



The Shocking Message of Jonah

By Ed Christian

From a theological viewpoint, the book of Jonah is one of the most important books in the Bible. From a literary viewpoint, it is a masterpiece, ranking with Ruth and Esther in narrative perfection and stylistic complexity.

People and Places

Jonah ben Amittai, whose name means “dove” in Hebrew (the correct pronunciation, *Yoná*, sounds more dovelike than the usual pronunciation), was a minor prophet who lived in Gath Hopher, a village in the territory of Zebulun, a bit north of Nazareth. Thus, Jonah was a Galilean. Even then, Galilee was considered a backward, rather uncivilized area.

Apart from the book bearing his name, Jonah is mentioned only once in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 14:25. There we find that he made a prophecy that came true. We don't know whether he left behind a book of prophecies like some of his fellow prophets. If so, it is lost to us. In any case, his reputation was great enough that he ended up as the hero of a still-famous story.

Jonah's mission was to Nineveh, the largest city in Assyria and one of the largest in the world at that time, with some 120,000 inhabitants. The walls of the city were nearly eight miles around. The Assyrians had a reputation for cruelty in their conquests—far beyond that of Babylon or Persia in later centuries. However, Nineveh was also a center of learning, with a large

library. It was in the ruins of that library that archeologists found the Epic of Gilgamesh in the nineteenth century. The Assyrians were usually enemies of Israel. Nineveh is mentioned in Genesis 11, and D. J. Wiseman says its foundations date back to about 4500 B.C.¹

Rather than go to Nineveh, as God commanded, Jonah sailed for Tarshish from the port of Joppa. Joppa is the southernmost of the two natural harbors along the coast of Palestine. Today it is called Jaffa or Yafo, and the city of Tel Aviv has grown up around it. (Many of the oranges purchased in Europe are shipped from that port, thus they are called Jaffa oranges.)

There were several places called Tarshish in Bible times. Jonah was probably sailing toward the Tarshish in Spain, at the far end of the Mediterranean from Joppa. Tarshish was just about as far as anyone would want to sail. The trip to Tarshish was a long, dangerous journey. Tarshish was known for its mines. (Indeed, the word could be used for any area known for its mines.) It's characteristic that Jonah would rather risk his life sailing to one of the least civilized places in the then-known world than warn a Ninevite of what God had in store. Clearly he was very prejudiced against Assyrians.

Fact or Fiction?

We don't know whether the book of Jonah is a historical account or fiction—a sort of parable borrowing the name of a known character. It's quite possible that when the book was written, it was understood to be a story with a message, rather than a historical account. The fact that Jesus referred to it proves nothing—he could just as well have used the three days and nights found in a fictional story in a typological way.

I myself believe the book is based on an historical account, but the perfection and complexity of the structure suggests that at the least, the historical account has been molded to fit the form. An example of such molding is found in the fact that whereas all the extant Hebrew versions have Jonah proclaiming that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days, the Greek version in the Septuagint has Jonah proclaiming destruction in three days.

It's more pleasing, from a literary standpoint, to imagine Jonah sitting outside the city waiting three days for the destruction of Nineveh than waiting forty days. The change seems to have been made solely for literary reasons. (Changing the biblical text for literary reasons was more acceptable in the centuries before Christ than it would be when the Masoretic text was put together centuries later.)

No Assyrian text has yet been discovered that reports a profound repentance by the Ninevites, but one may yet be found. However, if the book of Jonah is a historical account, a likely temporal setting for it would be 763 B.C. In that year, according to Assyrian records, there was a total eclipse, a severe famine, a major earthquake, serious flooding, and a devastating loss in battle. To the Assyrians, this would have suggested that their king had lost the mandate of heaven. Both people and king would have been eager to do whatever necessary to regain the gods' favor.

Literary Structure

David Dorsey writes that Jonah has seven episodes, following the parallel pattern a-b-c // a'-b'-c' // d.² Dorsey was my Hebrew professor at Evangelical School of Theology. (This a-b-c // a'-b'-c' // d structure is also used in Genesis 1.) The parts b and c and b' and c' each reveal an elegant chiasmic structure, whereas part d is a three-part parallelism followed by a climax (a b // a'b' // a''b'' // c).

