

Food for Thought Article: “Going Deeper with Jonah.”

Introduction: “You can’t be serious!”

The Biblical book of Jonah makes me smile because of all the incongruity humour it contains. Even now I am grinning from ear to ear as I remember preaching on chapter one and just as we got to the words ‘a huge fish swallowed Jonah’ there was a power cut and the whole church was plunged into darkness!

Incongruity humour arises out of the tension that is created when concepts which are incompatible are placed side by side and are then resolved in unexpected ways. There is a difference between our expectations of what will happen and what does happen! Jonah was sent to the capital city of a heathen nation. That had never happened before! Jonah was sent East to Nineveh but travelled West to Tarshish! God’s prophets normally obeyed God, but, initially at least, Jonah did not. All this is highly unusual.

The great wind and the raging sea grew calm when Jonah was thrown overboard and then Jonah was swallowed by a huge fish/whale from where he prayed! *[Note: from now on I will call the ‘huge fish’ a ‘whale’]*. His prayer didn’t emanate from the majestic temple in Jerusalem but from the belly of the whale in the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah left Joppa by ship but returned by submarine!

And strangely, not only did the superstitious, idolatrous sailors learn to pray, fear, and worship the Lord through Jonah’s ‘witness,’ but the whole city of Nineveh repented when Jonah spoke only five words to them in Hebrew! (Eight words in English: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed”).

I remember being asked to speak about Jonah at a church in the great city of London with its 9 million inhabitants. I wondered how it would be if the whole city repented at my words. It did not! But whereas most preachers and evangelists would be overjoyed if a whole city was converted through their ministry (think of the kudos!), Jonah was not best pleased! His anger knew no bounds and he became depressed and suicidal.

Neither do we know what became of poor Jonah. The saga ends abruptly, leaving us all ‘up in the air’. The book is also unusual in that whereas most Old Testament prophetic narratives trace the process whereby a Divine utterance **is** fulfilled, this breaks the pattern by showing how and why a Divine utterance is **not** fulfilled. If all this doesn’t make us laugh, what will!?

So, is the book of Jonah just a fishy tale or should we take it more seriously?

The Book of Jonah as a Dramatic Story:

The Writer

Every story must have someone to write it. Most of the book of Jonah, (except 2:2-9), I believe, was written by someone who acted as Jonah's amanuensis/scribe. It was probably someone close to Jonah, in whom Jonah had confided, and who wrote down the story of what happened in the third person.

This writer, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, probably put his own 'stamp' on what Jonah was telling him and he comes across as a quietly authoritative figure who has complete knowledge of all that goes on but never comments on the rights and wrongs of what is happening. The writer here maintains strict neutrality. It is up to us, the listeners/readers, to make value judgements, but nothing is prescribed.

The writer also uses a certain amount of satire (the exposure of human vice through ridicule), irony (the implicit conflict between two different points of view) and hyperbole (rhetorical exaggeration), to get his points across and to give the story life and colour.

The section which Jonah, I believe, must have written personally is his psalm of thanksgiving, his hymn of praise for his salvation ~ 2:2-9. It is his personal testimony of what happened to him, written in the first person, after he was thrown overboard from the ship. Go through the psalm and underline all the 'I,' 'me,' 'my' words.

Perhaps I should say here that I realise that the view I have just expressed is not shared by everyone! Whereas I am assuming that the book was written around the middle of the 8th century BC, some think it was written post-exile, somewhere between 500-400 BC, and that it is a fabricated story based loosely on Jonah and that the psalm was 'imported' to fit in with the storyline.

The Characters

For a story to communicate effectively, there must be people in it with whom we can identify in some way e.g. the Captain, the Sailors, the City-dwellers of Nineveh, and their King etc. There must also be some complex characters who are conflicted within themselves which affects their relationships. The two conflicted and complex characters in this story are Jonah and God himself.

The Plot

This serves mainly to create and build tension, then to resolve it, and then to leave the reader with some kind of lesson to be learned.

In chapter one for example, the first tension point is when Jonah disobeys the Lord and goes off in the opposite direction. This represents a clash of wills between the two main characters.

The tension is further heightened when God hurls a strong wind on the sea and the storm builds. The tension is resolved when Jonah is thrown into the sea and it calms down at once. But then the tension increases again with the news that a huge fish/whale has swallowed Jonah.

This is great story-telling!

