

Study 13a: Jonah: The Most Reluctant Prophet

Introduction. At this point in our study, we turn our attention to a book like no other in the Bible, the Book of Jonah, about a prophet who not only rejected God's call, but literally ran away and tried to hide from God. Filled with humor and ironic twists, Jonah tells the story of a prophet called to preach, not to the Jews of Israel or Judah, but to the pagans of their great enemy, Assyria.

The book is unique among the prophetic books of the Bible. It contains no oracles by the prophet, but takes the form of a narrative, a kind of short story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Unlike all other prophetic books, it tells the story of this prophet as he copes with God's call. In Amos and Hosea, for example, we are presented with a collection of prophetic messages, and the personal fate of the prophet remains in the background. In Jonah, however, we have only the story of the prophet himself. The prophet, although we tend to sympathize with him, is by no means a heroic character; indeed, just the opposite. In some respects, however, Jonah is a man of strong will and much of the story centers on a conflict between the will of the prophet and the Will of God. We also encounter some highly unusual events and creatures, all miraculous in their way that make the story even more interesting for the reader.

Why is it included among the Bible's prophetic books? Presumably because that's exactly where the author and those who followed him decided it belonged. This is evident by the book's opening words (see below) that mirror the prophetic calls of many of the other prophets, e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, etc.

Although Jonah is a short book, consisting of only four chapters, it offers us far more than a brief narrative of the odd adventures of a reluctant prophet. As we will see, it gives us an early foreshadowing of the Good News of Jesus Christ and His command to make disciples of all nations, even those the world urges us to despise. Secondly, it forces us to look more deeply into our attitudes of exclusivity, attitudes that often try to constrain God, Who in His mercy and forgiveness desires the salvation of all. It reminds us that by deepening our prayer life we can become more alert to God's call, especially when He calls us from our weakness to do His work in the world.

Like most satirical writing, the Book of Jonah is filled with humor. Those who accept its message will appreciate the ironies and smile at Jonah and the other characters who populate the story. But those who disagree with the message, or find it disturbing, usually come away angry. I suppose you'll just have to read it and absorb its message to discover where you stand.

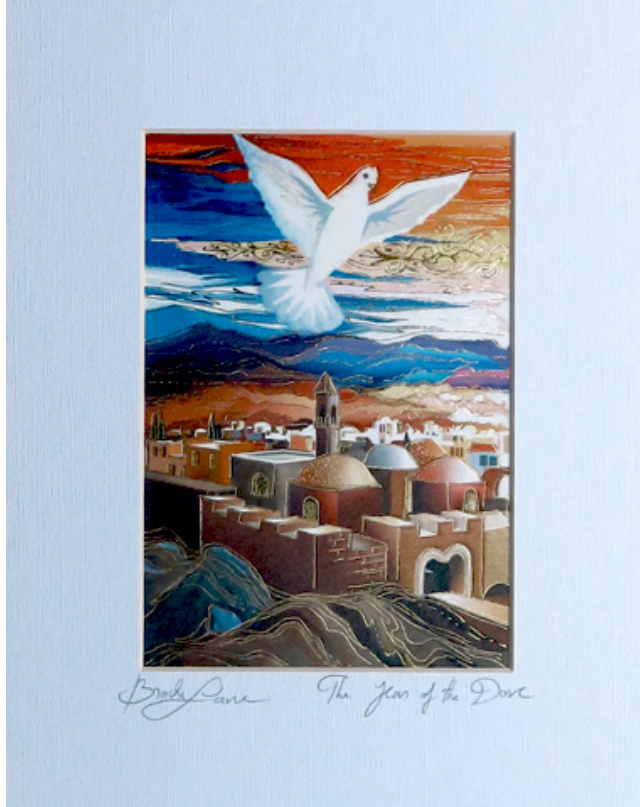
Jonah, the Man and Prophet. We don't know too much about Jonah, other than what we're told in the book's opening verse:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: [Jon 1:1]

...and his likely identification with a prophet named Jonah ben-Amittai who lived during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.). We encounter him in 2 Kings when, speaking of Jeroboam, the author writes the following:

He restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the sea of the Arabah, as the Lord, the God of Israel, had foretold through His servant, the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, from Gath-hepher [2 Kgs 14:25].

