

Are The Old Testament Stories Myths?

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The Problem:

Some are saying that the story of Jonah (and by implication many others) are simply not intended to be taken as historical narratives. They are intended to be taken as good stories with moral lessons.

Here is how some react:

With this assumption [i.e. that Jonah as written is intended to convey an actual historical story], I must conclude that Christianity is worthless, and not worth bothering with. I see it as possible, even probable, that some events in history are the basis for the story, but a literal historical reading of it asks me to check my brain at the door.

If, however, I am allowed to use my God-given intellect to read Jonah, I can recognize it as a "story" and its historicity is simply not of much interest. And then the claims of Christianity again are worth looking.

> "Is there any harm in simply believing Jonah to be historical narrative?"

Yes. Suppose you teach it as such to a young person, who later realizes that it is simply a story. Because of this, that person may decide to reject Christ, thinking that to accept him necessarily means one has to accept Jonah as history also.

The claim here is that the story of Jonah just doesn't make sense in light of what we "know". This is the same argument made against creation (based on an acceptance of Evolution as a fact), and Noah's flood (where's the sediment layer?). In other words, if you cannot prove it beyond the shadow of a doubt, then the only rational approach is to consider it to be just a good story.

The amazing thing here is that some claim to be believers in Jesus Christ (and hence the resurrection), and yet balk at any miracles before him. Any miraculous event will by nature be opposed by science because science denies anything outside the realm of the "natural" world. The ultimate outcome of accepting only what can be proven by science is to deny even the existence of God.

Jonah

Some reasons given for "intellectually" refusing the story of Jonah as not historical include:

- obvious exaggerations such as Jonah saying that Nineveh was "3 days journey across" which would be far beyond the size of any known city
- even the cattle did penance?
- The whole city repents at a 5-word sermon???
- Swallowed by a fish and lives to tell?
- the literary character of the book
- the book has a form quite different from that of any of the other prophetic books.

Three Days Across

The account of Jonah that Nineveh is a city of “great extent” is shown in 3 major translations:

Jonah 3:3 (KJV) Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey.

Jonah 3:3 (NKJV) Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, †a three-day journey *in extent*.

†Exact Meaning Unknown

Jonah 3:3 (NIV) Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.

In the context of Jonah’s account, the idea of three days’ journey is in regard to the task at hand as is indicated by the statement which follows (v. 4):

And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Jonah began the 3-day task which involved not just journeying across the diameter of the city, but preaching to the city (not likely to be done at a normal traveling pace) which would require going throughout the city, not just a straight shot across. Most likely Jonah would be interacting with the populace giving the reason for being overthrown. The people would be asking questions such as what was his basis of authority for proclaiming against the city. Jonah’s account then is not an attempt to tell a fellow traveler how long it took to get through the city, but a relation of how long it would take to accomplish his God-given task. This is not an obvious exaggeration (on Jonah’s part), but a rather obvious attempt to distort Jonah’s statement in order to discredit the book.

Even the Cattle did penance?

Nothing is said in the story about the cattle doing penance, but this wild claim is made in an attempt to ridicule the book. The actual statement (in a declaration made by the king of Nineveh) says:

(Jonah 3:7-9, NKJV) Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. ⁸But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who can tell *if* God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

It a distortion of the text to make this say that the cattle “did penance”, for they do not have the capacity to repent. Rather, the repentance of the owners made their repentance known in all things – including how they dealt with their animals.

The Whole City Repents at a 5-word Sermon?

It is not likely that the entire city would repent due to an unknown man speaking these few words”. However, the assumption made by the critics is that this would be all the information that the city had – a truly unlikely situation since God actually sent Jonah in order to bring about repentance. It is plausible and likely that when the storm became so fierce that men despaired of their lives and threw the cargo into the water, that they would return to port where they left from (Joppa) since they had no cargo to deliver. This unnatural occurrence of the storm dissipating when Jonah was thrown overboard would be told at least as an explanation for why the voyage was ruined – this was no ordinary storm. That they felt it was no ordinary storm is evidenced by their reaction “(1:17) Then the men

feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” This story was likely to be spread around, so that when Jonah is found alive on the shore it was a matter of great interest. We are not told how much time elapses after Jonah is deposited on dry land before God speaks a second time to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh. It may have been enough time for the story to be widespread about how Jonah was thrown overboard to save the ship from the storm that was clearly a matter of divine origin. This would make Jonah a well-known man and provide evidence that God had spoken to Jonah, so that when he came to Nineveh with a message from God, there was evidence already in existence that the one who had once fled from God’s task was now taking it up.

Commentators have disagreed about whether Jonah actually died and was resurrected by God. Evidence given that he did die is the language in 2:6 where Jonah says, “Yet You have brought up my life from the pit...” The “pit” is language often used to refer to death in the book of Job. For example:

Job 33:22 (NKJV) Yes, his soul draws near the Pit, And his life to the executioners.