The plot is carried along by various agents which are all appointed by God i.e., the storm, the whale, the plant, the worm, the sun, and east wind. All these agents are either constructive or destructive.

Notice too how the writer, in chapters one and two, uses 'symbolic geography' as part of the plot i.e., horizontal - East and West, and vertical – up and down. We have already noted that God told Jonah to go to Nineveh in the East, but he fled to Tarshish in the far West. And as Jonah fled away from God he went '**down**.' He went '**down**' to Joppa; he went '**down**' into the bowels of the ship; he laid '**down**;' he went '**down**' into the deep, '**down**' to the very roots of the mountains, '**down**' to Sheol, the world of the dead.

When we disobey God, we are on the way down. Sin and disobedience lead to descent and death. But then salvation brings Jonah 'up;' things start to move upwards, vertically. Jonah came up to the surface: "You, Lord my God, **brought my life up** from the pit;" "my prayers **rose** to you, to your holy temple." Pilgrims always went **up** to worship God in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is 2,474 feet above sea level (754 metres).

Compare salvation through Jesus: He came down to earth from heaven. He went down to death, went down into Sheol. He descended into hell, before being raised up and then exalted at the Father's right hand.

"What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions. He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe." (Eph. 4:9&10).

And of course, ‘When he [Christ] ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people” (Eph. 4:8). We, in Christ and like Jonah, have been brought up from the depths of disobedience, and death. “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6).

We have also been given gifts which he wants us to use in obedience to him.

The Emotional Impact

To communicate effectively, any story, play, film etc. must have people who are expressing powerful emotions. The writer of the book of Jonah really does ramp up the emotional intensity! For example, in chapter 1 verse 5 we read that the sailors were ‘afraid’; in verse 10 they were ‘terrified’; and in verse 16 they ‘greatly feared the Lord’.

In chapter 4 verse 1 Jonah ‘became angry’ and then his anger escalates further until we read in verse 9 that he ‘was so angry I wish I were dead’. Meanwhile he had been ‘very happy about the plant’ (vs. 6).

The book of Jonah really is an emotional rollercoaster!

The Symmetry and Balance

As a dramatic story, the writing is a model of literary artistry which is marked by symmetry and balance. For example, 1:1-3a and 3:1-3a are parallel. Also, the 4 episodes of the overall plot correspond with each other.

Thus, in chapter 1, Jonah is set in a social situation in which a pagan group (the sailors) under their leader (the captain) are in trouble and appeal to God for help. Correspondingly, in chapter 3, Jonah is again in a social situation in which a pagan group (the Ninevites) and their leader (the King) are also in trouble and appeal to God for help.

By way of contrast, but still balanced, we read in chapters 2 and 4 that Jonah is devoid of any human company and speaks directly with God alone.

Alternatively, we may put chapters 1 & 2 together and see how they are balanced by chapters 3 & 4.

However, having considered some aspects of the book of Jonah as a dramatic story, what kind of literature (genre) is it that we are reading? This, it seems to me, will greatly influence how we interpret the book and what lessons we take away from it.

One of the most popular interpretations is to view the book as a parable. Certainly, it has the comparing, contrasting and symmetrical aspects of a parable. It also leaves readers with some things unresolved which require further thought. This too is typical of a parable.

Some see it as basically an allegory, where one thing is being described under the image of another. So, for example, the whale that swallowed Jonah represents the Assyrian Empire which would eventually 'swallow up' Israel by capturing and taking away the 10 northern tribes.

However, this, for me, is not the whole story.

Chapter 2 verses 2-9 is neither a parable, nor an allegory; it is a psalm. And the Hebrew poetry of psalms is always based on real events, albeit sometimes described in figurative, picture language.

Could the Book of Jonah be understood as a factual, historical account, whilst also using a diverse range of styles of writing?

The reasons for believing the book of Jonah to be non-fiction, literally true, include the following:

1. The book deals with real people and real places mentioned in other parts of the Bible. Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 and so we know he was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel during Jeroboam II's reign (793-753 B.C.)
2. The 'great city' of Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. This city, near Mosul in today's northern Iraq, was indeed one of the greatest, oldest, and richest cities in antiquity. At the time of Jonah's visit (around 780 BC), it was the largest urban centre in the world (admittedly 'modest' by present day comparisons but it was nevertheless mightily impressive for its time). It was a great feat of engineering with massive walls and 15 gates into the city. It had canals, irrigation ditches, aqueducts, gardens, parks, and a zoo.

