

Learning How to Read

Contra Costa Gospel Church
Adult Sunday School

Text Before Event 4

In biblical texts, there are so many important events in the lives of our biblical “heroes.” And so, it becomes imperative that we properly interpret these events so that we can understand the authors’ point of including them.

We remember our second main principle of Biblical interpretation:

Don’t analyze the event in isolation. The event always has its place in the larger narrative.

Another example...

4) Jonah gets swallowed by a fish

This is certainly one of the most memorable stories found in the Bible for its vividness and frankly, strangeness. A fish swallowed a man whole? For three days and three nights? This story is basically summarized in two verses: “But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights... And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (1:17; 2:10).

Like other amazing events found in the Bible, we are left to wonder, what is the point of the event? What do we learn from this story? About Jonah? About God? About us? When we consider this story outside of its context, we might find ourselves coming to conclusions such as:

- There is no safer place to be than in the will of God, even if it’s in the belly of a fish.
- Don’t run from God. He will always find you and make you do what He wants.
- God will always provide for you help, sometimes in the strangest of ways.
- Fish are friends, not food.

For each of these “conclusions,” were someone to claim that these were legitimate lesson points of this event, on what basis could we refute them? Are these legitimate conclusions of the story? Why or why not?

In order to arrive at a proper understanding of Jonah’s time in the belly of the fish, we have to look at this event within the context of the entire book, taking a bird’s eye view approach of the event. We must not analyze the event in isolation, since the event always has its place in the larger narrative.

Jonah 1 - Our GREAT God

In this first chapter, the author establishes from the outset that the God of Israel is the greatest God of the world, even greater than the so-called gods of Israel’s neighbors. How does the author do this?

- Recurrence of “great” throughout the narrative
 - In the study like this, it’s helpful to read from the most “wooden” of modern English translations, where the editors always translate a Hebrew word into the same English word every time. NAU > ESV = NKJ > NIV
 - Read Jonah 1 in the New American Standard Version to find all the occurrences
- Chiastic structure of the chapter
 - In this Hebraic literary device, the text “zooms in on the middle,” with the extremities being correlated which draws attention to the center
 - A Wind-ravaged sea (1:4)
 - B Sailors called out to their gods (1:5)
 - C Jonah’s apathy (1:6)
 - D Sailors questioned Jonah (1:7-8)
 - **E Jonah believes in Yahweh (1:9)**
 - D’ Sailors questioned Jonah (1:10-11)
 - C’ Jonah’s resignation (1:12)
 - B’ Sailors called out to the Lord (1:14)
 - A’ Calming of the raging sea (1:15)
- The conversion of the sailors to faith in the Lord (1:16)

Jonah 2 - Jonah’s Prayer of Repentance

While we often think about the amazing nature of Jonah’s rescue, sometimes we forget that he was swallowed up because of his sin and rebellion, and that it was while in the belly that he repented and prayed for mercy.

This is a curious prayer psalm, curious because while some of it relates specifically to Jonah’s situation in the water, other parts of it seem to be about more than him. Which parts of the prayer do not relate specifically to Jonah’s situation in the water, and perhaps point the reader to something “beyond Jonah”?

Jonah 3 - Nineveh Repents

Through the “amazing” preaching of Jonah, the city of Nineveh repented from their sins and the city was spared by the Lord. Could not be simpler than that.

Jonah 4 - Jonah Gets Mad

In a twist, it seems that Jonah was not happy Nineveh wouldn’t be destroyed. He pouted, and then proceeded to blame God for being too merciful. He went up on a mountain to see what would happen to the city (whether it would be destroyed or not), and sought shade from a vine. That vine shriveled up the next day, which made Jonah even madder. And from this, the Lord chastises Jonah for being more concerned with his stupid vine than with the thousands of people in Nineveh.

Jonah is not alone. He represents the sentiment of Israel at that time, who wanted nothing more than the destruction of her enemies. Why should they be the ones to bring God’s message of salvation to such evil people? Because it’s what the Lord wants, and what the Lord wants when it comes to showing mercy to people, He gets. With this in mind, how might we tie in the story of Jonah in the belly of the fish with the larger narrative? What is the point?