

The Book of Jonah¹

An Interpretation

Introduction

The following is the fruit of an exploration in the Book of Jonah. The ideas set forth result from a reading of the sources listed in the bibliography plus an occasional interpretation offered by the writer. This paper will not by any means exhaust the field as the author has chosen to deal with a limited number of topics that he found to be of special interest. He is but scratching the surface of a story whose profundity men have tapped for millennia.

The chapters will be:

- I. The man.
- II. The flight.
- III. The Prayer.
- IV. The Non-Jews.
- V. The Burden of the Book-A Dilemma.

So that there be no misunderstanding, it will be the assumption of this paper that the book is in no manner or form to be considered as historically true. The author will often refer to historic personages in a pseudo-historic context.

A number of the theories to be offered will be mutually exclusive. The author offers them as a guide to understanding and with the full knowledge that they are only theories.

I. The Man

“Go at once to Nineveh” (Jon; 1;2) God commands Jonah. Jonah does not go. He will not prophesy. He turns his face from Nineveh, and flees to the opposite end of the earth.

¹ Written originally for a class taught by Mordecai M. Kaplan z'l for which I received an A+ in 1958/9. I was extraordinarily proud of that response from MMK. It is here reprinted largely as I wrote it. The NJPS translation of 1963 is used instead of the JPS of 1917. The reader will excuse the insufficient bibliography.

He was not the first to struggle to avoid his prophetic destiny. He was in a tradition honored by the great prophets of Israel. Moses, head and shoulders above all prophets protested; “But they will not trust me...for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I!”² Jeremiah protested that he was too young and that the Lord should send a man to do a man’s job. Both understood and feared the consequences of responding affirmatively to the divine call. For over forty years, Moses suffered in his dealings with an obstinate people. And generations later Jeremiah knew for forty years, what it was to be rejected, scorned and live in mortal danger. For all their relentless loyalty to the divine call, they did not succeed in reshaping their people. The prophets of Israel were the heirs of a long tradition of failure. Jonah uniquely, refuses to prophesy because he fears success more than failure. Unlike others who stood their ground and argued it out with their Maker, Jonah flees worldwide from his mission. Who was he? This Jonah son of Amittai, who despite himself was destined to save Nineveh.

“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”³ We have here recorded the single prophecy of a man who was a prophet with strong nationalist leanings and who apparently had the king’s ear. In the Second Book of Kings, we read; that, despite doing what was displeasing to the Lord, Jeroboam ben Joash, King of Israel (787-747 B.C.E)...”restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the promise that the Lord, the God of Israel, had made through His servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amittai from Gath-hepher.”⁴ This is the first mention of the prophet Jonah son of Amittai, and the content of his message, though the words themselves are not recorded. There is little doubt that whatever he said fell upon receptive ears and when the prediction came to be, led to great acclaim and popularity. This was also a man who had an almost unique experience for a prophet. His prophecy is realized, and in his day. The man is a native of the tribal territory of Zebulun, and has been active in the Northern Kingdom. More than this we do not know.

In accordance with the traditional viewpoint, we shall assume that our hero is to be identified with this prophet from Gath-hefer. As in the case of Elijah and Elisha, the story may be one of the legends which grow up about a

² Ex; 4; 1 ff. Translations of the Torah text are from the magnificent translation by Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

³ Jon; 3; 4

⁴ II Kings 14; 23-28

prophet during the course of his life's work. Thus the prophet is an historical personage though the events may not be.

What manner of man and prophet was the Jonah we have here? One of the commentaries tells us that he received the call to go to Nineveh in the midst of a rousing good time at the Simchat Bet Hashoevah⁵ when we might assume that his condition was not epitomized by one hundred percent sobriety. Constancy is not one of his greater qualities, as he is never quite sure of the rightness of what he is doing. The Rabbis note that when he arrived at Jaffa, he found the port empty. When a ship arrived fortuitously and dropped anchor, Jonah saw in this an omen vindicating his precipitous flight from his calling.

