

JONAH



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If what first comes to mind when you think of the prophet Jonah is that he was swallowed by a whale, then prepare to think about him in an entirely different way. For Jonah is a most unusual prophet. Unlike Hosea, Jeremiah, or John the Baptist, for that matter, whose fearsome utterances send chills down our spines, Jonah is someone with whom we can identify. Flawed and vulnerable, Jonah is very human—his response to God’s command to go to Nineveh is to hightail it out of there as fast as he can. As we look more closely at the book of Jonah be prepared to find in the prophet’s struggle many of our own struggles with God. And get ready to see God with new eyes, for the book of Jonah is basically a theological argument, where God’s true nature is revealed.

If Jonah is unlike other prophets, the book itself is also unique among the prophetic books. Prophetic books, in general, address a specific situation in

Israel's history. For example, the prophet Amos addressed Israel's religious hypocrisy and social injustice, while Jeremiah zeroed in on the people's flagrant disregard for the covenant and its stipulations. Narrative rarely appears in this genre, which is composed largely of prophetic utterances of one sort or another. But the genre of Jonah differs from the other prophetic books. The one prophetic utterance of Jonah is, as we shall see, highly ironic: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4).

Jonah is in the form of a story, like Esther and Ruth. The tale begins by introducing Jonah son of Amittai, who is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet sent by God to advise the king of northern Israel, Jeroboam II. While the author of Jonah may have had traditions and legends about the prophet at his disposal, the story he has written is in the form of a folktale, a genre in which characters are exaggerated, animals can talk, and fantastic events

occur—it is not unheard of in folktales for a fish to swallow a human being (see Tobit 6:3). It might be possible for us to identify a fish that could swallow a human being whole, but given the genre of Jonah, the more revealing question is about the creature's purpose in light of the larger theological conversation between God and Jonah. We should also note that the story was probably written sometime several centuries after the historical prophet Jonah lived, in the fifth or fourth century B.C.E., that is, in the postexilic period, after the people had returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. We will return to this fact when we reflect on the message of the book. Before outlining the larger theological conversation, let us turn to a closer look at the setting, plot, characterization, and the importance of direction and time in the book of Jonah.

Jonah is a story in two parts. Chapters 1 and 2 take place, for the most part, on the sea. Chapters 3 and 4 take

place on dry land. As we shall see, these settings are significant for the story.

The Story: Part One

The book begins with the prophet on dry land. Presumably, he is living in Judah, as Israel was called in the postexilic period, and he probably resides in Jerusalem. (Let us assume that the book does not connect him with Gath-hepher, as does 2 Kings 14:25.) We find him at what Jews would have assumed is the center of the world, the place where God dwells, having re-entered the temple, rebuilt after the exile (Ezekiel 43:4-5; Jonah 2:7). When Jonah receives God's command to go to Nineveh, he goes to the port of Joppa to find a ship to flee to Tarshish. Tarshish is located west of Judah. Some scholars suggest it might be Tarsus, home of the apostle Paul, but it is more likely the ancient city of Tartessus in southern Spain, even farther west. Whichever city it is, it is obvious that Jonah is

heading in the *opposite* direction of Nineveh, a city in the east, in northern Mesopotamia, which we now know as Iraq. Tarshish would have been considered outside of God's sphere of influence (v. 3; but see v. 9!). It was on the outer rim of the Mediterranean, the edge of the known world. Jonah is trying to get as far away from God as possible.

Jonah is so desperate to get away from God, he leaves the dry land and sets out on the sea. The ancients regarded the sea as treacherous. Recall the Genesis creation story: God imposes order on the watery chaos by making the dry land appear (Genesis 1:6-10). Frightening monsters, and other unknown dangers, lurked below the surface.

At sea in a boat, manned by an obviously "foreign" and "pagan" crew, Jonah's adventures really begin. It turns out that the Lord (Hebrew: YHWH) has pursued Jonah and "rocks the boat" by sending a wild wind that almost sinks the vessel (1:4). What follows is a

comic scene of sailors furiously bailing out water while Jonah descends to the hold for a nap.

