

The Message of Jonah

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a teaching for Yom Kippur

At some point throughout its history, it is not uncommon for a nation or state to reach a point of sinfulness where it deserves nothing less than the full onslaught of God's punishment. Such is the case as depicted in the Book of Jonah. The Prophet is called out by the Lord, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (1:2). Nineveh was the capital city (or region) of the Assyrian Empire, one of the most brutal and inhumane powers the world, even to this day, has ever seen. This was a people whose culture was largely focused around the military and around the desire to conquer. The Assyrians would fillet their enemies alive and display their mangled corpses as a warning to those who opposed them. The Assyrians would also deport conquered subjects to other regions of their empire, to control them and weaken the likelihood of rebellion against them.

Knowing the reputation of the Assyrians and what they could do to his people (in particular, the Northern Kingdom), the response of Jonah to the Lord's calling should not be that surprising: "Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish" (1:3). While Nineveh was likely only about 500 miles from Jonah's hometown of Gath Hopher,¹ contrary to what God told him to do, Jonah boarded a ship in Joppa that would be sailing in the exact opposite direction—as far west as one could go in the Eighth Century B.C.E.—to the country we now call Spain! The Lord had called Jonah to speak against the great evil of Nineveh, in a chance for the Ninevites to repent of their dastardly ways. Yet, thinking that if the Ninevites repented it would mean certain disaster for Israel in the future, as God would spare His judgment upon them, Jonah thought it best not to listen.

While on the ship heading west, "the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship" (1:4-5a). We are not told in the text how far west this ship was able to sail. Perhaps it sailed only a short time, and then God sent the storm. Perhaps it sailed a longer time—enough for Jonah to think that God was not

¹ 2 Kings 14:25.

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paying attention—and then the storm hit. Regardless of how long it took, the Lord was certainly aware of what was going on.

The crew on the ship did not know what to do, calling out to their own deities to save them. “Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, ‘How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish’” (1:5b-6). When hearing the cry of the ship’s captain, I am immediately reminded of a statement Christopher J.H. Wright makes in his book *The Mission of God*: “In a polytheistic universe, we cannot expect all the gods to please all the people all the time. So disappointment with the gods is part of the lottery of life. Spread your bets among the gods, then, for you win some, you lose some.”² It was clear at this point in the sea voyage that the gods everyone else had called out to were not listening. The last bet rested with the Israelite Jonah and with the Lord.

So what happened? “[T]he sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.’ They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah” (1:7). One can only imagine the look on Jonah’s face when this happened. The sailors are quite inquisitive, wanting to know who this man was who had boarded their ship (1:8). Jonah realizes that he has been caught—not by these pagans—but by the Lord. He says, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (1:9). His testimony is that his God is the One who created the elements that are tossing the ship to-and-fro. The sailors can only ask him “What have you done?”, as Jonah had apparently told them “he was running away from the LORD” (1:10).

Something, of course, had to be done. “The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, ‘What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?’” (1:11). Jonah knows what to say: “Pick me up and throw me into the sea...and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you” (1:12). Interestingly enough, the crew “did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before” (1:13). These pagans even cried out to Jonah’s God, “O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased” (1:14). And so, realizing that God is responsible for the storm, the sailors do as Jonah had told them—he is thrown overboard and “the raging sea grew calm” (1:15). The sailors recognize the power of the Lord, and they even make some kind of sacrifice to Him (1:16).

Jonah, on the other hand, was swallowed by a “great fish,”³ and he “was inside the fish three days and three nights” (1:17).

One cannot begin to imagine the kind of pain and agony that Jonah must have experienced. First, those of us in the Twenty-First Century need to consider what traveling by ship across the Mediterranean must have been like for those who lived

² Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 174.

³ Please note that there is some controversy over what kind of creature swallowed Jonah. All the Hebrew says is *dag gadol* or “great fish.” The Greek Septuagint rendered this as *kētei megalō* or “a great whale” (LXE). The Hebrew from the time probably lacked the vocabulary to specify what kind of marine species swallowed Jonah. It would not seem unlikely that a whale is what swallowed Jonah, per some more modern accounts of people being swallowed by whales and surviving (cf. R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], pp 907-908).

The NASU rendering of Matthew 12:40 renders *kētos* as “SEA MONSTER.”

almost 2,800 years ago—when we complain about not having enough leg room on short hop plane flights. Second, imagine being tossed overboard into a raging sea with no life preserver. How long could you swim in such conditions? (Notice that the Book of Jonah does not tell us whether or not Jonah could swim.) And on top of all this, perhaps as you try to stay afloat, a big sea creature comes and swallows you whole.

