

Jonah: A Prophet Who Was Irritated By God

Centuries before the birth of Christ, an Israelite storyteller asked himself some “what if?” questions:

- What if a genuine prophet refused to co-operate with God, while all around him pagans responded to God at the slightest suggestion?
- What if this prophet knew how to compose lovely prayers, but rather than pouring out his inner thoughts to God, he hoarded up secret anger against God?
- What if he got depressed not because he was unable to get people to turn to the Lord but because he *succeeded* in leading people to turn to the Lord?

Our storyteller turned these possibilities around, & into his mind came the picture of a prophet: not a Charlton Heston type of prophet, a figure of seriousness & gravity, but a lightweight fellow, a Stan Laurel kind of prophet – the sort of person who, when faced with imminent catastrophe, might take a nap. With this figure in mind, the storyteller was ready to put pen to papyrus.

“Now,” he began, “*the word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh & cry out against it.’ But Jonah set out to flee from the presence of the Lord.*” The phrase “*The word of the Lord came to so-&so*” was a standard biblical way of reporting that God had entrusted a message to a prophet. “*So-&so set out to flee from the presence of the Lord*” was a very non-standard way for a prophet to respond! Obviously Jonah was going to be an unusual prophet.

Reading the story of Jonah, we can sense that the author was pleased with his literary creation. Jonah is an entertaining non-hero. We have no way of knowing whether the author also thought that his story was inspired by God. But many people in Israel did. They recognized in this little story a message from God, & they showed their recognition by placing it in the library of Israel’s inspired writings – the library that has become the Old Testament of the Christian Bible.

In the library of the Bible we find history & law, prophecies & letters. Amid these imposing volumes, is there a place for a little humour? Apparently so, for if humour lies in perceiving an incongruity, there is plenty of humour in this short story. At every turn, Jonah violates the expectations that Israelite readers would have had. For example, Abraham prayed for the wicked city of Sodom to be spared divine retribution; Jonah gets angry because God does spare a city. Job cried out in anger against the Lord for being harsh to the innocent; Jonah cries out in protest because the Lord shows mercy to the guilty. Elsewhere in the Bible, the people of Israel often reject the warnings of prophets, even when they speak at length. In the book of Jonah, pagans respond as soon as a prophet opens his mouth.

Of course, to describe the story of Jonah as humorous is not to say that it is not also serious. Detecting the serious issues beneath the surface of the story is part of the enjoyment of reading Jonah. Before we begin reading the book of Jonah, it may be helpful to explain a few elements in the story's background. This background was familiar to the ancient audience but is unfamiliar to most of us today.

The author identifies the Jonah of the story with a real Jonah, Jonah son of Amittai, who lived in the eighth century before Christ & is briefly mentioned in one of the historical books of the Bible (2 Kings 14:25). This places Jonah at a particular point in Israel's history: the story takes place a generation or so before the armies of the Assyrian Empire descended on Israel, grinding the northern portion of the country to dust & turning the southern portion into a political satellite.

Even in an age of ruthless warfare, the Assyrians were known for their savagery. They incinerated cities, drove people from their homes, & abused prisoners of war. One of the Assyrian emperor's palaces was decorated with wall panels that proudly showed his soldiers performing what today we would call military atrocities & crimes against humanity.

It is to the capital of this evil empire, to Nineveh (in modern-day Iraq), that God sends Jonah to preach. The first readers of the story lived after the Assyrian onslaught. They could readily understand why Jonah might have been reluctant to carry out such a mission.

The book of Jonah is often referred to as a short story. Does that mean that it did not really happen? Some readers may wonder whether denying that Jonah is historical betrays skepticism about miracles, with which the story is loaded. Does interpreting Jonah as fiction lessen its importance?

For centuries Christians & Jews did consider the story of Jonah to be historical. For example, in the fifth century Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, defended the story against the charge that the miracles it recounts are impossible. "Certainly what happened to Jonah is unexpected & beyond reason & custom," Cyril admitted. "But if the all-powerful God wished to accomplish it, who will refuse to believe it?" Cyril refuted the arguments of the book's pagan mockers by pointing out that in their own religious literature they encountered many things stranger than a sea monster saving a prophet by swallowing him.

However, it is not because of skepticism but because of an analysis of the text itself, its language & style, that most scholars today regard Jonah as an imaginative story. & this view does not make the story less important, any more than Jesus' stories about a kindly Samaritan & a wayward son (Lk 10 & Lk 15)

are less important than accounts of actual people. The questions the book of Jonah raises are no less serious & the messages it conveys are no less true than if the story were historical fact.

Before you begin to read the book of Jonah, here are a few suggestions for how to get the most out of your reading:

- The author refrained from telling us everything we might like to know about why Jonah does what he does; this forces us to try to work out Jonah for ourselves. Jonah is a puzzling person, so be prepared to be puzzled! Be ready for a story where the storyteller leaves us guessing until the end - & even then.
- The author of Jonah was a talented storyteller (it seems a shame that none of his other stories have survived). The story is very cleverly put together. Every word counts. To get the most out of the story, slow down! Read carefully, & reread. One suggestion is to read the whole story in one sitting. It shouldn't take too long – it's only three sides of A4!
- As you read, ask yourself: How am I like Jonah - & do I want to be? At the end of the story, God puts a question to Jonah that challenges him to change. In what way is God's question also directed to you? What would it mean for you to answer God's question?
- When you get to the end, ask yourself: What is the central, serious issue that underlies this story? Why did the author decide to deal with this issue by means of a little humour? What makes this issue so difficult to confront? Where do I face this issue in my own life?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Denis McBride C.Ss.R., *Journeying with Jonah: The Struggle to Find Yourself*, Redemptorist Publications, Chawton Hampshire, 2015.

Paul Murray OP, *A Journey with Jonah: The Spirituality of Bewilderment*, The Columba Press, Dublin, 2002.

Phillip Carey, *Jonah*, SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible, SCM Press, London, 2008.