This scene of Jonah's interaction with the foreign sailors reveals how the book's perspective differs from the rest of the prophetic books. For while they condemn the Israelites' sins, including their outrageous hypocrisy, their callous disregard for the poor, and their outright apostasy, the prophets on the whole do not have a kind word to say about Israel's enemies, the foreign nations who war with Israel. These foreign peoples may be God's instruments of judgment against the chosen people, but they will get theirs too someday. Jonah's book is different.

In contrast to other prophetic books, Jonah has no oracles against foreign nations. Instead, the foreign sailors are depicted as the most honorable, devout, and upright of human beings. They first honor their own gods by making offerings—throwing their belongings into the sea. In the face of the horrific

storm, they are trying to lighten the load as well, but the language here has a definite religious cast. The Hebrew word used for *fear* in v. 5 also means *awe*. Unlike Jonah, they revere their gods and call upon them when in trouble, putting their piety into action. When their gods prove to be ineffective, they shift allegiance to YHWH (vv. 14, 16), who, the book maintains, really holds power over the sea (v. 15).

In contrast to Jonah's lack of concern, the sailors show compassion, and refrain from lynching Jonah when they discover that he is to blame for the storm. Before they finally throw Jonah overboard, they try everything to save him (v. 13). When it becomes clear they must consign him to the sea, they ask forgiveness from Jonah's God for taking innocent blood. Even their act of throwing him overboard is depicted as an act of devotion, for they assume God desires it. Their faith in God is strengthened when God calms the sea. Faithful and devout, they are perfect examples

of obedient God-fearers, that is, foreign converts to YHWH.

Jonah, the chosen prophet of God, does not come off so well. He does not act like a devout person, or call upon God, or perform acts of piety; he goes to sleep. Even the foreign captain admonishes Jonah's lack of religious response. Jonah at least to an extent redeems himself by offering himself up to save the ship (v. 12). Jonah knows, as we as readers know, what's really going on here.

God is portrayed as the one true God, the God who really is in control, who can command the sea, and who inspires faith even in those outside Israel. But here God is also portrayed as threatening and dangerous, a God it is not wise to cross or defy. The book shows us a God who exhibits an all-encompassing but also harrowing mercy—all are delivered, somewhat bruised, yet awestruck by God's power.

Above all, YHWH, the God of Jonah, is rendered as doggedly in pursuit, a God who does not wait for the prodigal to return but goes after him. This is a God who sticks more firmly to us the more we try to peel God off, a God who is not above making our lives uncomfortable and our retreat difficult, and who is willing to go the ends of the earth, if that is where we are determined to go.

Chapter 1 concludes with Jonah being thrown overboard. He is plunged into the sea and sinks toward his terrifying fate, to be swallowed by a monster of the deep. Exactly what kind of fish is not specified; the word used is a general Hebrew word for a fish (1:17; 2:1).

We do not know how long the adventure at sea takes, but we are told that Jonah spends three days in the belly of the fish. This is significant because the ancients believed it takes three days for a soul to descend to Sheol, the realm of the dead (cf. Hosea 6:2). We hear

this idea in the Apostles' Creed, which says Jesus "descended to the dead." In Matthew 12:39-40 Jesus relates his death to Jonah's experience: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." In the dark depth of the sea, in the sea monster's belly, Jonah at last prays to the God he has been fleeing.

The story of Jonah's sojourn in the whale is related in poetic form in chapter 2. Strangely enough, this is not a psalm of repentance or a plea for help; instead it is a psalm of thanksgiving, but more about this later.

Jonah's flight has not only taken him away from God toward the edges of the world; it has also been a continual descent. He goes down to Joppa, goes down to the hold of the ship, and now he prays as if he has descended to Sheol, the lowest place in the cosmos (2:2). God dwells above the dome of the sky in the heavens, the highest point of

the cosmos. Jonah has reached the greatest distance from God. But God also inhabits the holy temple in Jerusalem, and it is to God in the temple, enthroned upon the mercy seat, that Jonah makes his plea (2:4, 7).

