

Why Judge Prophets by the Spirit of Prophecy: Jonah, Part 1

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I John 4:1-3 – *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God; Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God; and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now it is already in the world.*

Revelation 19:9,10 – *... worship God; for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*

Prophets are rightly judged by their prophecies. To some people, testing the prophets is not complicated. According to them, you simply check to see if their prophesied events take place. If they do occur as stated, the person who gave the prophecy is considered a true prophet of God. If, however, those events do not occur, then the person is marked as a false prophet.

Is this all there is to judging prophets? Is this trying the spirits as John wrote? Jonah's forty-day prophecy is an example of where an unfulfilled prophecy does not mean that the person who gave it is a false prophet. The purpose of this study series is to show why this is the case, and why we must instead judge prophets by *the spirit of prophecy*. For all true prophets bear testimony of Jesus Christ by *the spirit of prophecy*, who is *the testimony of Jesus*.¹

Who Can Tell?

Jonah is best known² as the prophet who spent three days and three nights in the *belly* of a *great fish*.³ God had called upon him to go to Nineveh, the capital of ancient Assyria, to tell its citizens of His pending judgment, but Jonah did not want to go on this errand for the Lord.⁴ So God prepared an unmistakably unique way—that of entombing Jonah in a *great fish* three days and nights—for Jonah to be obedient in proclaiming God's judgment upon Nineveh.⁵

After arriving in Nineveh, far inland from where his journey had begun, Jonah delivered God's decree by telling the people that their *great city* would be *overthrown* in *forty days*.

Jonah 3:4 – *And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey⁶ and he cried, and said, Yet **forty days**, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*

¹ cf. I John 4:1-3 & Revelation 19:10 with I Corinthians 12:3-11 & I Corinthians 14:32; cf. Alma 4:9,10 with I Nephi 7:4 & III Nephi 9:62,63; cf. III Nephi 5:27,33,37-38 with I John 5:7-12

² Jonah should be best known for Jesus' quote in Matthew 12:33-35 IV (39-41 KJV), etc.

³ **Jonah 1:17**: Jonah was likely dead while in the *great fish* or *whale* just as Jesus was dead in the tomb; see, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fktX1EY8IJ0>

⁴ **Jonah 1:1-3** with **Jonah 4:1-3**; see **Amos 3:7** with **Isaiah 1:18-20**

⁵ **Jonah 3:1-3** with **Jonah 1:17** & **Mark 8:12**. See also **Jonah 4:1-11** with **Acts 9:15,16** & **Ephesians 4:1**

⁶ Nineveh was so large it took three days to travel across this city in Jonah's generation (**Jonah 3:3**).

However, Nineveh was not *overthrown* in *forty days* as Jonah said it would be.⁷ Did not Moses warn us about prophets who say certain things will happen in the future and then those things do not take place? In Moses' words, anyone who has foretold events that do not occur has spoken *presumptuously*, and therefore we do not need to be *afraid* of that person.⁸

Deuteronomy 18:21,22 – *And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously; thou shalt not be afraid of him.*

What did Moses say would happen to prophets who have spoken *presumptuously*, to those who *presume to speak a word* in the Lord's name?⁹ He said they *shall die*.¹⁰

Deuteronomy 18:20 – *But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die.*

Since Nineveh was not *overthrown* in *forty days* as Jonah said it would be, Moses' warning and instruction leave us with some questions:

- Would Moses have advised the people of Nineveh to wait those forty days to see if Jonah was right?
- After the forty days had passed without any destruction, would Moses have told them that Jonah had spoken *presumptuously* and to not *fear* Jonah in the future?
- Would Moses have even testified against Jonah before the people, saying he should die for prophesying judgments that did not happen as stated?

From the Ninevites' perspective:

- Should they have cited the principles outlined by Moses in *Deuteronomy 18:20-22* to justify waiting forty days to find out if Jonah was a true or false prophet?
- Would they have been wise to test Jonah in this way?

We know the answer to each question is no. Why? God commanded, even constrained Jonah to pronounce His judgment upon the Ninevites, not for them to test Jonah.¹¹ Plainly stated then, Jonah was not presumptuous. For, had the Ninevites failed to repent within those forty days, their city would have most assuredly been *overthrown* according to God's word.

To their credit, the people of Nineveh honored Jonah's prophecy by regarding his message as being from the Lord—as they ought to have done. Instead of waiting the forty days to see if Jonah was telling the truth, the Ninevites had chosen wisely to humble themselves before God and to repent of their evil and violent ways.

Jonah 3:5-8 – *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. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and*

⁷ *Jonah 3:10* with *Jonah 4:1-11*

⁸ *Deuteronomy 18:20* with *Jeremiah 5:31, Jeremiah 14:14, Jeremiah 23:14-40*, etc.

