

Lessons from the Book of Jonah

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Given at LCJE
9 August 2012

How many of you would vote for Jonah to remain in the Bible? It may have been a while since you read the book, but let's remember that a prophet of God should be a man who hears God say something, and he complies. Today we're going to look at this ancient prophet and his interactions with seafarers, with kings, and with God, and see what this little book, smaller in toto than one chapter in the book of John, has to say to us as 21st century people.

Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me." But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Wait a minute, shouldn't our hero/prophet have heard God's word, and stood up and gone where God told him to go? Isn't that what a biblical prophet would do? Instead, he went the exact opposite direction, fleeing to the west, some say to Spain, but certainly in the Mediterranean Sea, and away from Assyria.

Saying 'no' and "lord" in the same sentence makes no sense to me. One thing is clear in biblical hero stuff, the hero says "Yes" to the Lord. But not our Jonah.

He is to go to Assyria, the dreaded enemies of the Jewish people, the military occupiers of some of Israel's inheritance, and offer them God's plan? Jonah says, "I don't think so! Get yourself another guy." And he books passage from Joppa (modern Tel Aviv) on a ship going the exact opposite direction, as far away from Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) as he could.

Do you still want Jonah in your prophet list?

But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.

God butts in, and will do so every once in a while in this story. And I'm glad for that! And He creates a mighty storm in the Mediterranean.

Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.

This must have been extraordinary to scare experienced naval people. The tempest was no ordinary windstorm. It was severe.

And our hero doesn't even involve himself in the ordinary activities of the ship, certainly not in the worries of the day, as he falls asleep downstairs in the hull. Your prophet, your hero, disengages from society and doesn't even help when any ordinary man would do so.

So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, "What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy god, if so be that god will think upon us, that we perish not."

I purposely changed the word in the KJV "God" to 'god' as I don't think the naval captain would have been crying out to Yahweh, but rather telling the novice sleeper to cry out to his tribal deity and maybe his or someone's crying will prevent any further tempest.

And they said every one to his fellow, "Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.

Amazingly, in the same way as the star led the magi to the baby Y'shua, and I don't recommend the usage of astrology, God allowed the mariners to use lot casting to find the cause of the storm.

Then said they unto him, "Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?"

Here I see the men all screaming at once. This is not one person or even one at a time conversation. I see it as a cartoon with bubbles above each seaman asking, or rather yelling their question.

And he said unto them, I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land... For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

I'll bet he references 'dry land' in hopes that he too can find dry land again! But here he is, admitting who he is, confessing his faith/fear in Yahweh, to a group of pagan sailors.

Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this?

The sailors understood and were terrified. The Hebrew says they were afraid with a great fear. These sailors were not only afraid because of the storm, now they knew they were in trouble with a deity bigger than their own. Big time trouble. They had heard about this Yahweh.

Then said they unto him, "What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us?"

They knew that Jonah not only brought the trouble, but could ease it as well. They knew him to be a prophet of this Yahweh!

And he said unto them, "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you."

Seems everyone got this right. Jonah knew he was responsible and if they tossed him overboard they would be spared. But the men did not want to be murderers. They tried to row out of the trouble, but that wasn't going to work.

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto Yahweh, and said, "We beseech thee, Yahweh, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, Yahweh, hast done as it pleased thee." So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.

The godless prayed to the God of Heaven and He spared them. Their prayers were heard. And in response, the men (in our terms) got saved.

Then the men feared Yahweh exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto Yahweh, and made vows.

Jonah, the disobedient prophet, was successful with the seamen. Jonah announced to whom he is committed and from whom he is running and somehow that works with the mariners. He had a successful ministry while running away from God. And that would be a great 'end of the story' (although not for Jonah in the seas), but it goes on from there.

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly,

After three days? Who had the clock? How did he know it was 72 hours? We'll see the video of this in heaven, and know how that worked. The Bible says, "Then he prayed"? What took him so long? I would recommend praying a little sooner. But whenever you get to it, that's useful. Jonah, the disobedient prophet in chapter one now becomes a desperate pray-er in chapter two.

And said, "I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of sheol cried I, and thou heardest my voice. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me."

Here he admits it wasn't the seamen who tossed him overboard, but it was the Sovereign Lord. And he tells God that he feels like he is in the spin cycle in the washing machine. And I can imagine that, as I've stood in New York City and in North Carolina in hurricane winds, wondering how I would ever get back to safety.

The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.

Seaweeds around him, in this spin cycle. And for 72 hours!

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD. And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

Jonah's desperation was met with God's answer, and what he prayed evidently made the whale sick, and vomited Jonah to dry land. Jonah was successful with God and with the whale. What a hero/prophet you have! Here he stands on dry land, a churned up robe, whitewashed from the acid reflux of the whale, seaweeds around his head.. what a picture!

Aren't you glad God keeps butting in, and involving himself in the story? He made a sea rise in the Mediterranean, and in He prepared a whale, and now He spoke to the fish and made it vomit Jonah out. God is very involved in this story.

And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,

He probably is speaking to Jonah the two hundred and second time!

Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

Finally, Jonah hears and does. And does what he has heard. Hooray, our hero gets to perform his duty. And duty it is. He is not at all keen on the Ninevites, and by extension, all the Assyrians to know God. He hates them and hates that God cares. We'll see that soon. So I title this chapter, Jonah, the Dutiful Preacher. He is doing what he is doing because he is required to comply and required to preach to them.

Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.

This could mean that it took three days to go either across it or around it.

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

Jonah is so happy about this. The dreaded enemies of the Jewish people in this 8th century (BCE) scenario are going to get theirs. They are going down. They will finally get the punishment they deserve.

And yet, back in the back of his mind, he knows God is kind and forgiving and might just offer to the Evil Empire a way out. He might offer Assyria to be forgiven. That would be horrible! It would be like Ahmadinejad getting saved.

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

The same Hebrew word “Kara” is used of Jonah’s proclamation of imminent judgment and the people’s proclamation of a fast. Jonah was not ready for their repentance.

For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence (Hebrew: Hamas) that is in their hands.

I’m not sure how you would go about preventing beasts like cattle and sheep from eating or drinking grass or water, but somehow this universal aspect of repentance came fully on the godless Assyrians, and they all, from king (read: mayor) of town to the animals all took this edict on board.

Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

This is true repentance, admitting our sins, admitting our desperation, admitting God’s love, and our inability to deserve it.

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

This had to be evaluated after 6 weeks, since God did not do it. The only way we know this didn’t happen is that a month and a half later, He did not bring the disaster on the Ninevites.

God again got involved in this story. And we are grateful. And we could write dozens of newsletters and record hundreds of hours of video clips of interviews as a result. Pagan enemies of the Jews saved. Jonah was again successful. But not because he loved the people to whom he was sent. In fact, Jonah is extremely unhappy about the whole thing. That’s why I call him a Dutiful preacher in chapter three. It’s his duty, not his passion. It’s his duty to talk to Ninevites, not his desire for their coming to faith in God.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

Jonah unveils his racism. He hates the Assyrians. And he is unhappy about their conversion to God.

And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, Ah LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

This is Jonah the prophet, the guy you vote to be in your Bible, and he is a racist. He lists the attributes of the Almighty. He is not singing praises like we do when we sing things like He is good, or He is gracious, but rather, he is complaining. He is saying, "I knew you would forgive those evil people, and I didn't want you to do that. You are true to your nature, and I don't like that about you at all!"

Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

Three times he's going to say "I'd rather be dead." That's not a thing a prophet should be speaking, especially when he is so successful, is it?

Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?

So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.

I see Jonah going outside of town, folds his hands and legs and sits down and says, "Hrrumph!" with a bit of disdain.

And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.

God is so busy and involved!

And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

I'm so angry, Jonah admits. I'd rather be dead!

And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

You betcha, God, I'm so fed up with this religion, I'd rather be dead.

Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

The despondence of the prejudiced person Jonah is riveting. He is wishing to be dead. He is unhappy. He has been successful with mariners, with God, with

whales, with Ninevites and yet, he is unhappy. What is wrong with you, that you still want to keep Jonah in the Bible?

I think it's not really a story about Jonah at all. I think it's deserving of remaining in the Bible because it's a story about God, who involves himself over and over, butting into each situation, for His glory and His purposes. He wants everyone, even Jonah to understand His love and grace. Twice God argues with Jonah, and asks him if it's right to be angry. And the book ends with God sharing His compassion for 120,000 intellectually challenged people who live in the Assyrian empire. Jonah is not a story about Jonah, so much as it's about the God of Jonah.

But wait, there's more. This is not the end of the story of Jonah.

Look with me at Matthew chapter 16. Beginning in verse 13:

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I the Son of man am?" And they said, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." He saith unto them, "But who say ye that I am?" And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered and said unto him, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven."

This unusual declaration by Y'shua, which sounds like he is praying to Peter, is actually an ordination ceremony. Peter is being ordained to Gospel ministry and thus Y'shua uses his formal name, Shimon Bar Yonah, son of Jonah, to do so. I'm not sure if Jonah was his father's name, but Jonah's ministry is certainly going to be given to Peter.

For that, let's look at one final section of Bible, Acts chapter 10.

Cornelius is hoping to hear from God and God's servant, and in a dream is instructed to send for Peter. At the same time Peter is having a drama of his own.

We read:

And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat." But Peter said, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean."

Again, don't use 'no' and "lord" in the same sentence, Never a good idea.

And the voice spake unto him again the second time, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.

Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate,...

Peter's vision is not about lunch, but about people, Gentiles like Cornelius, who eat such things for lunch. And it's right that it was Peter, son of Jonah, who had to go and take the message to the centurion. Remember Rome was the dreaded enemy of the Jewish people. Like Assyria, they were occupiers of the land of Abraham's promise. Like Assyria, they were despised, and yet God sent another Jonah to the Gentiles/enemies and to bring them the message. And from where did Peter depart to get to Cornelius? Acts 9 ends with his location. Joppa, the very city from which Jonah did NOT go to Nineveh, now Peter, Jonah's greater 'son' does go to his Nineveh in the form of the Roman Cornelius and the beginnings of the group "Gentiles for Jesus" was born.

That's the real end of the story of Jonah.

And now, I can understand why we leave Jonah in the Bible. And I hope you can as well.