The scene has shifted from Jonah being thrown overboard to now being inside of the great fish. Jonah, in one of the worst conditions a human being can ever find himself—*having been eaten as supper*—can only turn to his Creator. **Jonah prays!** He calls out, “In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me” (2:2-3).

The Hebrew says that Jonah cried *m’beten Sheol*, which would have been “the realm of the dead” (TNIV).⁴ To the sailors who threw him into the sea, Jonah was certainly as good as dead. But did Jonah actually cry out to the Lord from Sheol, having already died? This is a significant debate among interpreters, especially as Yeshua the Messiah will later connect Jonah’s experience to His own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). When He died, Yeshua entered into Sheol “and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19, NRSV), as a vindication of His triumph over sin. It may simply be that while Jonah was in the sea creature, he may have been in a kind of hibernation, somehow in a state between this dimension and that of Sheol, seeing what lies beyond. He may not have been entirely dead, but his reaction to what had transpired with him rejecting God’s will for him, would surely determine what would happen next.

What Jonah thought is made clear by his prayer: “I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple” (2:4). He believed himself removed from God’s presence, but would look to His Temple in his heart even though he thought he would not see it again. Having rejected the call of God upon him, Jonah now is undeniably repentant. He has been placed in one of the worst conditions imaginable. “The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever” (2:5-6a). The large fish served as a kind of coffin or sarcophagus for Jonah, swimming deeper and deeper into the ocean. Near the bottom of the ocean are where the mountains begin, and the great awesome forces of Planet Earth would have been like prison bars sealing Jonah’s destiny forever.

But all was not lost! At the point when it seems that Jonah would be closed up within Sheol without chance of escape, he proclaims “you brought my life up from the pit,⁵ O LORD my God” (2:6b). Jonah declares the great mercy of God toward him: “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD” (2:7-9).

⁴ The NIV translation of Jonah 2:2 has provided an interpretation by rendering *Sheol* as “the grave,” whereas other versions (i.e., RSV, NASU, NJPS, NRSV, ESV, HCSB, CJB) simply leave it as “Sheol,” leaving the interpreter to decide whether a place of internment or the netherworld is being spoken of.

⁵ Heb. *m’shachat*.

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Jonah has now been taught in a very real way how important it is for him to heed the Lord's instructions to him. And, he has been given a very tangible preview of what awaits the Ninevites who fail to turn from evil. While we are not told all of the things that Jonah learned during the time he was inside the sea creature that ate him, he certainly learned more than just simple obedience to God!

And so what happens when Jonah has adequately learned the error of his ways? “[T]he LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (2:10).

Once Jonah is on *terra firma*, “the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give to you’” (3:1-2). The response of Jonah to the Lord is not at all surprising, considering what he had just experienced: “Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh” (3:3a). Nineveh is described as being “a very important city” (3:3b), a “three days’ journey in breadth” (3:3c, RSV). Some have thought that both the city of Nineveh and its surrounding countryside or district are in view.

The Prophet Jonah obeys the Lord. “On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned’” (3:4). Jonah arrives and simply makes his way *b’ir* or “into the city, going a day's journey” (RSV). He declares that in forty days Nineveh will be “overthrown” (RSV, NASU, NJPS, etc.). And what happens? “The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth” (3:5). We are not told how many people believed the Lord's decree against them—but enough people across Nineveh's social spectrum certainly believed in what Jonah had declared. His preaching to them is not recorded as being that complicated, as he had simply shown up and told the first people he saw that Nineveh was doomed. Perhaps the Ninevites had realized that their society could not continue in the way it had been going, lest their enemies and others take advantage of their corruption. Likewise, Jonah could have been completely bleached out, having been in the stomach of the sea creature for three days. And indeed, it is said that even the king of Nineveh “covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust” (3:6). He issues a decree that the people fast and call upon God for help:

“Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (3:7-9).

With such a decree issued for the environs of Nineveh, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (3:10).

Whatever catastrophe the Lord had intended for Nineveh had been averted, because of recognizing the message that Jonah had come to declare.

But even though Nineveh is spared (at least for a while), “Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry” (4:1), and we are given specific details of why he originally fled to Tarshish. “He prayed to the LORD, ‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live’” (4:2-3).

Jonah, the one who had unbelievably suffered while in the stomach cavity of the great fish, actually asks God *to kill him* having seen the people of Nineveh heed the message. Is Jonah still so hard of hearing and now *of seeing* God's salvation? The Lord asks him, "Have you any right to be angry?" (4:4). Jonah simply walks to a place east of the city, making a shelter for himself, and waiting to see what would happen (4:5). A vine grows up to give him shade, but a worm comes later and chews away at the vine killing it (4:6-7). The sun becomes so intense on Jonah that he just says "It would be better for me to die than to live" (4:8). The death of the vine makes him resentful.