Psalm 88 paints a picture of Sheol where the dead are forgotten by the living, and even worse, forgotten by God (Psalm 88: 3-5). The Hebrew idea of Sheol shares the general Near Eastern view that it is a place from which one cannot escape. "I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever," Jonah says (Jonah 2:2, 6a). He throws himself on God's mercy because it is only God who can draw him up out of Sheol. This idea is also expressed in the Christian motif of the Harrowing of Hell, where in his descent to the dead, Christ breaks the bonds of Hell and sets the prisoners free. Desperate and remorseful, and knowing only God can rescue him, Jonah repents. This man who has spent his entire energy running away from God now *turns back* to God,

which is the meaning of the Hebrew idea of repentance: turning around and turning back.

However, as we noted, Jonah's psalm is a prayer not of penitence but of thanksgiving. Deep in the sea, in the belly of the whale, and for all practical purposes dead, Jonah already knows that God will be merciful, for he knows who God is, a God of mercy. This opens up questions about Jonah that will reappear later. What does Jonah really understand about God's mercy? What does Jonah believe one must do to get God's mercy? Who does Jonah think deserves God's mercy, and more crucially, who does not?

God responds to Jonah's repentance and gratitude, causing the whale to "spew" Jonah out onto dry land (2:10). It is not so important where, as much as that Jonah is back on dry land, back in the realm of safety and God's protection. As we all know, however, the process of salvation is not necessarily neat or pretty, and so as we end Part

One of the story we leave Jonah cast up on the beach, soaked in fish vomit, and recovering from his ordeal.

The Story: Part Two

In chapter 3, God repeats the command to Jonah from the opening chapter: “Go at once to Nineveh.” The repetition of the exact phrase in the Hebrew text in both 1:2 and 3:2, not always reflected in English translations, reminds us that precious time has been lost by Jonah’s attempt to escape.

Jonah reaches Nineveh and gets about one third of the way through the city when he delivers God’s message. It is the only prophetic word Jonah speaks in the whole book: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (3:4).

The Ninevites’ response is immediate and absolute. As soon as the people hear Jonah’s pronouncement they begin a fast, donning sackcloth, the traditional garb of penitence. The King of Nineveh

immediately dresses in sackcloth and ashes and decrees a strict citywide fast that forbids both food and water, and includes even the domestic animals. The Ninevites are so quick to act that we can imagine the whole city covered in sackcloth before Jonah manages to get to the other side.

The scene may be comic and exaggerated, but it gets the point across. The Ninevites are utterly committed to repenting and turning to God. In fact, at the very beginning the author states that “the people of Nineveh *believed* God” (3:5), using the same Hebrew verb that is used of the childless Abraham when he looks up at the starry hosts and believes God’s promise to make his descendants as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:6). God’s response in Genesis, “and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness,” echoes through this story of the repentant Ninevites. Like the sailors in the first part the story, the Ninevites believe in Jonah’s God, are unreservedly upright, devout

in their actions, and hope in God's mercy.

Before we think we can take the episode of the Ninevites at face value, we need to look again at Jonah's prophetic utterance, for it is possible to translate 3:4 in at least two ways. The Hebrew verb can mean either *to overturn*, as in destroying a city, or *to turn* or *change*, in the sense of a change of heart. So at the heart of God's message to the Ninevites is this ambiguous and ironic prediction that leaves open the possibility of judgment, or its opposite, mercy.

In Jonah 3:10 we read that God is impressed with the Ninevites' response, so much so that God relents and spares them. In the end, once again, the author portrays God as a God of mercy.

