incident. We are not told from what known species of fish this huge sea creature came – or, for that matter, whether it came from any known species. Frankly, as one preacher said, 'It doesn't make a whale of a difference what kind of sea creature it was'.<sup>8</sup>

Again we should note that our Lord's claim that He would be buried for 'three days and three nights' is perfectly consistent with the fact that He died on the afternoon of Good Friday and rose again very early on the following Sunday. The explanation lies with the Jewish way of reckoning time. To the Jews of our Lord's day 'three days and three nights' could mean the combination of any part of three separate days.<sup>9</sup> In point of fact, of course, the Saviour was in the grave for parts of three days.

Third, the Lord Jesus was greater than Jonah in His life and His character. Whereas Jonah was initially disobedient to God's word – choosing to take a Mediterranean Cruise to Spain<sup>10</sup> rather than go to Nineveh and preach God's message there – the Lord Jesus, we are told in the gospels, did always and only those things which pleased the Father.

Yes, Jonah was prepared to sacrifice his life to appease the wrath of God and save a shipload of heathen mariners from God's judgment, but it was *his* sin and disobedience which had caused their lives to be endangered. Whereas, the Lord Jesus actually did give His life to appease the wrath of God and to save others, even though it was *their* sin and not *His* which exposed them to God's judgment.<sup>11</sup>

In the closing scene of the Old Testament book which carries his name, we see Jonah, having left the great city of Nineveh, sitting under a booth, surveying the city and hoping against hope that the city would yet be destroyed within forty days.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the New Testament gospel of Luke tells of how our Lord Jesus, approaching the great city of Jerusalem for the last time, wept because its unbelief and rejection of Him would result in its destruction forty years later.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the Lord Jesus was greater than Jonah in His preaching. Jonah's sermon was a message of judgement only, consisting of just five words in their language – and just eight in ours, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'<sup>14</sup> Although the King of Nineveh and his people reasoned correctly that God would not have sent Jonah to alert them to this forthcoming judgment unless He (God) was willing to *change His* declared plans for them if they first believed His word and *changed their ways* – which they did.

But, although our Lord sounded even more solemn notes of warning for those who rejected Him and who would therefore, as He said, die in their sins – to face God unforgiven – although His message did sound solemn notes of warning, His was combined with wonderful words of invitation and grace – declaring, as He did, that God had sent Him, God's own Son, into the world that 'whoever' believed in Him would not perish but have eternal life.

Oh yes, the Lord Jesus was, as He said, 'greater than Jonah' ... greater in His person as God's Son, greater in His experience of literal death and resurrection, greater in His life as being free from sin and disobedience to God, and greater in His preaching of pardon and salvation.

And yet, although immeasurably greater than Jonah, it was a fact that the men of Jonah's day responded with faith and repentance to the preaching of Jonah, whereas the men of our Lord's day chose to either ignore or reject Him. And it is for this reason that our Lord declared – most solemnly – that 'the men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it'. Let us ensure, by (in the words of the apostle Paul) our 'repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ' that they will not have occasion to rise up against us too.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 12. 38-41; with Luke 11. 30 between verses 39 and 40.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus refers to him twice in His public ministry (Matthew 12 and 16. 4).

<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 14. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Contrast the claim of the Jews in John 7. 52 – on which see the Pulpit Commentary, Lange, H. Meyer, and the Cambridge Greek Commentary.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Kings 14. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 1. 18.

