

Preaching Jonah: Comedy, Gospel, and the Human Condition

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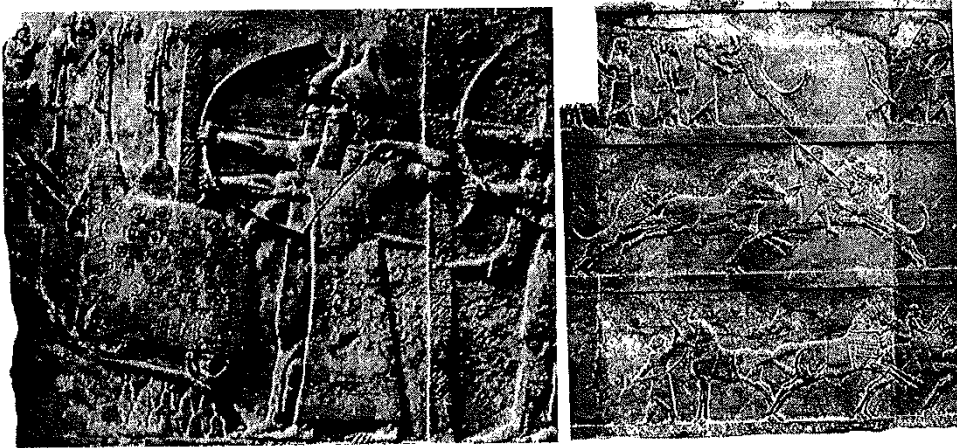
The book of Jonah has long intrigued readers. Children educated in church or synagogue grow up hearing the misadventures of the ancient prophet. The sheer folly of his attempt to escape Yhwh's assignment through travel, as well as the pomposity of his self-presentation as "one who honors Yhwh God of the Heavens" (1:9) and his final petulance in the face of divine mercy have all led interpreters to speak of the work as a cartoon of nationalism (Cadbury), as "annihilating satire" (Wolff), as a work with didactic tendencies (Nowack), or one undidactically leaving "no unambiguous dogma or decree ... [j]ust the mystery of divine compassion" (Craig), among other, not always compatible, views. Though understandings of the book as farce, satire, or didactic parable, depending on one's view of the precise comic register of the work, are preferable to more literal-minded readings that ask, for example, how a whale could swallow Jonah, they miss important elements of the book, simplifying what is in fact a complex moral lesson and reducing Jonah to an unsympathetic caricature rather than a person with a serious moral argument to make.

To understand Jonah, and therefore to preach it with understanding, we should remember that it explores a number of themes against a narrative background of the eighth century BC, the era of Assyrian domination of the ancient Near East. The mental picture of Assyria and its most famous capital, Nineveh, strongly color the book's moral discourse. Let us consider this background and then lay out some of the book's major themes.

Assyria in the Biblical Imagination

The book of Jonah opens with Yhwh commanding the prophet to warn the "wicked city" Nineveh of its impending doom. While the book gives little description of the city or the empire of which it was the center, the mere mention of Nineveh for any ancient reader after the Assyrian period evoked a complex set of mental images. The later text *Judith*, for example, portrays Nebuchadnezzar as king of Assyria, an obvious anachronism (which the book's writer must have known well). By the time Jonah was written, evidently during the Persian period, Assyria had become a memory. However, it was not merely a memory, not only because the Persian Empire deliberately imitated Neo-Assyrian artistic conventions (though alongside those of other conquered states), political techniques (though less savagely), and religious ideas. Of more immediate concern is the fact that the then consolidating biblical traditions spoke of Assyria in detail, and the consequences of Assyrian invasions of Syria-Palestine played out for several centuries. Not only did 2 Kings report Assyrian aggressions at length, but the prophetic traditions crystallizing in Isaiah

did so as well.¹ Assyria appears in several psalms, indicating a liturgical role of some sort for references to that state. If Psalm 83 is any indication, that role was related to the search for Yhwh's protection from that empire. Still more to the point, the references to Assyria take on a distinct profile: the empire menaces Israel, serving as an instrument of Yhwh's judgment, but it falls under judgment itself. Thus history is read in religious terms as a great drama in which the divine dramaturge escorts an empire on and off the stage, first to flourish, and then to die. As Nahum 3:18 puts it "Your shepherds slumber, O Assyria's king - your nobles dwell, your people is scattered on the mountains, and no one can gather them."



Literary Tools (Genres, Plot, Character Development)

The book of Jonah is a work of significant literary sophistication. It skillfully weaves together several genres to form a coherent and compelling story.

