

Jonah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jonah chapter 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his guard, and they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your guard. Perhaps the guard may give a thought to us, that we may not perish. And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

Then they said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, What is this that you have done? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then they said to him, What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, Pick me up, and hurl me into the sea, then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. Nevertheless the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

[2 : 27] The book of Jonah is the fifth prophet in the book of the twelve, perhaps one of the most famous stories of the Old Testament. It is also one of the most surprising and rich, containing intertextual depths that few plumb. In the context of the Old Testament, the subject matter of the story is surprising. It is a story of a prophet who goes to sea, and who also brings the word of the Lord to a foreign nation. Both of these things are rare within the Old Testament. The only other major boat story that we have in the Old Testament is the story of Noah and his ark. And in looking through the book of Jonah, we will find further connections between these two narratives. While the New Testament has stories of boats and fish on regular occasions, the Old Testament is dominated by land stories.

The anomalous subject matter of the book of Jonah is an indication of a shift that has occurred on other levels, a shift of the horizon beyond the immediacy of the land of Israel and Judah, as the word of the Lord goes out to a pagan nation. We don't know a great deal about the character of Jonah, beside the fact that he prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. We read something of Jonah's prophecies in a passage that gives us a sense of the historical background in 2 Kings chapter 14 verses 23 to 27.

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath as far as the sea of the Araba, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai the prophet, who was from Gath-Hefa. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.

But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash. Jonah would have been a contemporary or near-contemporary of Hosea and Amos, both of whom also addressed Israel during the reign of Jeroboam the second.

In 796 BC, the Assyrians under Adad-Narari III had defeated Damascus. Prior to this defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, the Syrians, or Arameans, had greatly troubled Israel. They had chipped away at its territory and caused them all sorts of other problems. Their woes continued after Adad-Narari's defeat of Damascus, and as a result, they were greatly weakened in the period that followed.

[4 : 57] After the death of Adad-Narari, Assyria wasn't the same power either. Their involvement and pressure upon the region was much diminished, and as a result, the northern kingdom of Israel was in a position to regain much of its lost territory. Things would later change with the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III. The story of Jonah, both on its immediate narrative level, but also on its deeper allegorical level, needs to be read against this historical background. Israel dwelt in a region caught between southern and northern powers. The southern power was generally Egypt. The rising northern power at this time was Assyria, later to be succeeded by Babylonia. Keeping the situation of Israel, and also the wider geopolitics in mind, we can also begin to understand the deeper levels of the story of Jonah. The clear structure of the story of Jonah is something that most commentators observe. Chapter 1 and 3 begin nearly identically, and as Uriel Suman observes, there is a common structural paradigm to be observed in the two scenes of the book. There is, he argues, a parallel to be drawn between the sailors and the Ninevites. The ship is in danger of breaking up, and Nineveh is threatened to be overturned in 40 days. The sailors pray to the Lord, and the Ninevites also seek God.

The sea stops raging, and the Lord also relents concerning the destruction of Nineveh. The sailors in the Ninevites provide a foil for understanding the Lord's dealings with Jonah. The Lord in the first instance pursues his prophet, and then Jonah refuses to pray to the Lord, and is cast into the sea instead. In the second instance, the Lord's mercy causes Jonah to get angry, and then he protests against the Lord's mercy, and watches the city, hoping that it might be destroyed after all. Then there are parallels between the story of the fish and the story of the plant.

In both cases, the Lord appoints these creatures to deal with his wayward prophet Jonah. Chapter 1 begins with Jonah being sent to the city of Nineveh. However, rather than going to the Assyrians in the city of Nineveh, as he has been instructed, Jonah tries to flee from the presence of the Lord. He makes a journey down. He goes down to Japha, goes to a ship going to Tarshish, the identity of which is uncertain, and then goes down into the boat. His desire is to escape from the presence of the Lord. The Lord is especially present in Israel among his people, and so Jonah wants to get as far away from there as possible. But his journey away from the Lord's presence is a descent.

The story of Jonah is one in which the Lord is seen to be sovereign over all of creation's forces. The elements of creation itself really come to the foreground in the book of Jonah. From the greatest, the waves of the sea, to the smallest, the worm in chapter 4. As the Lord hurls a great wind upon the sea, a mighty tempest arises. Faced with the possibility that the ship is going to break up, the pagan mariners pray to their various gods. Jonah, however, is somehow asleep in the inner part of the boat. As the crisis is beyond human power to respond to, divine help is sought. But the captain realises that Jonah is not participating, and so he goes down into the ship and rouses Jonah, sharply charging him to join in the prayer. Perhaps Jonah's god will listen to them.