If Jonah did not die, he was at least in a situation where death was expected, and so he was recovered from death by the divine intervention of God.

Jesus said that this was a “sign” to the people of Nineveh (Luke 11:30 (NKJV) For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, ...) indicating that the Ninevites had knowledge of Jonah’s being swallowed by the fish and being preserved alive (apparently by divine action). It was this sign from God that caused Nineveh to take Jonah’s preaching so seriously.

Those that ridicule the historical account of Jonah, must also ridicule the statements of Jesus as well, for Jesus plainly spoke that the presence of the men of Nineveh in the judgment would by their very presence condemn those who refuse to believe the words of Jesus – especially after receiving the even greater sign of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Luke 11:29-32 And while the crowds were thickly gathered together, He began to say, “**This is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet.** ³⁰For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. ... ³²The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah *is* here.

Some will argue that Jesus is simply referring to an event in a story much like we might do if we were to say, “I’m going to raft down the river just like Huck Finn”. However, this is clearly not the situation in Luke 11:29-32, since Jesus continues on to say that in the judgment, the men of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah will be present, and their very presence will condemn those in this generation who now reject the testimony of Jesus! Jesus speaks of an actual event where actual people from the city of Nineveh will be present. This cannot be understood of a mythological story.

Swallowed by a fish and lives to tell?

Those who want to accept the resurrection of Christ, but reject the historical nature of the book of Jonah will typically not reject this, since by doing so they would logically have to reject the resurrection account of Christ. However, it is implied by many as simply unbelievable. Is it more believable to accept Christ as being born of a virgin, and being raised from the dead? Those who reject Jonah on an intellectual basis, begin by assuming

that this just couldn't happen, and so must be an exaggeration (albeit based somewhere in fact on an actual true story). The primary reason for rejecting it on an intellectual basis is to reject anything which contradicts the laws of nature and what can be known by science. The ultimate end of this philosophy will also reject the resurrection of Christ, the miracles worked by Jesus and his apostles, and the creation of the world -- branding all of the Bible as myths. Even Christians can be led astray by this on the same principles used to deny the creation in favor of accepting evolution. This allows man to accept God while not being branded as intellectually brain-dead (i.e. denying the theory of evolution). Those who go down this path usually attempt to vindicate themselves by saying that they are able to separate fact from fiction in the Bible by using their "God-given" abilities of reason. This is really an attempt to minimize what God has given and say that we have the ability to make our own truth, and claim that it is from God, since God has given man the power to "reason".

Creation

Evolutionist: World is billions of years old

Christian: Appearances can be deceiving.

Evolutionist: Why would God intentionally deceive us by making the world appear to be older than it really is? Doesn't this make him untruthful?

Christian: God created man not as a child, but a man (i.e. with apparent age). The world is no different

In Gregory Koukl's article, he quotes one of the famous apologists for evolution:

'Richard Dawkins begins *The Blind Watchmaker* by making a stunning concession. "Biology," he writes, "is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose." Dawkins admits that living things appear to be designed. In his most recent work, *Climbing Mount Improbable*, he even calls living organisms designoids." Dawkins then warns us not to be deceived by appearances. Design is an illusion, he says. Living things were actually crafted by the "blind watchmaker" -- mutation and natural selection.'

Biologist says: Appearances can be deceiving.

Many have concluded that the Bible is right about creation, but we just misunderstand about the "days", and that they are "ages" -- not 24 hour periods. This is often called theistic evolution. God created by setting in motion the principles of evolution.

However, in the context of the Bible account it is clear that a "day" involves a morning and evening and these are not figurative terms but defined by the alternating periods of light and dark.

Gen 1:17 ¹⁷God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth,
¹⁸and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness.
And God saw that *it was* good. ¹⁹So the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

In Gen. 1:14, the term day is used to distinguish between days, years, and seasons.

(Gen 1:14 KJV) "And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: ..."

Clearly the term day here must refer to a 24-hour day with the lights of heaven to divide the day into a light portion and a dark portion, with these same lights as the divider of seasons. Any attempt to make this day figurative would also deny that the sun provides the seasons for the earth, and would deny any useful meaning for this passage.

The use of language in subsequent verses has as its primary focus the alternating periods of

light and darkness:

(Gen 1:18-19 KJV) "And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that *it was* good. {19} And the evening and the morning were the fourth day."

It is in this context (of alternating light and darkness) that the terms "evening" and "morning" are used, and they must be understood in light of this context then as the periods of alternating light and dark. The logical conclusion then, is that if the "day" is composed of a period of light and dark and is also a billion years long, the period of light must have been 500,000 million years long -- An inescapable conclusion, and also unacceptable by anyone.