⁹ cf. *Exodus 20:7* & *Deuteronomy 5:11* with *Jeremiah 23:21,34*

¹⁰ cf. *Jeremiah 28:15-17* with *Deuteronomy 18:20* & *Deuteronomy 5:11*

¹¹ While God may have been testing Jonah, it was not the job of the Ninevites to judge him; cf. *Romans 14:4* with *I Peter 1:7-16* & *I Peter 4:12,13*. Notice also in *Jonah 4* God did not correct Jonah over the 40-day prophecy.

he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water; But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God; yea, let them turn everyone from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

What was their reasoning for being receptive to God's word which Jonah delivered to them? They gave serious consideration to how God might not punish them if they repented and turned back to Him in humility and repentance.

Jonah 3:9 – *Who can tell, if we will repent, and turn unto God, but he will turn away from us his fierce anger, that we perish not?"*

Notice how their reasoning was similar to the pattern the Holy Spirit led Joel to follow when calling upon the house of Israel to repent.

Joel 2:14 – *Therefore repent, and who knoweth but he will return and leave a blessing behind him; that you may offer a meat offering, and a drink offering, unto the Lord your God?*

By being receptive to God's words spoken by Jonah, the Ninevites let God's Spirit convict¹² them of their sins and lead them in works born of faith. In reply, God did indeed *return and leave a blessing* on them in keeping with the principle of grace revealed in Joel's prophecy. For in seeing the Ninevites' favorable response to Jonah's pronouncement of His imminent judgment, *God turned away the evil that he had said he would bring upon them.*¹³

Jonah 3:10 – *And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way and repented; and God turned away the evil that he had said he would bring upon them.*

In other words, the people of Nineveh experienced the grace promised by God's true prophets of old.

Psalm 86:5 – *For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.*

Isaiah 55:7 – *Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

Jeremiah 18:8 – *If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will withhold the evil that I thought to do unto them.*

Ezekiel 18:32 – *For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; wherefore turn ye and live.*

Joel 2:13 – *And rend your heart, and not your garments, and repent, and turn unto the Lord your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and he will turn away the evil from you.*

Micah 7:18 – *Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.*

Zephaniah 2:3 – *Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness; it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.*

¹² e.g. **John 16:7-11** with **Alma 9:1-12**

¹³ cf. **Jonah 3:10** with **Matthew 18:26,27**; see also **Isaiah 55:7**, **Micah 7:18,19**, **Proverbs 28:13** & **James 4:10**

There are times when it takes only one person or a small remnant to *stand in the gap* for God to *pardon* a city or a nation, or to defer His judgments upon it for a season.¹⁴

Jeremiah 5:1 – *Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it.*

Alma 8:28-32 – *Yea, well did he say, that if the time should come that the voice of this people should choose iniquity; that is, if the time should come that this people should fall into transgression, they would be ripe for destruction. And now I say unto you, that well doth the Lord judge of your iniquities; well doth he cry unto this people, by the voice of his angels, Repent ye, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Yea, well doth he cry, by the voice of his angels, that I will come down among my people, with equity and justice in my hands. **Yea, and I say unto you, that if it were not for the prayers of the righteous, who are now in the land, that ye would even now be visited with utter destruction;** Yet it would not be by flood, as were the people in the days of Noah, but it would be by famine, and by pestilence, and the sword.*

However, when the time comes that any people become *fully ripe in iniquity*, there is no turning back the judgments of God, not even through the intercessions of the faithful.¹⁵

II Nephi 12:20-26 – *For the day shall come that the Lord God will speedily visit the inhabitants of the earth; and in that day that they are fully ripe in iniquity, they shall perish. But behold, if the inhabitants of the earth shall repent of their wickedness and abominations, they shall not be destroyed, saith the Lord of hosts. But behold, that great and abominable church, the whore of all the earth, must tumble to the earth; and great must be the fall thereof: For the kingdom of the devil must shake, and they which belong to it must needs be stirred up unto repentance, or the devil will grasp them with his everlasting chains, and they be stirred up to anger and perish: For behold, at that day shall he rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good; And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say, All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well; And thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.*

Sadly, as Nahum would later warn, Nineveh was eventually destroyed.¹⁶ With the passage of time, the rising generations had likely forgotten God's grace extended to them in the days of Jonah. Perhaps they saw how nothing happened after those forty days, causing them to doubt God's warnings of judgment and their need to humbly seek His mercy as had their forebearers.

Since Moses' counsel does not address Jonah's unfulfilled prophecy, we need to understand when and where it does apply. Before taking up that topic directly, we will first review the words of Jesus Christ about Jonah and his ministry. Why? As discussed in a later part of this series, Moses said that everyone who does not hear Christ in all things will be cut off from God's covenant people.

The next part in this study series is titled, *The Sign of the Prophet Jonah and the Baptism of Jesus*.

¹⁴ cf. **Ezekiel 22:30** with **Genesis 18:19-42**; see also **Alma 6:11-13** with **Ether 5:7-10**

¹⁵ cf. **Mormon 1:77,78** with **Jeremiah 7:16** & **Jeremiah 11:14**

¹⁶ **Nahum 1:1-3:19** with **Zephaniah 2:13-15**