In the last chapter, chapter 4, the theological conversation about God's mercy comes to a head. Jonah's response to God's mercy for the Ninevites is disgust. Interestingly, the Hebrew

verbal root used of Jonah's revulsion is the same one used to describe the behavior of the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1; cf. 3:8, 10). It means *wickedness*, *evil*, or *trouble*. Jonah sees God's action toward the Ninevites as a great evil. He thinks God's behavior is fundamentally wrong; he is deeply offended by God's merciful response. Jonah takes God to task, delineating in great detail what God looks like: gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and often refraining from punishing (4:2). Jonah does not see these as positive attributes—at least when they are applied to others—and declares it is because God is famous for God's mercy that he fled to Tarshish in the first place.

However, coming in chapter 4—after Jonah has been saved from certain death and is himself a beneficiary of God's unconditional grace—Jonah's case against the Ninevites seems all the more mean-spirited and judgmental. Why is Jonah so outraged by God's merciful acts? Why does Jonah insist

that death would be better than to live and witness such offensive behavior on the part of his God (v. 3)?

We might look to history, for we know that Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, which destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E. History, though, may not offer as much help as we might like because if the book was written during the prophet's lifetime, which most scholars doubt, it was decades *before* Assyria became a direct threat. If the book dates to the 5th or 4th century B.C.E., as is probable, the book's date falls centuries *after* the destruction of the north. In addition, the Judean returnees to whom the story is directed would have been southerners whose most recent, greatest nemesis was not Assyria but Babylon. So we do not know what a Judean reader of Jonah's tale would have thought of the Ninevites. The issue might not be the Ninevites in particular as much as foreigners in general—due to the exile, the returnees harbored a

deep-seated fear of non-Jewish religious influence. Or perhaps Jonah simply believes that God should punish the guilty regardless—of course, except for Jonah himself. At any rate, one question hangs in the air after Jonah's outburst: who does Jonah think *is* worthy of God's mercy?

This is a question that was hotly debated in postexilic Judah. It was commonly believed that the temptation of foreign gods had led to the division and ultimate destruction of Israel in the first place, so there was a contentious argument in Judah about how to view and interact with foreigners. Books like Ezra and Nehemiah seek to restrict foreign influence, while Isaiah takes a more universal view and envisions a time when God will draw all peoples to the holy city. At the heart of the debate is the question: how wide is God's mercy?

The book of Jonah offers its own answer.

YHWH does not respond to Jonah's anger in kind, but answers Jonah's diatribe with a *mea culpa*, in essence, agreeing: "Yes, I'm all these things and more!" The comedy continues: YHWH once again patiently extends his mercy to Jonah with an object lesson involving the sun, a plant, a worm, and a hot wind. YHWH provides life-saving shade for the sulking Jonah by means of a fast growing plant but the next day appoints a tiny worm to destroy it, exposing Jonah to the harsh desert elements. Jonah petulantly insists that death is better than life, but YHWH cannot help but point out the tension between Jonah's misplaced concern for a plant and his total disregard for the welfare of the Ninevites. The book ends with YHWH posing a question, addressing the issue of who deserves mercy. In an answer reminiscent of Abraham's questioning of God in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:22-33), YHWH asks: Should I not be concerned with a great city, which has

over 120,000 clueless people and their animals?

So far as the Book of Jonah is concerned, there is no doubt where YHWH stands in this great debate over the scope of divine mercy.

We do not know Jonah's response. We do not know if Jonah ever gets it, we do not even know if Jonah gets up off the ground. But we learn from the book of Jonah that mercy is at the heart of who God is. God's compassion is revealed over and over again by what God does and what God says. The extent of God's compassion is exhibited in the mercy shown the foreigners, but they, at least, have dramatically repented. Even greater is the mercy God bestows on Jonah, whose repentance is at best questionable.

The book of Jonah is not the only view of Nineveh put forth in Scripture. There is, for example, the book of Nahum, which enumerates the atrocities committed by Nineveh and portrays

God as a righteous avenger who comes to the aid of the doomed, much like the allied troops who liberated the Nazi concentration camps. It is not a bad idea to read Jonah and Nahum together and join this great debate over God's judgment and mercy yourself.



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