Gath-hepher, Jonah's apparent hometown, is in the district of the tribe of Zebulun in Galilee. He lived, therefore, in the northern kingdom of Israel during a time when



Assyria was beginning to exert its power and was already viewed as a potential major threat to both Israel and Judah.

Interestingly, Jonah's name in Hebrew means *dove*, while his father's name, Amittai, means *truth*. The dove was commonly used as a symbol of Israel and the Jewish people, just as the early Christians used the symbol of the fish. Thus, Jonah's name means "Israel, the son of Truth." I thought you might appreciate this photo of a print that hangs in our living room. By the Jewish artist, Bracha Lavee, it depicts Jerusalem and is titled, *The Year of the Dove*. I particularly like this print, depicting a dove high over Jerusalem, and for me (although not for the artist) it depicts the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost Sunday 2,000 years ago. I suspect it's no coincidence that God chose the dove as a symbol of the Holy

Spirit, who inspired the Hebrew Scriptures and led God's people to the Promised Land.

What did God call Jonah to do? As usual, the Lord God didn't waste any words:

Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it; for their wickedness has come before me [Jon 1:2].

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, an expanding regional power at the time and could certainly symbolize all of Israel's enemies through the ages. Since the dove is also a symbol of peace, perhaps this is one reason why God chose Jonah to preach His Word of repentance and peace to Israel's great enemy.

The book's name might lead us believe that Jonah is the hero of the story; but, as a close reading clearly shows, the real hero is God Himself. It is God who constantly takes the initiative – Jon 1:1,4,17; 2:10; 3:1; 4:6,7,9. It is God who shows patience and is merciful to all men, while Jonah is narrow-minded and vindictive.

The Book's Author and His Times. Obviously, Jonah did not write the book that bears his name. Nowhere in the text do we encounter a first-person narrative by the prophet himself. As one of my Old Testament professors said years ago, "Anyway, Jonah would

be too embarrassed by the story to write it, much less claim authorship. Wouldn't you?" I had to agree.

A first casual reading of the book would seem to indicate that the author was attempting to report straight history; but I actually think Jonah represents a type of Biblical literature similar to our modern historical novel. Like the historical novel, it is about real people and real events, perhaps altered somewhat to enhance the story line, but still presenting us with a timeless message. The author, depending upon when he wrote the book, most likely drew on the ancient traditions of his people and selected historical figures through whom he could make an appeal for tempering the need to maintain fidelity to the Covenant with the saving mission of Israel to the nations.

Many scholars believe the book was written long after the period when the prophet Jonah, described in 2 Kings, actually lived, perhaps during the post-exilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah. The long years of captivity in Babylon had deeply impressed the exiles with the need to preserve a *remnant* to return to the Land of Promise. At great sacrifice most of the exiles refused to be assimilated into the melting pot of Babylon. Had they not, they would have disappeared. Steadfast in maintaining their identity as a people, they prepared for their ultimate return.

This return to Judah, however, neither solved their problems nor ushered in a time of prosperity and peace. Instead, they faced a whole new set of challenges and conflicts. Perhaps the author was striving to achieve some religious balance among the returning remnant. Some had likely pushed Ezra's directives beyond reasonable bounds to make them the sole content of religion for God's people – in a sense an early version of the Pharisaic attitudes Jesus encountered a few centuries later. Their legitimate concerns about keeping the people a holy nation, a people set apart, didn't necessarily mean that pagans were outside of God's providence. It took a while for God's people to understand fully that He was the God of all nations, of all creation.

In a way it makes sense that the author of Jonah chose the prophet mentioned in 2 Kings since the earlier Jonah seems to have been enthusiastic about Israel expanding its borders under Jeroboam II. In his nationalistic enthusiasm, he perhaps saw only good things for Israel and, unlike Amos and Hosea, ignored the signs of a coming disaster. He might also, in an earlier form of political correctness, have ignored the infidelity of both king and people. This attitude would explain Jonah's strong resistance to his call and to God's command to deliver His message personally to the Ninevites. For one such as Jonah, who likely believed God was as nationalistic about Israel as he was, preaching to these pagans was unthinkable. Perhaps, too, Jonah was simply afraid. After all, he'd be one little Israelite preaching against the pagans in their huge city.

The author of Jonah might have chosen the known earlier prophet Jonah as an ironic symbol to stress the universality of God's mercy. He contrasts the narrow self-righteousness of this "son of the Covenant" with the humble repentance of the pagan Assyrians. The fact that the Assyrians were a particularly warlike nation and later became one of the greatest enemies of both Israel and Judah just reinforced the author's point.