In their attempt to explain why Jonah fled, the Rabbis stretch a point and add a third prophetic calling for our prophet. The first was when he was asked to deliver the expansionist prophecy to Jeroboam II. The Rabbis add that he was subsequently sent to Jerusalem to predict her destruction within forty days if the city did not repent. Like Nineveh later on, Jerusalem was on the brink of repentance. When its inhabitants heard Jonah's message, they repented immediately and the forty days passed without destruction. When the destruction promised did not happen, (the careful reader will note that the word repentance is not included in Jonah's words) the local populace turned on Jonah and accused him of being a false prophet, a capital crime, and even if one escaped indictment, a serious defamation of a prophet's credentials and status. Thus even before Nineveh, Jonah had witnessed God's desire to spare humankind, given their repentance. That Jonah was extremely sensitive to the public reaction to his prophetic message is made clear by the Rabbis, who say that when the message came to go to Nineveh, he hesitated, for Nineveh he knew was also at the brink of repentance, and were the city to be spared, he would be known even among the gentiles as a false prophet, and that added blow to his reputation he could do without. It is this protest that the Rabbis tell us he utters when he prays to the Lord saying;

“O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.”⁶

⁵ A very joyous celebration, at which festive performances took place

⁶ Jon; 4; 2

So here is our prophet, a man whose every effort until now has been crowned with success, but who is so dependent upon public favor and so unsure of his prophetic calling, that he runs from doing his duty, and boards ship a ship to anywhere.

Yet there is another nobler aspect to the man. He is clearly the loyal son of his people, and an acclaimed citizen of the northern kingdom, Israel. The nationalistic prophecy delivered in the days of Jeroboam II, was well in keeping with his outlook. He no doubt felt strongly about that Nineveh which had given his people such difficulties. It was only right, only just, only fair and long overdue, that the bloodthirsty city, the “Nazi Berlin” of its day, cruel conqueror and ravager of Israel and much of the ancient Near East, be finally destroyed.

A Rabbinic commentator places him squarely in the great tradition of Moses and David, offering that Jonah was willing to die so that his people might live. Therefore he went down to the sea, to forfeit his life rather than save that Nineveh which had caused and was destined to inflict so much suffering and pain on Israel. In the understanding of this commentator, the act of flight is translated from the cowardly refusal to do one’s duty into an act of valor above and beyond the call of that same duty.

Another Rabbinic account tells us that the prophet was less concerned about himself but more concerned that his people not “look bad” in comparison to the gentiles. It was after all to Israel that God had sent prophet after prophet. It was to Israel that these men had preached repentance and the good life. It was Israel upon whom lifetimes were spent exhorting the people to live the life they should be living. How was Jonah to go to that most abominable of the gentile’s cities, that Nineveh which was the “den of lions,”⁷ the city for which God had decreed destruction, and with a prophetic message but five words long induce their complete and immediate repentance? Jonah senses that they will repent, so he flees from the prophetic presence so that Israel might not look bad when compared to the gentiles.

And so the picture if one of a man torn. A man never quite sure of what he is doing. He is God’s prophet, but subject to man’s pressure. He will not speak God’s word, fearing the human reaction to that word. Nineveh is to be saved

⁷ Nahum 2; 12

but he would rather have it destroyed. The decision to flee was not an easy one for this man to make.

A prophet, beyond speaking the words of God is also expected to pray on behalf of his contemporaries. Yet Jonah will not pray. To pray is to appeal for mercy. Jonah will have none of it. Jonah will not be God's messenger no matter where it may lead him, nor will he pray for himself or for others, without great pressure. The reader will note that aboard ship and in the storm, it is the gentile captain who insists that Jonah

“Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish.”⁸

The Rabbis say that even his incarceration in the fish did not elicit prayer from him and that it was only after a mid-ocean transfer to a pregnant female fish full of the filth and slime of thousands of ova, that only then in his great discomfort did Jonah begin to pray.

So we see a man unsure of his prophetic role in both of its aspects. He will not be God's messenger/mouthpiece, no matter where it may lead him, nor will he do his prophetic task of praying even for himself without great pressure.

That the decision, to flee or not to flee, was not an easy one to come by is testified to by both the Midrash and by Herman Melville who writes that Jonah was able to sleep through the careening storm, as a result of the great anguish and turmoil he had gone through in fleeing. In the words of Melville,

“...a deep stupor steals over him, as over the man who bleeds to death, for conscience is the wound and there's naught to staunch it; so, after sore wrestlings in his berth, Jonah's prodigy of ponderous misery drags him drowning down to sleep”.⁹

Even after his descent into the bowels of the female whale, and after he has even begun to pray, Jonah still does not fully understand that to be saved, he is going to have to do his mission and do it fully. The Rabbis, sensing the

⁸ Ibid; 1; 6

⁹ Melville Ibid. Chapter 9

difficulty with the prayer, with which we will deal shortly, put into Jonah's mouth a very different prayer, which goes unanswered until after many devious avoidances of the issue, Jonah finally indicates that he will go to Nineveh, when he finally says; "What I have vowed I will perform."¹⁰ Only then, say the Rabbis, is he coughed up from the fish, which may be the limbo to which the unsure descend. As a result of his experience, the man grows. He goes to his mission, albeit with an unwilling heart. He who was indecisive, torn, subject to fits of great depression, who did not understand his own function in life, goes to do what he must. He goes to meet the main theme of the story. For there is one thing which has remained constant in the man throughout. One idea amid all the vacillations of character and temperament. He has understood to the very core of his being that Justice must be done, but more of that anon.