Jonah and the Twenty-First Century: Some Questions

1. If the wideness in God's mercy extended even to the Assyrians, does it extend to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists, atheists, evolutionists, or Wiccans? We grant that "Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name [than the name of Jesus] under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Does that mean they must become Christians to be saved, or is God's love wider than that? What kind of repentance might God expect?
2. What are the implications of this wideness in God's mercy for the exclusivity sometimes seen in Adventism? Is there still a valid place for Adventism within God's mercy? If so, what is it? What can we offer to the world that will bring them to salvation?
3. After many centuries of Christian persecution of Jews, a great many Jews find themselves unable to consider the claims of Christ fairly because they associate Christ with those who claim to be his people. Can those Jews who cannot accept their Messiah be saved, or by persecution have Christians effectively excluded them from salvation?
4. Jesus said, "For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world, through him, might be saved" (John 3:17). Is God's purpose and intent to save every shipwrecked sailor in the cold sea who feebly waves a hand and calls out "help," or will he save only those who swim to his lifeboat and climb up the ladder? That is to say, is salvation limited to those who are "safe to save," or is this idea a false concept of God similar to the beliefs of the Israelites about other nations in Jonah's day?



Here is Dorsey's reading of the basic parallel pattern of the story:

- a. **Jonah commissioned to go to Nineveh;** his disobedience (1:1-3)
 - "arise, go to Nineveh, the great city . . . and Jonah arose to flee"
- b. **Jonah and the pagan sailors** (1:4-6)
 - begins: Yahweh threatens judgment against the pagan ship
 - sailors *respond immediately* and vigorously with conviction
 - sailors *cry out* to Jonah's God for mercy
 - their *leader*, the captain, participates in the effort, expressing hope that *God may show mercy and relent*
 - ends: *Yahweh spares the contrite pagans* of the ship
- c. **Jonah's grateful, beautiful prayer** (1:17-2:10 [2:1-11])
 - "and Jonah *prayed* to Yahweh"
 - boasts about Yahweh's *love* that pagans forfeit
 - Jonah is grateful that his *life* and *soul* have been saved (although he has not repented)
- a'. **Jonah recommissioned to go to Nineveh;** his obedience (3:1-3a)
 - "arise, go to Nineveh, the great city . . . and Jonah arose and went"
- b'. **Jonah and the pagan Ninevites** (3:3b-10)
 - begins: Yahweh announces judgment against the pagan city
 - Ninevites *respond immediately* and vigorously with conviction
 - Ninevites *cry out* to Jonah's God for mercy
 - their *leader*, the king, participates in the effort, expressing hope that *God may show mercy and relent*
 - ends: *Yahweh spares the contrite pagans of the city*
- c'. **Jonah's resentful, mean-spirited prayer** (4:1-4)
 - "and Jonah *prayed* to Yahweh"
 - complains about Yahweh's *love* that the pagans have received
 - Jonah resents that the pagans have been spared; wishes that his *life* and *soul* would be taken
- d. **Climax: Yahweh's lesson for Jonah** (4:5-11)

The two commissioning stories are virtually identical. More interesting is the correspondence between the episodes involving the pagans—in one case pagan sailors, and in the other pagan Ninevites. Dorsey points out ten similarities:

- "1. Jonah finds himself among idolatrous pagans with whom he interacts.
- "2. The action is recounted in lively detail.
- "3. Jonah's arrival brings with it the ominous judgment of his God Yahweh.
- "4. The pagans respond immediately, vigorously, and with great conviction.
- "5. The pagans cry out to Jonah's God for mercy.
- "6. Their leader (the captain, the king) participates.
- "7. The leader expresses the hope that God may show mercy and relent.
- "8. Yahweh spares the pagans.
- "9. Yahweh spares the guilty parties—Jonah and the Ninevites.
- "10. Jonah seems remarkably detached; he is a reluctant participant."³

Whether the book of Jonah is a historical account or a parable-like work of fiction, the various parts of the literary structures in the book are so carefully interwoven that we can be confident that the book as we now have it is remarkably close to the book in its original finished state. If it were not, there would be holes in the structure, and there are not. We can also be quite confident that although the story of Jonah may once have been passed down orally, the version we have is a deliberately patterned written document. This sort of complexity is not characteristic of folktales or oral traditions.