Some historians of the ancient Middle East claim that it's not altogether impossible that the king and people of Nineveh should have listened to a foreign preacher's call to repentance. Faced with a threat from the north – the inroads of the mountain people – they might well have seen Jonah's arrival as a divine sign and listened to him. Stranger things have happened in the history of humanity.

Other scholars reject the reality of the story as described simply because of the series of miraculously odd events encountered throughout the book. They also dismiss the possibility of the Ninevites actually repenting during Jonah's missionary visit. Of course, these tend to be the same minimalist scholars who reject all miracles described in both Old and New Testament books. As a believer in the miraculous, I consider this argument a weak one and tend to ignore it. In any event, the miraculous element in Jonah is a medium of expression that serves the purpose of religious truth.

Others believe that the humor found in the book, certainly more than in any other book of the Bible, argues against its depiction of historical reality. I suspect those who believe this have long since lost their ability to laugh at the oddities that surround us. Perhaps the Holy Spirit wanted to demonstrate that God too has a sense of humor. After all, we were created in His image and likeness, so from what other source could we have received our ability to laugh at one another and ourselves?

One can believe that Jonah is essentially fictional and still accept its message. As a work of fiction, a story that expands the understanding of God's omnipotence, it is perhaps best viewed as a kind of parable designed to deliver a meaningful message to its readers. Jesus, after all, relied heavily on parables to teach His disciples and even gave one of the characters a name – the poor man named Lazarus [Lk 16:19-31].

Whoever wrote the book knew how to tell a story in thrilling and gripping language. Linguistic scholars also point to the fact that the language used points to a later era when Hebrew was influenced by foreign influences, probably after Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C.

I will, however, never argue with anyone who accepts the book as completely historical. God works in mysterious ways and frequently does what we rational creatures consider the impossible. Although its unusual story line certainly grabs our attention, the importance of Jonah is found in its message. Personally, I would love to have known the author, a man who obviously enjoyed his work.

The Book of Jonah and its Message. The Book of Jonah can be divided into four sections that reflect the book's chapter divisions:

- God's call and Jonah's Rejection -- Jonah 1
- Jonah's Prayer and God's Response – Jonah 2
- God's call, Jonah's Obedience, Nineveh's Repentance – Jonah 3
- Jonah's Anger and God's Reproof – Jonah 4

God's Call and Jonah's Rejection. As mentioned above, the book opens with God's call to Jonah and His command to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. But Jonah will have none of it and believes he can run away and hide from the Lord:

But Jonah made ready to flee to Tarshish, away from the Lord. He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down in it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the Lord [Jon 1:3].

Tarshish is the Biblical name of Tartessus, a town on the western coast of Spain on the very edge of the then known world. The Hebrew language used in this verse leads us to believe Jonah was more intent on fleeing from God's service than from His presence. But in either case, we see signs of Jonah's religious nationalism, since he seems to believe that by leaving Israel, and going as far away as possible, he will somehow escape God's rule. For Jonah it seemed the most sensible decision. Jonah's limited view of Israel's God and his pathetic attempt to escape highlights the difference between Jonah and the other prophets who received God's call.

Throughout the book Jonah tried to place limitations on God's power, a serious error that the other characters in the book, all pagans, did not make. When a storm threatened the ship and its crew, Jonah slept peacefully below decks until the captain chastised him:

What are you doing asleep? Get up, call on your God! Perhaps this God will be mindful; of us so that we will not perish [Jon 1:6]

But things just got worse for Jonah. Fearing for their lives, the crew cast lots to identify who had caused their dire situation. Of course, "the lot fell on Jonah." Eventually he confessed that he was fleeing from the God of Israel, "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." It's here that we find a pagan crew with a deeper understanding of God than Jonah, His prophet. They said pretty much what all of us want to say to Jonah as we read his story:

"How could you do such a thing!" [Jon 1:10]

Jonah suggested that if they threw him into the sea, God would calm the storm, but the pagans resisted such a dire solution. When their seamanship failed to help, the pagans turned to the God of Israel and prayed:

Then they cried to the Lord: "Please, O Lord, do not let us perish for taking this man's life; do not charge us with shedding innocent blood, for you, Lord, have accomplished what you desired" [Jon 1:14].

