

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: The Prophecy of Jonah

One who wishes to attest to the absolute reliability of God's word on a matter must face up to the difficulty raised by the prophecy of Jonah. If we are to trust God's words absolutely, it is essential that we believe that God always keeps His word. Yet in the case of Jonah it appears that He did not. Let us examine the relevant verses.

In Jonah 3:4 we read, "And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.'" 5. So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. 6. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 10. And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not."

This is a stunning statement, and certainly appears to be a direct contradiction. In the fourth verse, Jonah prophesied and clearly said that Nineveh would be overthrown in forty days. Yet in verse 10 God is said to have repented and to have not done the evil He was going to do against the city! The words of Jonah are clear and unmistakable. And yet God did not fulfill them! How can this be? Did God go back on His word? Did He contradict Himself by not fulfilling this prediction?

This is a very difficult and very important problem. I once read the writings of a man who, reasoning from this passage, made the assumption that God can change His mind about any prophecy He makes. Then, proceeding from this assumption, he went on to declare that God had changed His mind entirely about the future. He will no longer bless Israel in the future as He said He would do, this man claimed. There will be no future earthly Kingdom or thousand-year reign. The entire book of Revelation has been scrapped, as God changed His mind about all of it. He seemed to be quite relieved in declaring that we will never have to go through the tribulation period, as God has decided not to do any of this!

Yet what does such a conclusion lead us to? If God really decided to scrap Revelation around the time of A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed, as this man claims, and its fulfillment would have been such a terrible thing that we should be so glad never happened, then it would seem that He wrote the book of Revelation in a temper tantrum, and then a few years later cooled down and decided against it! Is this really a correct, reverent viewpoint of God? Moreover, what does this do to our faith in any part of the word of God? If God can change His mind this drastically about the future, could He not change it about anything in the Bible, including our salvation?

And yet we have Jonah, a clear example of God changing His mind and not keeping His word. Does this not seem to support this man's conclusion? Can we really trust any prophecy of God in view of His failure to fulfill the prophecy He had Jonah make to the Ninevites?

I believe that there is a key to understanding this apparent contradiction between God's words and His actions. To get an idea of this key let us look first at a different story in the Bible: that of Jehoshaphat, Ahab, and the prophet Micaiah in I Kings 22.

We get the background of the story starting in verse 1: “Now three years passed without war between Syria and Israel. 2. Then it came to pass, in the third year, that Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went down to visit the king of Israel. 3. And the king of Israel said to his servants, ‘Do you know that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, but we hesitate to take it out of the hand of the king of Syria?’ 4. So he said to Jehoshaphat, ‘Will you go with me to fight at Ramoth Gilead?’ And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, ‘I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.’”

So we see what was happening. Jehoshaphat, the righteous king of Judah, is attempting to make an alliance with Ahab, the wicked king of Israel. Ahab proposes that they go into a joint venture together to defeat the Syrians and get back a city the Syrians had taken from Ahab. Jehoshaphat unwisely agrees to join Ahab in this venture.

Now, however, Jehoshaphat starts getting concerned about what the LORD might think of their actions, so he asks Ahab in verse 5, “Please inquire for the word of the Lord today.’ 6. Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said to them, ‘Shall I go against Ramoth Gilead to fight, or shall I refrain?’ So they said, ‘Go up, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king.’”

Ahab, of course, called the false prophets of his gods to prophesy to them. Jehoshaphat realizes that these are false prophets, and so he knows that their word is untrustworthy. Therefore, he questions Ahab again in verse 7, “Is there not still a prophet of the LORD here, that we may inquire of Him?’ 8. So the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, ‘There is still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the LORD; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.’ And Jehoshaphat said, ‘Let not the king say such things!’ 9. Then the king of Israel called an officer and said, ‘Bring Micaiah the son of Imlah quickly!’

The next few verses set the scene for us. The two kings, dressed in their royal robes, are sitting on their thrones, and all the prophets are prophesying in dramatic fashion before them. Into this scene comes poor Micaiah. The messenger who is bringing him even warns him (in verse 13,) ‘Now listen, the words of the prophets with one accord encourage the king. Please, let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak encouragement.’ 14. And Micaiah said, ‘As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.’” These other prophets spoke whatever they thought would be popular, but Micaiah knew it was his job to speak the truth! Oh, how needed today are those who are willing to speak unpopular truths so as to be faithful to the LORD, disregarding the disapproval of men!