Genres in the book include a sea story (chapter 1), a thanksgiving psalm (chapter 2), a story of prophetic confrontation with a monarch (chapter 3; compare Daniel 2-6), and a dialogue between the prophet and God (chapter 4). Particularly striking is the inclusion of 2:2-9, a thanksgiving psalm. Although it has elements of both penitence and thanksgiving, the emphasis on the latter seems, in some ways, out of place in the story. How odd that Jonah should be grateful at this point! Though not drowning is preferable to the alternative, he does not explicitly repent or in any way seek to remedy his situation. He assumes that his ichthyological transportation betokens salvation.

Within these genres, several literary devices are present that advance the plot. (1) Each episode ends with God doing something (commanding a fish, relenting from punishment, or dialoguing with the prophet). (2) Three episodes embed internal dialogue, sometimes in several voices, while chapter 2 is entirely a speech. (3) Prayer figures throughout the book, often as a trigger for a change in the story. And (4) references to

¹ References to Assyria occur, e.g., in 2 Kgs 15-17; Isa 7-8; 10:1-11:16; 14:25; 19:16-25; 30:31; 31:8; Jer 2:36; Ezek 23:5; 27:23; 31:3; 32:22; Hos 5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 9:3; 10:6; 11:5; 12:2; 14:4; Mic 5:4-5; 7:12; Zeph 2:13; Zech 10:10; Ps 83.

meteorological and astronomical realities often mark transitions in the story (the storm in chapter 1 and the sunrise in chapter 4).

Another aspect of the plot development is the exploration of the character of Jonah. He appears at first as a rebel who flees without cause, then as a self-designated worshiper of the Supreme God, and then as a pious man of prayer inside a sea creature's belly. Having gotten the message, he goes forth to give it to a surprisingly accepting audience. Why? Jonah's internal motivations become a bit clearer when he laments to God, citing Exodus 34:6-7, that the deity's innate mercy poses a serious problem. The problem, hinted at rather than stated explicitly, is that God's mercy means pardoning the power most threatening to Israel. Perhaps Jonah's reputation as a prophet is also at stake, since if God relents, then Jonah will be proven wrong. But the larger issue, and a profound moral one at that, is how God can balance the need to mend human relationships while not increasing the opportunity for injustice. As the ancient Christian commentator Cyril of Alexandria (AD 376-444) put it,

"...the God who knows everything had the beneficial intention of demonstrating even to the ancients that

Hamilton's Rules for Humor in Preaching

1. It should be funny.
2. It should not be demeaning or insulting.
3. It should not be decorative or a "warm-up."
4. It should carry the weight of the Gospel.

people who were quite

alienated and caught in the toils of deception would also be attracted in due course to the knowledge of the truth, even if quite desperate, stubborn, and completely in the grip of obduracy" (p. 152). As agreeable as Cyril's reading is, it still leaves open the problem of God's involvement in the creation of a just and peaceful world.

The final literary tool available to the author is humor. Often the profoundly comical dimensions of the book get lost in our homiletical seriousness. However, the madness of sleeping while the boat was sinking, the proud claim to serve God (while in fact fleeing from God), and the episode with the gourd are all obvious comic elements. The same is true with the fish, which switches gender according to the Hebrew text, being first a *dag* (masculine), then with Jonah inside a *dagah* (feminine), and then a *dag* again after spewing him forth. Alone in the book, the fish obeys God without a basis in fear.

Themes in Jonah

In the course of telling a story, the book explores a series of themes, each worthy of the preacher's attention. In no particular order, they include

Prayer and Piety. In contrast to the disobedient Jonah, the endangered sailors piously pray first to their gods and then to Yhwh, humbly asking for mercy. Jonah prays from the fish's belly, and the Assyrian king calls on his people to pray penitently. The theme of prayer is extremely prominent in Second Temple Jewish texts (and earlier and later, for that matter). See, for example, Nehemiah 9 or the prayers in Sirach or the Greek version of Esther (often printed as "Additions to Esther") or Daniel. Prayerfulness characterized the pious Jew, and the misuse of prayer by Jonah marks him as something other than pious.

Prophecy as Warning. The idea that prophets warned wicked people of impending doom is also widespread in the Bible (for see Isaiah 6; Amos 3 and 7). Ideally, warning

should produce repentance. Such warning was a function of the prophetic conception of divine justice: if God does not warn people of impending doom and give them a chance to clean up their act, then God acts unfairly. This idea also lies behind Jesus' story of the "Rich Man and Lazarus." Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh because he does not wish to give people even a chance for repentance.