<sup>7</sup> The Cambridge Greek Commentary asserts, 'It is scarcely needful to note that there are no whales in the Mediterranean'. This is rubbish! See, for example, concerning the huge sperm whale, 'It is relatively abundant from the poles to the equator and is found in all the oceans. It inhabits the Mediterranean Sea ...', [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sperm\\_whale#Distribution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sperm_whale#Distribution). Also, the 'number of sperm whales in the Mediterranean is ... in the hundreds', [http://www.cetaceanalliance.org/cetaceans/Pm\\_home.htm](http://www.cetaceanalliance.org/cetaceans/Pm_home.htm)

<sup>8</sup> See ... [http://www.gijapa.org/pages/default2.asp?active\\_page\\_id=737](http://www.gijapa.org/pages/default2.asp?active_page_id=737)

<sup>9</sup> In rabbinical thought a day and a night make an onah, and a part of an onah is as the whole. The Jerusalem Talmud (Shabbath ix. 3) reads, 'It has been taught: R. Eleazar ben Azariah says, "A day and a night constitute a span [an onah – a portion of time], and part of a span is equivalent to the whole of it"'. (From ... [http://www.occities.org/haqq\\_1/TALMUD-Shabbat-9-3.htm](http://www.occities.org/haqq_1/TALMUD-Shabbat-9-3.htm)) See Kittel's TDNT, Volume II, pages 949-950 – an article by Gerhard Dellling. (Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah lived around A.D. 100.)

Compare 1 Sam. 30. 12 'three days and three nights' with verse 13 'three days'; also Esther 4. 16 with Esther 5. 1.

<sup>10</sup> The devil was his travel agent; a boat was waiting for him. But the devil does not give anybody a free ride! (See Jonah 1. 3b.) The sea cruise to Spain didn't work out as he hoped. He went *down* to Joppa, and he went *down* into the ship, Jonah 1. 3. He went *down* into the sides of the ship and lay *down* to sleep, Jonah 1. 5. When he was thrown overboard he said he went *down* beneath the mountains, Jonah 2.6 . Down, down, down, down, down. What a spiritual journey!

<sup>11</sup> Jonah must rely on Jehovah to calm the storm but Jesus is greater in having Himself control over nature.

'The account of Jesus calming the storm gives an early comparison to both Jesus and Jonah getting into a boat (Jonah 1:3; Matt 8:23). Immediately the story says that a great storm was upon them (Jonah 1:4; Matt 8:24). This is no ordinary storm but one that is great and mighty. Just as in Jonah, these career seafarers were greatly afraid of this storm due to their fears of it overtaking their ship. Both storms are fierce enough that the thought of death is on each of the crew members' minds (Jonah 1:5; Matt 8:25). It is remarkable that both Jesus and Jonah are fast asleep (Jonah 1:5-6; Matt 8:25). The boats are crashing up and down but they are oblivious to the dire situation. The disciples run to Jesus and say, "Lord, save us" (Matt 8:25). Just as the crewmen run to Jonah and cry, "call out to your god that he may save us" (Jonah 1:6). In both instances, the people on the ship wake up the person who in their own unique way can calm the storm. Jesus wakes up with confidence because he knows he is in complete control of this storm. Just as when Jonah is woken up and confronted he knows that he (in a completely different way) is in control of the storm (Jonah 1:12). Jesus, being greater than Jonah, has the power to calm the storm instantly with his voice (Matt 8:26). Jesus speaks and the storm immediately calms and the waters become peaceful once again (Matt 8:26). Jonah knows that the reason the storm is crashing on them is because he is fleeing from Yahweh's commands. Jonah tells the crewmembers if they throw him overboard, then the storm will become calm. After throwing Jonah in the sea, the storm ceased immediately and there was complete serenity. The response of both the crewmen and the disciples is utter amazement. The disciples are amazed because the wind and the waves obeyed the voice of their Lord (Matt 8:27). The crewmen are amazed and compelled to worship Yahweh, who is not just Jonah's god any more (Jonah 1:14, 16). The content parallels are striking in Matthew's account. In Matthew 8:24, he says, "αυτος δε εκαθευδεν" (he (Jesus) was asleep). In Jonah 1:5 it reads, "Ιωνας...και εκαθευδεν" (Jonah...and was asleep)'.  
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<sup>12</sup> Jonah 4. 1-5.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 19. 41-44; cf. Luke 13. 34-35; 21. 5-24.

<sup>14</sup> Jonah 3. 4.