When, despite their prayers, the storm continues to rage, possibly a storm that is of such focus severity that they can only take it as a sign of divine wrath against someone on the ship, they decide to cast lots to determine who it might be. When the lot falls upon Jonah, they seek to establish his identity, and to determine what he has done to provoke the divine anger. Jonah's response, of course, has an irony to it. He declares that the Lord is the god of heaven who made the sea and the dry land, and yet he is in the process of trying to escape from this god, trying to go away from his presence. As the psalmist in Psalm 139 points out, there is nowhere that you can flee from such a god's presence. At this point, the storm is only getting more severe, and they realise that they're going to have to do something if they're going to survive. Jonah, recognising that he has brought the disaster upon them, says that they ought to throw him into the sea. And yet they try and save his life. They row hard to get back to dry land, and yet they are not able to do so. When their efforts to get back to dry land fail, they call out to the Lord in prayer. They pray that the Lord would not lay the blood of Jonah to their account.

[9 : 06] As the Lord himself seems to have brought this situation about, they trust that they will not be held guilty for shedding innocent blood. Against the foil of their prayer here, and their subsequent sacrifice to the Lord, and their making of vows, the rebellion of the unfaithful prophet Jonah really stands out. As they cast Jonah into the sea, the sea is stilled, and the disaster is averted. Their response has all of the hallmarks of conversion. Here we clearly see an anticipation of what will happen in Nineveh. The people of Nineveh will also call out to the Lord in the face of an imminent crisis, and as that crisis is averted, they will seek his face. The chapter ends with the Lord appointing a great fish to swallow up Jonah. We're not told what type of fish it was, although historically many have speculated that it was a sperm whale. Jonah was in the belly of this fish for three days and three nights. When we step back from the immediacy of the narrative, we begin to notice some patterns in the story of Jonah. The name Jonah means dove, and among other things, at the beginning of this book, one of the questions is whether Jonah is going to get to dry land. In the story of the flood, the dove is sent out by Noah in search of dry land. Here in the book of Jonah, a similar theme might be in play. The world of Israel and Judah is about to suffer a new deluge, and the big question is whether the nations will survive and be brought to dry land on the other side.

Jonah himself reminds us of Israel. He is an unfaithful prophet running away from the word of the Lord, just as his nation Israel is. He's joined with pagans, just as Israel is joined with the pagan nations round about. And Israel's unfaithfulness will bring a storm of judgment upon the region, a storm that will threaten to overturn many nations beyond Israel itself. Israel will have to be thrown into exile.

But yet, as they are thrown into the sea of the Gentiles, the Lord will appoint a mighty sea monster to swallow them, and they will be protected in its belly. This should help us to see that the sea monster here, the big fish, is not just a random miracle. It is a sign. Jesus speaks about the sign of the prophet Jonah. It's important to recognize that this sign of the prophet Jonah was already a sign even before Christ related it to his resurrection. Jesus is taking up the meaning of this existing sign and relating it to something fuller within his own ministry. James Bajon has observed the theme of being swallowed by a great sea monster and then disgorged later on. In Jeremiah chapter 51, in verse 34 of that chapter, And then in verses 44 to 45, Later on in that chapter, we are told that Babylon would sink into the sea.

Already then, we can see that elements of the story of Jonah can be read as an allegory of the story of Israel. The unfaithful prophetic nation that is bringing this storm upon the region is about to be thrown into the sea of the Gentiles, where it will be swallowed up by the big fish of Babylon. Yet this big fish has been appointed by the Lord precisely in order to rescue the prophet and to bring it back and to set it on its mission once more. The story of Jonah then was already a sign, but Jesus uses it as a sign of his own mission in Matthew chapter 12 verses 39 to 40. But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Later on in Luke chapter 11 verse 30, For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. There Jesus suggests that Jonah was a sign not just to his own people, but also to the people to whom he was sent in Nineveh. What might they have taken from his sign? Perhaps for them, as for Israel, the sign of Jonah was a sign of the Lord's power over the natural forces, and also a symbol of his power over all of the nations. As the geopolitical order is thrown into a tempest, the Lord is sovereign over that tempest, and he can establish a power within that to rescue his people.

Jonah's sign is a symbol of exile and return, but also a symbol of death and resurrection. In the life of the people of God, this would take the form of exile, and then being disgorged by Babylon and sent back to the land. In the case of Christ, Christ goes to the deeper exile of the grave itself, and rises up from the grave, overcoming that exile. The Lord is God, not just of the waves of the sea, nor just of the powers of the nations, but over death and the grave themselves.

[13 : 57] In Matthew chapter 4 verses 36 to 39, we find a story of Jesus that clearly looks back to the story of Jonah, and which also looks forward fittingly to the story of his death and resurrection.

And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was, and other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.

But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

The book of Jonah has also been associated with the Day of Atonement. It is traditionally read on that day by the Jews. We might see already in this chapter some of the themes of the Day of Atonement. In the casting of lots, in which Jonah is selected and cast out of the ship, for instance, we might see a parallel with the scapegoat. In chapter 3, there will be mourning and confession of sins.

Shortly after, Jonah will build a booth associated with the Feast of Tabernacles. James Bajon first brought these connections to my attention. A question to consider. In Acts chapter 27, Paul sails for Rome, and there is a storm followed by a shipwreck.

[15 : 14] How does Luke's telling of the story of Paul's shipwreck in the book of Acts play upon the background of the story of Jonah? What can we learn from the similarities and the differences?