They hurled Jonah into the sea, the storm subsided, and the crew, filled with fear of God, "offered sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" [Jon 3:16]. Isn't it remarkable that throughout this crisis only the pagans, and never Jonah, pray to the God of Israel?

That these events occurred at sea is another manifestation of God's power – something the apostles also recognized when Jesus calmed storms at sea [Mk 4:41] – a universal power that cannot be confined to the cities and nations of man.

Jonah Prayer and God's Response. Chapter 2 begins with God sending a "great fish to swallow Jonah, and he remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights" [Jon 2:1].

In the Gospel, when the scribes and Pharisees demand that Jesus give them a sign, He proclaims this miracle of Jonah as a prophecy, a foreshadowing or type, of His burial and Resurrection:

“An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. At the judgment, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and there is something greater than Jonah here” [Mt 12:39-41]. (See also Lk 11:29-32)

Later, when they continue to ask Him for a sign, an exasperated Jesus repeats his condemnation of those who refuse to believe and refers again to the sign of Jonah:

“An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah.” Then He left them and went away. [Mt 16:4]

Christ, then, who is far greater than Jonah, invites all people into the Kingdom of His Father but under the same terms that we find in Jonah: a sincere and fundamental change of heart, i.e., true repentance.

Recalling the likely date of composition, the great fish can also be seen as a symbol of the Exile brought on by the infidelity of Israel and designed to lead them through the school of suffering and privation back to loving obedience to God. Through the use of this image, the author of Jonah shows that, although the people returned to obedience, theirs was largely an external conformity to the Law of God. No interior change took place. In this connection it's interesting to note that the name Nineveh, the archetype of Israel's enemies, means “town of the fish.”

What kind of fish was involved and how Jonah survived this odd rescue is left to our imagination. But Jonah, aware that God had saved him, offered a prayer of thanksgiving, and did so, *“from the belly of the fish.”*

Jonah's prayer is a psalm-like plea to the Lord:

“Out of my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me...” [Jon 2:3]

“I am banished from your sight! How will I look again upon your holy temple?” [Jon 2:5].

The waters surged around up to my neck...When I became faint, I remembered the Lord; my prayer came to you in your holy Temple” [Jon 2:6,8].

Those who worship worthless idols abandon their hope for mercy. But I, with thankful voice, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay: deliverance is from the Lord” [Jon 2:9-10].

The Hebrew text makes it seem as if Jonah waited three days before praying, not a particularly holy attitude for a prophet. Perhaps the author just wanted to insert some more of his ironic humor here. What's odder – that Jonah should be swallowed by this fish, or that he waited three days in its belly before praying?

Jonah continues to amaze us with his contradictions and his humanity. We see an almost oblivious Jonah sleeping in the hold of the ship while the God-sent storm rages, and then find a fervent Jonah praying in the fish's belly. As we read his prayer, we find it particularly ironic that Jonah, who took such pains to flee from God, should dare to say, "*I am banished from your sight*" [Jon 2:5]. Jonah also seemed to be stuck with his misconceptions about the geographical limitations of God's presence, that his restoration will come about only when he can worship God in His temple [Jon 2:5,8].

The prayer ends with Jonah's condemnation of the pagans and their "*worthless idols*" who will receive no mercy from God. But, Jonah, "*with thankful voice, will sacrifice to you*" [Jon 2:9-10]. It seems that Jonah, after everything he has been through, has almost caught up spiritually with the ship's pagan crew, except perhaps when it comes to understanding the extent of God's mercy. This, of course, is perhaps the key message of the entire book.

God's Second Call. God heard Jonah's prayer and "*commanded the fish to vomit Jonah upon dry land,*" a rather undignified delivery. Three days in a fish's belly would have taken its toll and Jonah must have been far less than presentable. It becomes apparent that God still has much to teach His reluctant prophet.

Once more "*The Word of the Lord came to Jonah*" and God commands the prophet:

Set out for the great city of Nineveh and announce to it the message that I will tell you [Jon 3:2].

This time Jonah obeyed and "*set out for Nineveh with the Word of the Lord.*" Then, as we saw earlier, the author engages in a little hyperbole and describes Nineveh as a city so large it required three days to walk through it. His purpose was probably to let us know it was a large and populous city, as befits the capital of a powerful empire.