II The Flight

To God-fearing men down through the ages, Jonah's Flight has been a sore point. Who was the man who might dare to flee the all-powerful God, creator of heaven and earth? How, of all people, could a prophet try to do this thing? The Rabbis are sensitive to this dilemma. They wonder that being a prophet he must surely have known scripture. He must have known all those places which affirm the all-inclusive character of our God. They quote the verses with which Jonah must have been familiar. How could the man knowing all this have dared to flee from the presence of the Lord?

That one might flee from the presence of the Lord, is an idea that has old roots in Scripture; "And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven"¹¹, and it is later made clear that if the Jews are scattered among the peoples, they "will serve man-made gods of wood and stone, that cannot see or hear or eat or smell."¹²

Jephthah makes it quite clear to the king of Amon that he will fare only as well as Chemosh his god does.¹³ David complains "For they have driven me out today, so that I cannot have a share in the Lord's possession, but am told,

¹⁰ Jon 2; 10

¹¹ Deut 4; 19

¹² *ibid*; 4; 28,

¹³ Judges 11; 24

‘Go and worship other gods.’¹⁴ The Psalmist asks; “How shall we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil?¹⁵ And in Amos and Hosea the lands of the nations are referred to as the unclean land. The idea is an old one. But from the evidence in the book it would not be plausible to say that Jonah flees because his mind still retains this archaic notion. When he is forced to reveal his identity, he says; “ I am a Hebrew”...”I worship the lord, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land.”¹⁶ He does not want God to forgive Nineveh, but that very fact that God might do that shows his clear recognition that God’s sovereignty extends beyond the borders of Israel. We must then say that he is not fleeing from God and from His dominion. To Yehezkel Kaufman¹⁷ the flight is not only an attempt to flee from God, but is a sign of a perfected monotheism. In a discussion of Adamah T'maiah,¹⁸ Kaufman cites our book as the highest expression of the idea that though God’s sovereignty extends worldwide, yet his presence (sh'chinah) is concentrated in the physical environs of Israel. Though God’s concern with Nineveh would weaken his argument somewhat, nevertheless Kaufman is in basic agreement with the Jewish tradition which holds that Jonah did not flee from God but rather from the prophetic mission and from the sh'chinah, the divine presence. For in the words of Y'hudah ha-Levi; “All who prophesied did so either in her (Israel) or for her.”¹⁹ Thus Jonah could escape his task if only he could get outside the boundaries, where god will not disturb him, for God will listen to Ha-Levi’s dictum and leave poor Jonah be.

He takes ship for Tarshish. To Melville and others, in Spain and “as far by water from Joppa as Jonah could possibly have sailed in those ancient days when the Atlantic was an almost unknown sea.”²⁰

If we investigate other Biblical references to this place, its location is not quite as clear. That it was a long way off seems reasonable, for Solomon had “a Tarshish fleet on the sea...once every three years, the Tarshish fleet came in, bearing gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks.”²¹ The distance is fine but the direction is askew. The products described come from Africa and

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 26; 19

¹⁵ Ps; 137.4

¹⁶ Jonah 1; 9

¹⁷Yechezkel Kaufman Toldot Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisraelit, The Bialik Institute & The Dvir Co. Ltd. Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 1953

¹⁸ Lit; “impure land- outside the boundaries of the Biblical Land of Israel

¹⁹ Y'hudah ha-Levi; The Kuzary

²⁰ Herman Melville- Moby Dick, The Sermon Chapter IX

²¹ 1 Kings 10; 22

without the benefits of a Suez Canal, could only have come by way of Etzion-Gever, Solomon's door to the Red Sea, whereas our prophet is supposed to have embarked from Jaffa. In Isaiah²², and in Psalms²³, we see only that Tarshish was a long way off. Some suggest that Tarshish was a name for a type of ocean-going vessel.²⁴ The name could of course have been given these ships because they could handle the long trip to Tarshish, a trip of three years in Solomon's day. The theories are many. From Ibn Ezra's suggestion of Tunis, to Tartessus in Spain, to Sardinia the smelting center, and back to Carthage which served as a trading station dealing with interior Africa.