It was regarded as a great commercial and cultural centre. King Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC) set up a library which held over 30,000 inscribed clay tablets, the books of that time.

However, its wickedness was also on a grand scale. We could call it 'Sin City.' Idolatry was everywhere. Carved images and cast idols adorned their temples. Their main goddess was Ishtar. The people regarded themselves

as being like lions - proud, ruthless, powerful, to be feared. The lion was the emblem of Assyria.



Wooden Carving of the Goddess Ishtar with Her Lions

Sexual immorality was rife as was occultism. They were also a cruel nation impaling their enemies on stakes. The prophet Nahum asked of them, "Who has not felt your endless cruelty?"

Self-indulgent luxury was also prevalent. One of the most famous Assyrian Kings was Sennacherib (705-681 BC). He described his palace as "The Palace without Rival." Using modern parlance, he might have said it was the 'Mother of all Palaces.'

3. Jesus treated Jonah as a real person. Jonah lived at a place called Gath Hopher (2 Ki. 14:25) which was near Nazareth. Jesus must have grown up knowing all about Jonah. Jonah was a local lad! Jesus said of himself that 'a greater than Jonah is now here' and what is more remarkable is that Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet that Jesus directly compares himself to. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Mt. 12:40)
4. Jesus also treated the repentance of the Ninevites as an historical event.

To the Pharisees and Teachers of the law Jesus said: "The Men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here." (Mt. 12:41)

Jonah's death by drowning.

I believe that when Jonah was thrown over the side of the ship he sank right to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea – he died, he was drowned. This, for me, makes most sense of Jesus' words about Jonah i.e. Jonah and Jesus both being brought back from death having been 'entombed' for 3 days and nights. The whale (there are many whales in the Mediterranean Sea), didn't save Jonah from drowning but brought him back to the surface after God had brought Jonah back to life by re-uniting his body and Spirit.

Whales are amazing, intelligent creatures. The world record depth for a tagged whale to dive is currently 2,992 metres. Whales typically stay under water for 5-15 minutes, but sperm and beaked whales can stay under for just over 2 hours. Their lungs are a lot more elastic than ours and act like giant bellows. They can shut down parts of their body when submerged, and their blood, which is very dark red, almost black, contains high levels of haemoglobin and myoglobin which enables their blood to carry more oxygen. When they go to sleep, only half of their body shuts down at a time whilst the other half remains alert and awake. They sleep with one eye open and one closed ~ try that when you go to bed tonight!

What's even more interesting is that whales have been seen to carry small, sick, or dead whales in their mouths (including dolphins which are classed as 'toothed whales'), even carrying them around over a period of a few days. So, a whale would be an appropriate air-breathing mammal for God to use to pick up the body of Jonah from the seabed and return it to shore.

Jonah's psalm (2:2-9), indicates his experience as he sank down to the bottom of the sea, as his life ebbed away. He was taking on water, he finished up at the 'roots of the mountains' i.e. the sea-bed, and he remembers that 'seaweed was wrapped around my head.'

A drowning person gradually loses consciousness and dies primarily by carbon dioxide poisoning within a few minutes. After he died, Jonah was aware he was now in 'Sheol', the grave, the place or realm of the dead (vs.2). And it was from there that God brought him back to life and arranged for the whale to pick him up, bring him back to the surface and deposit him on the beach.

Jonah was now full of praise that the 'Lord my God brought my life up from the pit' (6b). But Jonah's 'shouts of grateful praise' (vs. 9) didn't last very long!

What was going on inside Jonah?

When people read the book of Jonah, they are often fascinated by what was going on inside the whale. However, it is a much more fruitful line of enquiry to ask, 'What was going on inside Jonah?'

Overall, Jonah was a disgruntled, angry, 'pouting prophet.' In chapter 4, the Hebrew words used to indicate his anger show that he 'glowed' with anger and that he wasn't just angry, he was 'damned angry' (vs. 9). Given his miraculous deliverance/salvation and his powerful testimony, why was he so angry?

Part of the clue to understanding his anger is his previous experience of God. It is surprising how many folks are angry with God because of what he has or hasn't done in the past.

As we have already noted, Jonah was called to be a prophet in the time of King Jeroboam II (793-753 BC). Jeroboam II was yet another of the evil Kings of Israel but the surprising thing for Jonah was that God appeared to bless the King's reign, extending the borders of Israel, and giving him significant victories over Israel's enemies (2 Kings 14:23-29). He saved Israel at that time.