We don't know whether the book of Jonah was written by the prophet himself. Jonah is referred to in the third person, rather than in the first person. Also, it seems to have been written—or at least edited—after the eventual destruction of Nineveh, generations after Jonah's time. If the book was first written generations after Jonah's time, we should be cautious about assuming that all the details of the story are accurate. In particular, Jonah's beautiful first prayer, echoing more than a dozen other Old Testament texts, may not be the actual words Jonah spoke.

(Some have asked how Jonah could have known that after he was thrown overboard the sea grew calm, and the sailors sacrificed to God and made vows to him.

This wouldn't require a prophetic revelation. For all we know Jonah could have paddled about near the ship for an hour or more before being swallowed by the great fish, or clung to something thrown overboard. He might have heard the actual words of the vows.)

The Shocking Message of Jonah

Why is Jonah, from a theological viewpoint, one of the most important books in the Old Testament? Because it reveals explicitly an aspect of God's mercy seldom alluded to elsewhere. It is similar to the parable of the prodigal son. However, it is more similar to the decision by the church leaders at the Jerusalem Council to throw out virtually the entire Mosaic law code and ask of non-Jewish Christians little more than what God asked of Noah after the flood. (I wonder whether the book of Jonah may have influenced the church leaders' wise decision.)

The attitude of the children of Israel is seen in their boast, "Who is like our God?" God was *their* God, the source of their prosperity. He had chosen them, and he loved *only them*. Many Israelites would have been uncomfortable with God showing mercy to anyone else, but for God to show mercy to the dreaded Assyrians would have been nearly beyond comprehension. To show mercy to the Assyrians was nearly to participate in Israel's disaster.

The Israelites had many opportunities to share their faith and their God with the world around them, but there is little sign that they did. Jonah's own words show that he *knew* God was merciful and forgiving, but he didn't want God's mercy to be extended to Israel's enemies.

Every statement of God's exclusivity in the Old Testament needs to be reexamined by the light of God's amazing mercy, as revealed in the book of Jonah. Whether or not the story is historical or fiction, it seems clear that its message is truth revealed by God. Given the prejudice of the Israelites against other nations, it seems clear that if it were not revealed, it would never have been written.

Consider that when Jonah proclaimed God's intent to destroy Nineveh, he offered the Ninevites no hint that God might be willing to forgive. Not only did he not tell the Ninevites why God planned to destroy them, as far as we can tell from the text, he didn't even tell them it was God who would destroy them. He merely said, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (3:4).

The Ninevites responded by believing the prophecy and deeply repenting, giving up "their evil ways and

their violence" (3:8). They seem to have known somehow where they had gone wrong. They may also have known from the famine, flood, earthquake, eclipse, and loss in battle that some god was angry.

But notice what is left out of these verses. There is no indication that the Ninevites destroyed their pagan idols or stopped sacrificing to the false gods they represented. There is no sign that they added Yahweh to their pantheon, much less worshiped him alone. The sailors specifically sacrifice to "Yahweh," but the king of Nineveh refers only to *elohim* (god) or *ha'elohim* (the god). He could have used the same word for one of his own gods. We don't even know that the Ninevites knew anything about Yahweh, the God of Israel, or repented *to him*.

There is no hint that they sacrificed to Yahweh, became Jews, followed the Mosaic code, kept the Sabbath or any other commandment. All they did was repent, turning away from their evil ways and asking *ha'elohim* for mercy. God reached them where they were and left them where they were. He did not guide them into Judaism but into repentance.

The Ninevites (and other Assyrians) were among the worst sinners on earth at the time, if what archaeologists tell us about them is correct. Surely God, in his love for his people, would delight in the destruction of these wicked ones. Yet God reveals that he is filled with love for even the worst of Israel's enemies. His mercy is not exclusive, but is wide enough to embrace every repentant sinner on earth.

Notes and References

1. See Wiseman's article on "Ninevah," in the *New Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed., eds. J. D. Douglas, F. F. Bruce, J. L. Packer, N. Hillyer, D. Guthrie, A. R. Millard, D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1982).
2. All references to Dorsey are to his chapter on Jonah in *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1999).
3. Ibid.

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