

Old Testament Historicity: The LDS Position

Jonah, Job, Genesis | Genre & Interpretation | Explaining to Protestants

1. THE KEY PRINCIPLE

First Presidency (1921):

"That is not of very great importance so long as the doctrines contained in the work are correct."

Doctrinal truth is more important than historical literalism. The purpose is to teach lessons, not record documentary history.

2. FIRST PRESIDENCY ON JONAH & JOB

Letter to Joseph W. McMurrin (Oct 31, 1921)

On Job: "It is held by the Church that Job was a real character. It is **barely possible** that the book was one of the kind prevailing in olden times, **setting forth certain principles in the form of a parable.**"

On Jonah: While they thought Jonah was a real person, they said it was possible the story was a **parable** common at the time. "It is of **little significance** as to whether Jonah was a real individual or one chosen by the writer of the book."

Cited in Thomas Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, p. 283

3. LDS SCHOLARLY RANGE

Ben Spackman (PhD, Claremont)

"What I'm suggesting is that **Jonah was originally a satirical parable** and understanding it historically is **actually wrestling the scriptures.**"

On Genesis 1-11: "It is **not intended to be literal, scientific...** It is a search for origins, to answer questions about our place in the world."

John Gee (BYU Egyptologist)

Argues for Jonah's **historicity** based on Assyrian records showing policy reversals that align with Nineveh's repentance.

Both positions are acceptable in LDS thought. Range of views = theological flexibility.

4. BYU RSC ON JONAH

"Only one general consensus prevails: **There is no definite physical evidence** known at the present time that can either prove or disprove the book of Jonah. Whether it is valid or invalid, historical or unhistorical, literal or allegorical, **is strictly a matter of personal preference.**"

Dating the Book

Language, style, and theology suggest Jonah was written **between 450 and 300 BC**—centuries after the prophet lived (~788 BC).

5. GENESIS: WHAT'S FLEXIBLE

Non-Negotiable:

Adam and Eve as historical persons

(D&C 137:5; 138:38-39)
Adam mentioned in latter-day revelation as real person who will return (D&C 116, D&C 27:11)

Flexible Elements:

- **The rib** — "Modern prophets have taught that the creation of woman from the rib is to be taken **figuratively.**"
- **Forbidden fruit** — "Probably wasn't an actual fruit but is a **symbol.**"
- **Creation timeline** — Not specified; early members speculated billions of years.

1931 First Presidency Memo:

"**Leave geology, biology, archaeology and anthropology,** no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, **to scientific research,** while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church."

6. UNDERSTANDING GENRE

Ben Spackman:

"There are different kinds of interpretation that go **WAY beyond 'figurative' and 'literal'**, which is really problematic as a binary."

"Ancient Israelites approached the use of history in scripture differently than modern authors. **Historical accuracy is actually a modern concept.**"

The Bible Contains:

- Historical narrative
- Poetry (Psalms)
- Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job)
- Prophecy
- Apocalyptic (Daniel, Revelation)
- Parables
- Law codes

We already read different genres differently. We don't read Psalms as literal history. Why force Jonah into that genre?

7. 2008 CHURCH CLARIFICATION

"In 2008, the Church clarified that **Latter-day Saints do not strictly adhere to biblical literalism,** allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of scripture."

8. EXPLAINING TO PROTESTANTS

1. Jesus Used Parables

The Prodigal Son wasn't historical but taught profound truth. If Jesus could teach through non-historical stories, why couldn't OT authors?

2. Genre Determines Interpretation

- We already do this:
- Psalms ≠ literal prose
 - Proverbs ≠ absolute guarantees
 - Song of Solomon = poetry

3. Moral Truth > Historical Precision

"The moral lessons embedded in such stories are considered **more significant than their historical accuracy.**"

4. C.S. Lewis: "Myth Became Fact"

Lewis rejected "myth = false":

"The story of Christ is simply a **true myth**: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that **it really happened.**"

Some OT stories may have **mythic qualities** (archetypal patterns, symbolic numbers) while still conveying **true teaching** from God.

5. Who Decides Without Revelation?

Protestants face a dilemma: Without continuing revelation, who authoritatively decides what's literal and what isn't? The result: thousands of denominations.

9. THE LDS ADVANTAGE

- **Additional scripture** — BOM, D&C, PGP provide witnesses
- **Continuing revelation** — Living prophets can clarify
- **Temple** — Creation taught symbolically/covenantally
- **Flexibility** — 1921 FP allowed room for interpretation

10. SUMMARY TABLE

Element	LDS Position
Adam & Eve	Historical (D&C 137:5), some details figurative
Jonah	May be historical OR parabolic
Job	May be historical OR parabolic
Genesis creation	Not a science textbook
Genre	Multiple genres; not all documentary

Bottom Line:

"That is not of very great importance so long as the doctrines contained in the work are correct."
— First Presidency, 1921

SOURCES

LDS: 1921 First Presidency letter; 1931 FP memo; 2008 clarification
Scholars: Ben Spackman (PhD); John Gee (BYU); Thomas Alexander
BYU: 2008 "Jonah: Testimony of the Resurrection"
FAIR: Genesis interpretation articles
C.S. Lewis: "Myth Became Fact" (1944)