Jonah was puzzled by this; surely God should be acting in judgement and punishing His people not blessing them! It made no sense to Jonah at all, although he did learn from this that God is 'gracious and compassionate,' 'slow to anger' (unlike Jonah!), 'abounding in love' and a God who 'relents from sending calamity' (Jonah 4:1&2). However, knowing all this was not enough to assuage his anger apparently.

He had learned all this about God's nature and character when he was still at home in Gath Hopher. But Jonah was not impressed by God's forgiving nature.

Unlike many today who think that the God of the Old Testament is a vindictive, judgemental God, Jonah believed the opposite - that God was too soft. So rather than go and call to repentance the nasty, cruel, Assyrian enemies of Israel in Nineveh, he would much prefer it if God zapped them!

We see the same attitude in two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, (the sons of thunder). They were ready to call down fire from heaven to destroy the hated Samaritans when they refused to receive Jesus (Lk. 9:51-55).

God's pastoral care of Jonah.

Whenever we feel any strong emotion which is too powerful for us to handle, especially anger, we can talk to God about it. All powerful emotions, if they are becoming destructive, must first be acknowledged, and then evaluated.

Jonah, in chapter 4, had become suicidal, so God said to him, 'Jonah, is it right for you to be angry?' 'Is your anger justified?' And then God allowed Jonah to have another experience that tested him even more!

Jonah had plonked himself down to the east of Nineveh to wait and see what would happen to it and its citizens. But in the dry desert heat, Jonah suffers, until the Lord provides a plant, which grows up quickly, and gives shade. For once, Jonah is now 'very happy.'

Again, it is surprising how our emotions, and even our Christian lives, fluctuate according to how comfortable we are! We expect God to keep us comfortable. Jonah's comfort, however, is short lived. A divinely appointed worm decides to feast on the plant, it withers, and in a scorching sirocco east wind and strong sun, so does Jonah.

God then asks Jonah if he is right to be angry about the plant. Jonah says, 'It is right for me to be angry.' And so, we get caught up here in the question of human rights versus Divine rights. If it is right for Jonah to be affected by, and concerned for, a single plant which is here today and gone tomorrow, is it not right for God to be affected by, and concerned for, 120,000 people plus all their animals?

What do you think?

Finally, what are the main lessons that God may want to teach us from the book of Jonah?

1. God's Will is Absolutely Sovereign and His Sovereign Rule and Covenant is worked out in relationship and conversation with others.
2. God is the All-powerful God who not only created everything but also controls nature. Seven of the ten miracles in the book of Jonah are nature miracles. In one of his better moments, Jonah was able to say, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9).

And whilst we may be taken up with God's control of a huge, intelligent whale, how about his control over a small, simple, insignificant worm? That really is a big miracle! (4:7)

3. Although God is Sovereign, he is open to change. Only God has complete free-will and is able to relent, reconsider and change his mind according to what is happening on the ground. (See Jer. 18:7-10). We also must be open to change. Repentance is at the heart of this book ~ Jonah's repentance, the Sailors repentance, the people of Nineveh's repentance.

Today, in the Jewish liturgical calendar, the book of Jonah is read in Synagogues on their most Holy Day of the year, Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Between the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashana) and Yom Kippur are ten days which are called 'The Ten Days of Repentance' or 'The Awesome Days.' The Jewish people remember how repentance and forgiveness are at the heart of their relationship with God and with each other.

4. Whereas Jonah was a Nationalist ~ keen for the protection and preservation of Israel ~ God is an Internationalist. He wants to reach out to people of all nations.
5. God wants to be compassionate and merciful to repentant sinners, but 'those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them' (2:8).
6. As recipients ourselves of God's grace and mercy, we must be willing to extend that same grace and mercy to others. This was something that Jonah found so hard to do.
7. Although Nineveh was a 'great' city for its time, we regard its population of 120,000 as miniscule compared with the great cities around the world today: Lagos 16.5 million; Mexico City 22.5 million; Mumbai 27.7 million; Shanghai 29.8 million; Tokyo 37.1 million.

Jesus had compassion on the crowds for they were 'like sheep without a shepherd.' How can we share in his compassion for the multitudes?

George Irving – Sept. 2024

Unless otherwise acknowledged, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version ® NIV ® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

Used with permission. All rights reserved worldwide.