

Jonah 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jonah chapter 2. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, I called out to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me. All your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, I am driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me. Weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever. Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.

But I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. When reading Jonah chapter 2, we might wonder how it fits into the larger narrative. There is no statement of repentance on Jonah's part, and his prayer from the belly of the big fish has a number of elements that seem odd in its context. The prayer is framed, on the one side, by the big fish's swallowing of Jonah, and on the other side, with his vomiting of him out. One of the things that will help us to understand this prayer is to consider some of the wells of symbolism that it is drawing upon. A clue to one aspect of this is seen in a very strange detail at the beginning of the account.

At the end of chapter 1, the big fish was described as a male fish. At the beginning of chapter 2, the word that's used is the word for a female fish. What accounts for the shift between the two?

Perhaps the best way to understand this detail is to stand back from the text and to notice some of the symbolism that is taking place. James Bajon has observed the way that in Jeremiah chapter 51, verse 44, Bel in Babylon, that swallows Israel, is described using masculine language. However, Babylon itself, later on in that chapter, is described as feminine. As a predatory entity, Babylon is male.

As a place where Israel ends up, it's female. More interesting still is the way that Amy Erickson observes some of the symbolism of birth that's taking place here. She remarks upon the strangeness of the expression, out of the womb of Sheol. She goes on to observe other language in verses 1 to 6 that is elsewhere used in the context of birth. She suggests that the person crying in distress might also make us think of birth pangs. The realm of Sheol here is described in a way that has connotations, not just of death, but also of birth, and such connections are found elsewhere in scripture.

[2 : 49] The infant child is knit together in the lowest parts of the earth, in Psalm 139 for instance. Erickson argues that we should think of Jonah here as en-wombed. I have already noted the way that this story is one that evokes the events of exile and then return. The notion of such a movement being described as one of death and resurrection, and also as one of birth, fits well with the way that the events of the exodus are described. The exodus is presented as a sort of birth from the belly of Egypt. Now there's going to be another birth from the belly of Babylon. On the subject of the exodus, Erickson notes over a dozen points of contact between the language of this passage and the language of the song of the sea in Exodus chapter 15 verses 1 to 19. The term salvation, he threw them into the sea, or threw me into the deep in Jonah. The red or reed sea in the reference to the reed in verse 5.

Two different terms for the deep or the deeps, and then a reference to going down, the heart of the sea or the seas, the earth as the underworld, passing over, swallowing, loyalty, the Lord's holy abode or sanctuary, dry ground. Interestingly, there is also a reference to three days journey immediately after the song of the sea in Exodus chapter 15 verse 22. We should also notice the way that this passage evokes the situation of Genesis chapter 1 at the very beginning of the creation, prior to things being formed out of the great deep. Jonah is being returned to this de-created state, out of which he will be brought forth once more. Throughout the book of Jonah, there are many elements of the original creation.

We have sea monsters, we have the deep, we have storms and great winds, we have beasts, we have the burning sun, we have a weed in this chapter and we have a gourd in chapter 4. The great drama of Jonah is taking place within the world of the most basic elements. As in the story of Noah and the ark, he's a man adrift in the deep. Like the dove in that story, he's seeking for dry land. We might also recognise the importance of the themes of dry land in the story of the Red Sea Crossing, which is also alluded to here, and the story of the original creation, where the dry land is established on the third day. One of the interesting things about Jonah's prayer is the way that it speaks about a former deliverance.

I called out to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. It seems likely that he sees the big fishes swallowing of him as the first token or sign of the Lord's fuller deliverance. It's the sign that his prayers have been heard, and he anticipates that the Lord will bring this salvation through to completion. He begins by speaking about the Lord in the third person, I called out to the Lord, and then shifts to the second person, and you heard my voice. Describing his former situation to the Lord, he multiplies the different ways that he describes the waters of the deep. The deep, the waters, the billows, the flood, the waves, the heart of the seas. Beyond the language of the deep, he also speaks about subterranean themes, the roots of the mountains, going down to the land whose bars closed upon him forever. Descending into the pit, he is undertaking a passage into the realm of death, into the order that preceded the days of creation, and also a sort of return to the womb.

The language of the Psalms is not far in the background of Jonah's prayer here. We might think of Psalm 120 verse 1. In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. Well, Psalm 18 verses 4 to 6.

[6 : 17] The cords of death encompassed me, the torrents of destruction assailed me, the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the Lord, to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. Jonah is making his own prayer here, but he's using the language of the Psalms in order to do so. The reference to the reed at the end of verse 5 is a surprising one, translated as weeds plural in most translations.

The term is actually singular, and it also relates to the language that's used of the reed sea or the red sea in the book of Exodus. Kevin Youngblood observes that this is another surprising detail of the text. Reeds are not usually associated with the sea, they are more typically associated with fresh waters. He suggests that taken with a term that would typically translate as river in verse 3, there's a reference here to a river ordeal. He writes that the descent that Jonah is experiencing ends up at the same place, the river, where judgment by river ordeal takes place to confirm Jonah's guilt and the propriety of his being confined in Sheol. The mention of the reeds enhances the imagery of the river ordeal, as Jonah finds himself bound and yanked down by the entangling river plants.

He also observes that language of being enclosed, enveloped and wrapped, all evoke a process of Jonah being wrapped in grave clothes and buried in a tomb. The prayer of Jonah is a response of thanksgiving to deliverance. From the deep, Jonah calls out to the Lord, seeking his holy temple. Verse 7 describes the Lord's hearing and answering of Jonah's prayer, just as his life is fainting away. While there is no call to praise within this prayer of deliverance, it does move towards a commitment to pay vows to the Lord, and also to worship the Lord in his temple. The Lord addresses the fish that he has appointed. We might think of the fish here as a sort of leviathan, a great and terrible sea monster, who is nevertheless under the rule of the Lord. The fish vomits Jonah out upon the dry land. Jonah, whose name means dove, moving from the engulfing chaos of the deep to the dry land at the end of chapter 2, does seem very fitting. One of the questions that the interpreter of Jonah chapter 2 will have to face is raised by verse 8. Jonah speaks of those who pay regard to vain idols forsaking their hope of steadfast love. About whom might he be speaking here? Is he thinking about the pagan sailors of chapter 1? That might invite us to compare and contrast their calling upon the Lord and Jonah's calling upon the Lord. In light of such a comparison, many commentators do not have a favourable impression of Jonah's prayer here. A question to consider. What is your impression of

Jonah's prayer? To what extent should it be regarded as sincere? Should we perceive a subtext in verse 8, either referring to the pagan sailors or to the pagans of the city of Nineveh?