Then he comes to the king, and we read in verse 15, “Then he came to the king, and the king said to him, ‘Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall we refrain?’” But now notice Micaiah’s response, “And he answered him, ‘Go and prosper, for the LORD will deliver it into the hand of the king!’”

Had Micaiah sold out? Had he decided to speak the same thing the other prophets spoke so as to be popular? No, indeed, for in the next verse we realize that this is not what he meant, for King Ahab responds to Micaiah, “How many times shall I make you swear that you tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?” It seems that the king knew that what Micaiah had said was not the truth! And we know that it was not when we look at Micaiah’s next words in verse 17, “Then he said, ‘I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master. Let each return to his house in peace.’”” Micaiah did not really mean what he said earlier. The LORD did not want Israel to battle the Syrians, and He would not give them the victory.

But what about Micaiah’s earlier statement? He seemed to clearly say that the armies should go to fight at Ramoth Gilead, and that the LORD would cause them to prosper, yet later he took it back. How could this be?

I think the clue we need here is to remember that this prophecy of Micaiah’s was not first written, but rather was a prophecy that was spoken to the kings of Israel and Judah. As such, merely the

words that were said are not so important, but rather how they were to be understood by the one hearing them. Ahab, upon hearing Micaiah's prophecy of success, fully realized that Micaiah was not speaking the truth. Probably Micaiah's voice and attitude toward delivering this message made it clear to the king that he was speaking sarcastically. Perhaps he gestured to the other prophets surrounding him as he spoke, and said this in mockery of their unified predictions of success. At any rate, the king of Israel fully understood what he meant, and that behind his words lay an accusation.

Now the problem comes in when these words are written down in our Bibles. We have no way of hearing how Micaiah delivered these words, nor of how he may have gestured or acted while delivering them. Thus when we read the words they appear as solemn and declarative as any other message from the LORD in Scripture. Yet we can get a clue as to how they were intended, not by the words themselves, but by Ahab's reaction to them. He understood that these words spoken to him were not the truth from God, and we should understand this through him as well.

So we can establish a principle. Prophecies that are spoken depend not just on the words spoken but also on how they were understood by the one spoken to, and sometimes we might be led astray by reading the words themselves from the actual meaning that was behind them. Thus we return to the account of the prophecy of Jonah.

Jonah went throughout Nineveh and made this prophecy. It was a very simple message, as we read it in Jonah 3:4, "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's message was simple. There was no mention of any hope of redemption. He spoke it as if the fate of Nineveh was set in stone. No call to action was made to the people of Nineveh. No means of redemption was offered. Yet look at the reaction of the king of Nineveh. "6. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. 7. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.'"

Why did the king proclaim this? Notice what he says in verse 9. "Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?" The king of Nineveh took Jonah's words to be a warning and a call to action. He seemed to understand that God was giving them a chance to repent.

But how did Jonah himself take the message? Let us look at Jonah's reaction in Jonah 4:1, "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. 2. So he prayed to the LORD, and said, 'Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One Who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!'"

So we see that both Jonah, the one who spoke the message, and the king of Nineveh, the one who heard the message, understood the message to be a warning. Although there was no word in the message about repentance bringing forgiveness, both Jonah and the Ninevites understood it that way. And, indeed, that is the way it turned out.

So I believe that we have the answer to our contradiction. This word of the LORD that Jonah spoke was a spoken, not a written, message. Thus it took on a meaning beyond the actual words spoken. Both Jonah and the Ninevites understood the message this way, and the Ninevites responded to it and so received forgiveness.

So once again we have an answer to a supposed contradiction in Scripture. We see that messages that were spoken rather than written can have an understood meaning that the words themselves do not imply. This was the case in the instance of the prophecy of Jonah. Yet many, many of the

LORD's promises for the future were not spoken, but rather written originally. Thus we know that the message in these cases is the words themselves, and since they were not spoken there can be no other implied meaning behind them. Thus we cannot use the example of the prophecy of Jonah to justify lack of faith in the other prophecies that God has made. These spoken prophecies were understood in the way God meant them to be, and He fulfilled them in the way that they were understood. Yet the written prophecies can only be taken as written, and thus we know that God will fulfill these to the letter. How thankful we can be to God that we can have absolute faith in His Word!

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