The Lord asks Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?", and he says "I am angry enough to die" (4:9). The Lord grew the vine for Jonah to make an important point to him: "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (4:10-11). On this note, the Book of Jonah ends. And indeed, for many readers it is a strange ending.

Many of us only recall the Book of Jonah for the scene of the Prophet being thrown overboard, swallowed up by the great fish, and then after repenting his being coughed up on dry ground. Not enough of us consider why Jonah disobeyed the Lord, and even after repenting of his error and proclaiming His judgment to Nineveh, was fiercely unhappy that the Ninevites heeded the message. Why, even after having spent three days and nights in the sea monster's stomach—likely teetering between this world and the world of Sheol—did Jonah want to die after going to Nineveh and proclaiming God's offer of mercy to them?

The answer is simple, yet is very complicated. After the Ninevites listened to Jonah's proclamation to them, the Prophet then goes outside the city a miserable wreck. He may have expected the people of Nineveh to reject the offer of mercy from God, moving out to a spot where He could then witness the destruction of the city. *This did not happen.* The Lord, instead, shows Jonah a small illustration of how He feels. A vine grows up giving shade to Jonah that later quickly dies. Jonah is furious over such a small piece of greenery, and simply wants to die himself. The baseness of Jonah's heart, in spite of all he has endured to arrive at Nineveh, is self-obvious.

If Jonah is this upset at the death of a plant, how upset is God toward a people that His righteousness requires Him to judge? The last sentence of ch. 4 makes it clear: "should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons...?" (NJPS). These are human beings the same as Jonah. These people have value in the eyes of their Creator, too. These are people to whom the Israelites were called to serve as priests (Exodus 19:6), *intermediaries between God and them*, serving God in the world so that others may know of Him and His salvation! The Prophet Jonah, while rejoicing in God's mercy toward him—which he did not deserve—finds himself to be prejudiced toward those who deserved His mercy even less than he, who actually heeded God *the first time*. In fact, the Lord's mercy not only was extended to the people of Nineveh, but to their domesticated animals.

It is likely that the illustration God uses for Jonah to know of His mercy worked, and that he finally "got it." Yet, many people today who have partaken of

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God's mercy (or who at least say that they have partaken of His mercy) do not demonstrate that same mercy toward others. Just using the simple geography of Nineveh, which is today in modern-day Iraq, think of all the people who have cried out to the Lord for the salvation available in Jesus or Yeshua—and yet who also pray to the Lord for the destruction of Arabs and Muslims. Yes, it is absolutely true that Islamic terrorism is a danger to the world and that jihadists have committed terrible crimes. This is not in dispute. But at the same time, Arabs and Muslims are human beings the same as you and I. They have the potential to be redeemed and radically transformed by the power of Yeshua. In our desire to be "Israel," let us not forget that the mandate upon Israel is to testify of the God of Israel to the world.

Most of us will not be called to go to modern-day Iraq or Syria (or perhaps even Tarshish/Spain) today to proclaim the good news of Yeshua. But each of us is called to be God's servant to the world, specifically the immediate world in which we live. He calls us to live lives of obedience unto Him, so when necessary we can stand up for the truth and call sin what it is. The warning seen in Jonah is that He can bring us to the point of death, inside the stomach of a fish, knowing what lies beyond. And, the warning seen in Jonah is that just as God places value on people *outside of the community of faithful, so must we!* Yet, if these are the important messages that the Book of Jonah gives us—why do so few of us in the Messianic movement take them seriously? Even if brought to the brink of death like Jonah, are we still offended when God saves our enemies? When we harbor negative thoughts to those who want to do us harm, should we not be brought to our knees and pray *first* for their salvation?

History records that Nineveh, and the Assyrian Empire, later did fall to its enemies. But, the Biblical record is clear that before this happened the Northern Kingdom of Israel did fall to Assyria. The reason it fell was not because Nineveh was preserved; the Northern Kingdom fell because of its own sins (cf. 2 Kings 17:7-17)—specifically its rejection of the Lord, its idolatry, *and* its child sacrifice.

The Book of Jonah likely asks you many questions that you may have never considered before. When contemplating these known questions, you may ask yourself other questions regarding where you stand before the King of Kings. Is it any surprise why Jonah is traditionally contemplated during the time of *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement? Not only does Jonah ask questions about why God would be merciful toward one of Israel's greatest enemies, but it also asks questions about why one of His Prophets did not rejoice over their repentance. I sincerely hope and pray that none of you ever rejoice over the downfall of God's enemies, *because God Himself does not*. I implore you instead to heed the command of Yeshua: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).⁶

⁶ Consult the entry for the Book of Jonah in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* for a summary of its date, composition, etc.