After only a day of hearing Jonah proclaiming God's Word – "*Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown*" – the Ninevites accepted God's Word and believe. The people, the king, the entire city repented and covered themselves in sackcloth. The king proclaimed throughout the city:

"By decree of the king and his nobles, no man or beast, no cattle or sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water. Man and beast alike must be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God; they all must turn from their evil way and from the violence of their hands [Jon 3:7-8].

Despite the serious nature of the events described, the author continues to amuse us with the king's orders to cover the animals with sackcloth along with the people. Another example of hyperbole, perhaps just his way of showing us the depth of repentance experienced by the Ninevites.

The final sentence of the royal decree is actually quite moving, and demonstrates the king's humility, his realization of his position relative to the greatness of God:

"Who knows? God may again repent and turn from His blazing wrath, so that we will not perish" [Jon 3:9].

God's sees the depth of the people's repentance and does not carry out the threatened destruction of the city. The idea that God "repents" or changes His mind is, of course, commonly encountered in the Old Testament, where God's omniscience and eternal nature are less understood. That our God knows what will happen does not lessen the importance and efficacy of both prayer and repentance. This is a mystery we cannot fully comprehend, largely because we live in the world God created, a material world limited by space and time.

Jonah's Anger and God's Reproof. Chapter 4 opens with Jonah's anger that God did not destroy the Ninevites, an anger he expressed predictably in his unique form of prayer. Perhaps recalling times when good things happen to those we dislike, we can all empathize with Jonah here; although for Jonah it's far deeper. The Assyrians represented Israel's enemy, an empire he hoped God would destroy. But God in His mercy had forgiven them of their many sins and will allow them to prosper, probably, Jonah thought, at the expense of Israel.

The prayer began with Jonah proclaiming that from the beginning he was right to leave for Tarshish. He knew that God who is *"a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, repenting of punishment,"* would do just what He had done and forgive the Ninevites. Because this was too much for him to accept, he begged the Lord:

"...please take my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live"
[Jon 4:3].

God simply asked Jonah a question – *"Are you right to be angry?"* – to which Jonah gave no response. Instead, he left Nineveh, and built a hut east of the city. There he would wait and watch over the city, presumably hoping that God would still destroy Nineveh.

To teach his prophet a lesson, God provided a gourd plant, a wide-leafed tree that pleased Jonah since it gave him much needed shade from the hot sun. But the very next morning the plant withered, and feeling sorry for himself, Jonah once more claims *"It's better for me to die than to live."* Again, God asks him,

"Do you have a right to be angry over the gourd plant?" Jonah answered,
"I have a right to be angry – angry enough to die" [Jon 4:9].

This is the last we hear from Jonah. The Lord reprimanded him for his selfishness, that his only concern was for his own comfort. God, though, had far greater concerns; in this case for the people of Nineveh.

Throughout the book we witness the overriding power of God's will and the ineffectiveness of Jonah's. As the story ends, we are fully aware that Jonah's response to God made no difference whatsoever. Jonah's selfishness and anger had no effect on God's merciful decision to spare the Ninevites. Now only the abiding love of God remains – a love for all people, both Israelite and pagan – and this is the primary message of the story.

The book ends with a final question by God, but Jonah is no longer there to answer it. And so, we are left to answer the question ourselves as we read and contemplate the story and its message.

Jonah demonstrates how futile it is to resist the Lord's plan and warns "religious" people not to become like him. Too many lock themselves in a closed religiosity of their own making and, like Jonah, get angry with God because He won't join them. Sometimes it takes real suffering before we can come to an understanding of the love that God has for all, not just those we believe deserve His love. For Jonah, who was sure He knew better than God Himself, the Lord in His mercy seemed unreasonable, incomprehensible, and uncomfortable. If he was lacking one thing, it was trust.

Regular, prayerful reading of the Bible can go a long way in keeping our personal faith well balanced and in harmony with authentic Christianity. The Book of Jonah, for example, charges us with a serious responsibility; for we are called to carry the Word of God to all the Ninevites in our lives: "*Go and teach all nations...*" [Mt 28:19]

We might well take some time to reflect on the effectiveness of our own personal witness to Christ's message. How whole-heartedly do we cooperate in the Church's primary task of evangelization? Are we more Jonah-Christians than Christians after the heart of St. Paul, who said,

"This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth." [1 Tim 2:4]

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. How do you explain Jonah's attitude?
2. Compare the Book of Jonah with the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:12-32).
3. Does God's way of dealing with Jonah tell us anything about human freedom?