

***Dr Aw was asked to comment on a letter which expressed an opinion that the books of Esther and Jonah could be 'fiction in a historical setting'. As this view has a bearing on the truthfulness of Scripture he has requested that his comments be available for others to read.***

## **COMMENTS**

### **Timothy 3 :16-17**

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

It is true that Timothy does not say, “that all Scripture is an account of actual historical events”.

But neither does it not say that all Scripture contains parables though there are parables in Scripture.

Timothy’s point is that all Scripture is inspired by God and is appropriate for the various uses intended. It is not a statement of Scripture’s contents.

Argument from silence is not always reliable.

In truth, the Bible contains loads of actual historical accounts describing God’s dealings with people and nations over centuries of time.

Such as the Exodus, the chronicles of Israel’s wars and her judges, priests and kings. The New Testament is replete with accounts of people and places. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea and His Crucifixion and Resurrection are attested historical facts.

As you know, certain religions regard the Resurrection of our Lord recorded in the Gospels as myth. Some Christians hold this view too.

The point being, why make a fuss over this so long as Jesus ‘lives in my heart’ and ‘lives are being transformed.’

But it was Paul who emphatically wrote:

“ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

**1 Corinthians 15 : 14**

## What about the Old Testament

There is strong, growing archaeological evidence supporting the historical reliability of the Old Testament. Josh McDowell's book on "New Evidence that Demands a Verdict" is a good primer.

About the book of Jonah, may I quote the comment of the Quest NIV Study Bible on **Jonah 1 : 17**:

"Since the Bible uses language that spoke to people in ancient times in terms they knew the word fish could refer to a whale, but the Hebrew is not specific."

The ESV Study Bible's commentary on **v17** notes, "*appointed*. This is the first use of 'appoint' that underscores God's sovereign control over creation (cf 4 : 6 – 8) . . . . a large whale such as a sperm whale could easily swallow a man whole."

These two modern versions reject neither the historicity nor the miraculous nature that a big fish could swallow Jonah and later vomit him on to dry land. These are accepted and explanations are offered. This is what we should try to do when faced with interpreting difficult passages in the Bible. The Bible says that the Lord prepared the fish (**Jonah 1: 17**). That is the explanation for the Jonah's survival and deliverance, incredible as it may sound to modern ears.

The letter also poses a question with an answer.

"Does it matter? Even if Esther and Jonah are fictional, does that really cast doubt on the validity and authority of the Bible.

Not at all! Can't God inspire two books based on fiction but in a historical setting to teach us some Godly lessons ?"

## Reply

First, the question is not whether God can or cannot do anything. The question is whether God caused to be recorded something untrue or imaginary in regard to the books of Esther and Jonah. Should we read Esther and Jonah as historical records of what really happened in real-time or shall we dismiss their miraculous elements because they sound odd to a world incredulous of the supra-natural ?

We do not have a wisdom superior to that which produced these books so that we can decide which parts need to be fictionalised in a historical setting.

The letter correctly defines the inerrancy of Scripture as, “all that is written in the Bible is inspired and Scripture is without error.”

The books of Esther and Jonah are a case in point. They are either historical and contain historical records of actual events or they are not. Esther and Jonah were either real people who went through real experiences under God’s guiding hand as described, or they did not. We are not at liberty to change miracles of divine guidance or preservation into fiction, as if Scripture is somehow in error in recording what obviously did not occur. These are not parables which are illustrations for the purpose of teaching and understood as such.

Second, by suggesting to Christians that a portion of the Bible could be regarded as fictional is to pander to our natural mindset.

Whenever a passage of Scripture ‘offends’ our sense of what our day and age consider scientifically possible we can choose an alternate, less contentious interpretation. The Bible becomes more ‘believable’ - but loses its Spiritual power. Holding such a view, the feeding of the five thousand was not so much a genuine miracle as fictionalised history to teach us how a little boy’s offering his lunch for Jesus to use shamed the multitude into producing their own hitherto hidden lunches.

No one has ever conceived of or seen such a display of divine power in all of recorded history. It matters not, you see, whether it was an actual miracle. The ‘miracle’ was the transformation of the crowd’s selfish attitude by a childlike, unselfish act !

Returning to the miracle of Jonah and the fish, consider what the Lord Jesus said. He interpreted the Jonah episode as literal history, because He was going to experience it Himself, literally.

“For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth.”

**Matthew 12 : 40**

Third, if we deny the historicity of the Jonah account, we are saying that Jesus was lying when He said what He said with regard to the similarity of Jonah’s experience and His. At best, He was misleading his audience.

If Jesus knew that Jonah was fiction and yet chose to compare it to his own literal burial there is no other conclusion that we can reasonably draw. This destroys the inerrancy of the Bible, that is, that it contains no errors of fact or doctrine.

Search the Scriptures and see how many other times Jesus referred to people and incidents from the Old Testament as historical truth.

And now for the book of Esther

The commentaries available provide extensive historical background of this lovely book but for our purpose let us listen to what the NIV and ESV have to say.

### **NIV Study Bible**

“Why was it written:

As a **history** to record the events leading to the establishment of the Jewish observance of Purim (9 : 24 – 3 ), and as a way to assure God’s people (especially) the Jews of his protection.”

Were the Jews deluding themselves by making up a historical account of how God saved His people from extinction?

### **ESV Study Bible**

“If Haman had succeeded, the Jewish people as a whole would have been destroyed, and the story of God’s saving work in and through Abraham’s descendants would have come to an end. There would have been no fulfillment in Christ, and therefore no gospel and no Christian church.

Nothing less than that was at stake. That is why Christians should read the book of Esther, not just as a story about the Jews but as part of their own heritage.”

It is a heritage based on God’s miraculous intervention in the affairs of men, whether in Persia or in Israel.

Come to think of it, wouldn’t it be strange if some future generation of Singaporeans were to be told that it does not matter if LKY, our founding father, ever existed or said and did all those things attributed to him? The important thing being that we continue to be loyal to principles established by practice.

### **On 'fiction' and 'fictitious'**

In the letter, 'Fiction' is defined as 'imaginary people and events' and 'Fictitious' also means 'does not exist'. Each of these two words may have its conventional usage in literature and journalistic reportage.

Conceptually, however, they are equivalent.

The letter quotes the commentator in one of the study sessions as having said, "also like Esther, Jonah is fiction but with a historical setting".

In effect he is saying that the characters and events in the books of Esther and Jonah need not be regarded as real but imaginary. That is how most people will conclude. It matters little whether the phrase 'in a historical setting' is appended.

### **Conclusion**

Mention is made, in the context of a study session, that 'other participants will have different learning points and encounters with God' and 'It is not just about information but transformation'.

The basis of Christian transformation - the ordering and alignment of our lives with Biblical values – depends on truthful information. It is based on the truth as enshrined in an infallible, reliable Bible.

While it may be argued that people differ somewhat in their interpretation of the Bible, it should not differ to the point of contradicting what it plainly says.

The attitude that is condoned in this letter while it may be done in Christian generosity of spirit has unintended consequences.

By choosing what we can tolerably believe as fact and what we can regard as fiction (essentially the prevalent 'what it means to me is what matters' attitude), we erode, slowly but surely, our trust in the inerrancy and therefore the reliability of the Bible.

Without a trustworthy basis for the authority of God's Word, the claim of its ethical and moral teaching on the church is weakened, as has already happened.

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