The Balance between Justice and Mercy. In his final conversations with God, Jonah expresses dismay about God's proneness to mercy. Their exchange subtly addresses a question: how does God balance the need to allow wicked people to repent and the need to protect innocent people from evil? The book rightly recognizes that Nineveh poses a threat to the peace of the world (see also Nahum), and yet it's people also come under God's care. The conundrum calls for serious moral reflection, which the book at least initiates.

Repentance. Repentance first appears on board the ship in chapter 1, where the sailors ask for divine forgiveness. Some commentators, such as Martin Luther, have interpreted Jonah's speech to the sailors as an act of repentance, though this is only one way to construe his words, and perhaps not the best way. The most conspicuous example occurs in chapter 3, when the Assyrian culture, even the animals, repents. While early Christian commentators thought of the reference to the animals as a touch of hyperbole, the book wishes to say that all the culture was implicated in oppression, and all turned away from it in time.

At the same time, readers of Jonah know that Assyria's repentance in Jonah did not really characterize its long-term behavior. Already in the fourth century, Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 350-428) noted that Assyria later became an oppressive power, as noted in the book of Nahum. In order to find consistency among the biblical books, such ancient interpreters argued that God's mercy becomes all the more precious in view of the reality of the possibility of reversing repentance.

However, this possibility makes Jonah's moral question all the more pressing. How do we know when repentance is genuine, or when the balance between mercy and justice is right? This is Jonah's question, too.

The Sanctity of Life. Yhwh's final question in the book asks Jonah to think about the value of created beings and to escape his simplistic division of the world into us and them. As creator, God cares for all beings and invites the covenant people to do the same.

Commentary on prophetic teaching. As part of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, the book of Jonah has to be read as part of Israel's internal dialogue about the nature of its relationship with Yhwh. (And, as Hosea 11 explains, this dialogue is also part of God's internal thoughts as well.) At one level, the book of Jonah criticizes an overly easy belief in Israel's specialness. Its critique is thus similar to that in Amos. On the other hand, the book also knows that Nineveh was eventually destroyed. So Ehud Ben Zvi is right when he says that

For a readership that focuses only on the fate of Nineveh in the explicit literary plot of the book, the target of the satire are those who are upset, or even infuriated, by YHWH's mercy and their theological positions. But a rereading of the book that is strongly informed by the eventual fate of Nineveh ridicules a construction of YHWH as deity in which mercy is the final and most absolute attribute. From this perspective, Jonah was absolutely wrong in imagining YHWH as a deity who cannot be expected to carry out a massive destruction of human (and animal) life (contrast

Jon. 4.10-11). The text advances a satire within a satire, or rather two satires informing and balancing each other (p. 21).

This is a more subtle way to understand the dynamics of Jonah, and I think a right one. The book does not offer simple answers because it does not discuss the workings of a simple God.

Final Homiletical Remarks

Preaching Jonah is challenging. To avoid the homiletical sins of moralizing and psychologizing, we have to take the story seriously and to recognize that it leaves important questions open. Yet its questions are of the most serious kind: is God just, and how do you know? What are the responsibilities of those who know God to those who do not? Is it ever appropriate to disobey an order given by God? The deep moral indignation of the prophet and the deep moral concern of God clash in the story. Out of that clash comes the raw material for preaching.

For Further Reading

Ben Zvi, Ehud, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

A more technical monograph that usefully thinks about how Jonah functions as part of the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets and, in particular, on how the book comments on other prophetic writings.

Cook, Stephen L. and S. C. Winter, eds., *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

Contains several articles on Jonah and the history of its interpretation. Especially interesting is Baruch Levine's discussion of "The Place of Jonah in the History of Biblical Ideas."

Craig, Kenneth M., *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1999).

Studies Jonah as a narrative, concentrating on plot and the interior and exterior lives of the characters.

Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets* (trans. Robert C. Hill; Fathers of the Church 116; Washington: CUA Press, 2008).

The fourth-fifth century Father gives an insightful commentary on Jonah, seeing it as a warrant for the Christian mission to the Gentiles.

Limburg, James, *Jonah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

A brief but informed commentary on the book, accessible to most readers.

Sasson, Jack, *Jonah* (Anchor Bible 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990).

Arguably the best commentary on Jonah in English. A bit more technical than some, but full of important insights into Jonah as a literary work.

Simon, Uriel, *Jonah* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).

A well-informed and literarily engaging commentary that deeply engages traditional Jewish interpretation as well as modern critical scholarship.

Stuart, Douglas, *Hosea-Jonah* (Word Biblical Commentary 31; Waco: Word, 1987).

A very solid commentary written for both scholars and others, with valuable exegetical insights for preachers.