Any attempt to reconcile the two must compromise the accuracy of the scriptures and leave us with a God that cannot be trusted with an accurate account of our beginning and nature -- and the end result of that will be a God that cannot be trusted with an accurate account of our future. A fundamental claim of God is that he cannot lie. His word stands then as either all true, or else untrustworthy:

(Num 23:19 NKJV) ""God *is* not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" -- and --

(Titus 1:2 NKJV) "... in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, ..." -- also --

(Heb 6:17-18 NKJV) "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, {18} that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before *us*."

Exegesis

It sets a precedent, that if followed, allows us to mold any text into anything we want or desire. If we can take Genesis 1-11 as "figurative" without any evidence that it should be taken so, in clear violation of the obvious meanings and in contrast with the N.T. writers who quote Genesis with clear regard for it being an accurate record of the beginning, then it becomes impossible for us to be sure of the understanding of any passage. Without a certain understanding of God's word, we have no assurance of salvation.

Eden

Man	God
Speaks of the events of Eden as a moral story intended to show us the destructive nature of sin.	Speaks of the events of Eden as history -- a real place. It is used as a reference for historical accounts

Gen 4:16 Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden. ¹⁷And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son--Enoch. ¹⁸To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad begot Mehujael, and Mehujael begot Methushael, and Methushael begot Lamech.

Flood

Many have claimed that the lack of a clearly defined and readily identifiable silt layer convicts the Biblical account as fiction – perhaps a myth based on the real event of a localized flood, but ultimately untrue.

The evidence is that the earth has undergone a cataclysm of which we can only speculate from a scientific standpoint. We find mammoths frozen so rapidly that fresh vegetation is still in their mouths – and this in extremely cold climates.

“Under ordinary processes of nature as now occurring, fossils (especially of land animals and even marine vertebrates) are very rarely formed. The only way they can be preserved long enough from the usual processes of decay, scavenging and disintegration is by means of quick burial in aqueous sediments.” However, in contrast the fossil record shows great abundance of fossils. This is just what would be expected after the catastrophic event of the flood.

Scientists are not in agreement about how to explain fossilization. Some have argued that the abundance of fossil evidence is expected in an earth that is billions of years old, since that would allow enough time for this relatively rare occurrence to produce the vast evidence. But much of fossil evidence is indicative of very rapid occurrence – fish being fossilized in the act of swallowing another fish, etc.

Scientists are likewise unsure how to explain the cataclysm that surely much have affected the earth. Explanations such as an asteroid hit are quite common.

Where is the evidence for the flood? The rapid fossilization and rapid freezing of mammoths are evidence of a global catastrophic event. The flood event is a reasonable explanation of the evidence. The Bible alone is not the only document to record this. The Gilgamesh Epic records a story remarkably similar:

In brief, Utnapishtim had become immortal after building a ship to weather the Great Deluge that destroyed mankind. He brought all of his relatives and all species of creatures aboard the vessel. Utnapishtim released birds to find land, and the ship landed upon a mountain after the flood.

Historians have written of the existence of the Ark

Josephus wrote: "... the Armenians call this place, ¹⁶*The Place of Descent*; for the ark being saved in that place, its remains are shown there by the inhabitants to this day. 6. Now all the writers of barbarian histories make mention of this flood, and of this ark; ..." Over a dozen other Christian and Jewish leaders during the period 200-1700 A.D. wrote that the Ark was still preserved.

Peter speaks of the Flood as a real event which should motivate us today:

2 Pet. 3:4 through 2 Pet. 3:8 (NKJV)

⁴and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of creation." ⁵For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, ⁶by which the world *that* then existed perished, being flooded with water. ⁷But the heavens and the earth *which* are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

⁸But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Other miracles which some reject:

- the floating iron axe head
- water to wine
- the talking donkey
- raising of Lazarus

Impeachment

In a trial of law, if it can be shown that a witness has lied, then his testimony is thrown out, since it is not possible to determine where he has lied and where he has not lied. If God has given us a record which purports to be factual and historical, but it is not, then it is a lie. If the witness of the Bible is thus impeached, it cannot be said to be a good book. Which part can be trusted? If we cannot trust God for an account of our beginning, how can we trust him for our salvation?

Well this is exactly what Satan desires – to discredit God. If Christians are led to believe that they cannot trust the story of Jonah, and certainly evolution must be accepted as fact and therefore the creation account cannot be trusted, ...where will it end? How can we accept Jesus as divine when he speaks of Jonah as a real person? If Jonah is not real, then Jesus must not have been divine or he surely would have known this. The end result is easy to see.

Has God been impeached? Certainly not. The story of Jonah stands as a valid historical record. Many of the historical records of the Old Testament have been slandered in a vain attempt to discredit God himself – but these ultimately fail.

