

Bible Helps

Jonah

What is the book of Jonah?

This book is 4 chapters long and is considered part of the OT Minor Prophets. It's called a "minor" prophet not because it is any less important than Isaiah or Jeremiah but because of its size and location in the OT. Jonah is a narrative. And what I mean by this is that most of the book is taken up with telling the story of this prophet and his journey to Nineveh. Jonah is often spoken of as the OT missionary story. And there's good reason for this. God commissions an Israelite to go and call a pagan, Gentile people to repentance. What you will see happen in this book is really what should be happening today. God's people taking God's message to God's world. So there is a missionary heartbeat to this short book.

Did everything in this book really happen? Don't some people think the whole "big fish" part of the story is made up?

Yes, some people do think the fish aspect of the story is made up. There are a few different ways people handle this issue...

Option #1: Some folks say that what we see was simply part of a dream Jonah had while he was sleeping. He really didn't get thrown overboard and he really wasn't swallowed by a fish. He was sleeping and possibly because of a restless night of sleep, he had what you and I would call a nightmare. Maybe it was a nightmare sent by God. Maybe it wasn't. But because of a scary scene that took place only in his mind, he curbed his behavior and softened his heart. And by the time he woke up in the morning he was on the shore and already docked.

Option #2: Other folks go in a slightly different direction. They don't think Jonah had a dream. Rather they say verse 17 was created by the writer of the book to offer an explanation as to why Jonah had a change of heart between the time he boarded and ended up on the shore. It's simply a literary device used by the writer. It didn't really happen. It's simply a creative way to highlight Jonah's hard heartedness and his repentance.

Option #3: I (Pastor Tripp) personally believe there is a better and more faithful option and that is to believe and hold to what is in the text. In other words, to believe that Jonah was physically thrown overboard and that a real fish, a giant fish, swallowed him and held him captive for 3 days and 3 nights in its belly. The push back on this third option is that it's just not physically possible. Jonah would either have drowned or suffocated in the belly of any fish. My push back to this is to say that if God could part the Red Sea and keep a group of guys alive and unscathed in a Babylonian fire pit, He could keep and preserve Jonah in the belly of a fish. Those who deny a literal interpretation of verse 17 ultimately, at some level, deny that God is a miracle working God.

What resources would be of help in studying this book on my own?

Exploring the Minor Prophets by John Phillips