The speculation seems largely beside the point for our author seems simply to have chosen the farthest place he could call to mind, as we might say that someone had gone to Timbuktu, though we might not know or even care where it was, or what it was. The author was trying only to tell us that Jonah was trying to get as far away as possible from both the source and end of his prophetic mission.

III The Prayer

The fleeing prophet has been cast from the ship in which he was fleeing to Tarshish. He has been swallowed by a fish, saved by what history has called a whale and we are told that up from the depths comes a prayer.

“The Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three night. Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish.”²⁵

The next seven verses record what is said to have been Jonah's prayer. The chapter concludes with; “The Lord commanded the fish; and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land.”²⁶

Without the middle or prayer verses, the first two verses and the last verse make up a comprehensive unit, dealing with the swallowing, Jonah's

²² Is 65; 19

²³ Ps; 72; 10

²⁴ Ibid; 48; 8 lends some credence to this idea.

²⁵ Jon; 2; 1-2

²⁶ ibid; 2; 11

praying, and his redemption from the innards of the fish. The prayer²⁷ itself presents certain rather compelling difficulties. It is in the past tense at a time when the prophet is still imprisoned. It speaks with great confidence of redemption before it has happened. It mentions no sin whereas Jonah is by now very aware of his. It records no fish or sea animal, while this is Jonah's very environment. There is no request that he be saved, though his fate is very much in doubt.

These verses bear an affinity to a number of the psalms and indeed we find some interesting parallels and even a duplication of language. There is a tradition of Psalms of the Sea,²⁸ whose language and structure closely approximate that of our prayer and which deal with the saving of a man from a situation not unlike that in which Jonah finds himself.

There are a number of theories that can be offered in the attempt to resolve this problem. Robert Nathan in his novel about our prophet very blithely handles the problem by assuming that the prophet considers himself saved by the fact that the fish has rescued him, and in this way he accounts for the use of the past tense. Perhaps Jonah in his distress did not demonstrate great creativity and when he finally decided to pray, chose a stock prayer, a psalm with which he was acquainted. A later editor, sensing the gap in that we are told only that Jonah prayed but not what he said, may have inserted one of the "Down to the Sea" psalms which he felt were especially appropriate. The last theory seems most plausible as the narrative reads perfectly well without the addition.

Melville deals with the prayer somewhat differently but indicates thereby his very profound understanding of one of the book's main messages. He assumes through Father Mapple, who is delivering a sermon, that the prayer is an integral part of the narrative.

"But observe his prayer, and...learn a weighty lesson. For sinful as he is, Jonah does not weep and wail for direct deliverance. He feels that his dreadful punishment is just. He leaves all his deliverance to God, contenting himself with this, that spite of all his pains and pangs, he will still look towards His holy temple."²⁹

²⁷ *ibid*; vv 3-10

²⁸ (See Psalms 42; 8,69; 3,15,16, and 102; 23)

²⁹ Melville *Ibid*.

We see here a Jonah who fully understands that justice must be done and that there is no point in pressing that issue. Father Mapple claims that it is this very awareness which leads to Jonah's ultimate deliverance from the fish.

Our Rabbis understood the problem of the inserted psalm. Their account of Jonah's prayer differs almost totally from that of the psalm, having in common only the very end, "What I have vowed I will perform." They give us a very different picture of the praying prophet, a picture that fits their conception of him. They pay special attention to the first two verses of the chapter. The word fish is used here three times. The first two times describing God's preparing the fish and Jonah's being in it for three days and three nights. The gender used is the masculine. When the word next appears a ה "heh"³⁰ is added, indicating that the fish is now a female. And it is here that we read that Jonah prayed to the Lord God from the bowels of the fish. The Rabbis would not let this golden opportunity pass and this they us was the sequence of events.

Upon being cast from the ship, Jonah entered the bowels of a male fish where his situation was rather comfortable. He still did not understand his prophetic role and for three days and three nights went without praying, for does not the verse specifically say; "...and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights." *Then* "Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish." Apparently a mid-ocean transfer had been arranged and Jonah was switched from his very comfortable quarters in the male fish to a pregnant female, full of eggs, slime, and apparently a place of very cramped quarters.³¹ The discomfort finally elicits a prayer from our prophet. It is in a sense forced prayer. From Jonah's point of view there is no sense nor reason to approach the God of justice, who is in the midst of executing justice. It is as if Jonah were saying. "I am getting what I deserve. This is the way the world is and ought to be. If there is to be justice, and justice there must be, it must be justice in full for all humankind, Nineveh and Jonah ben Amittai, prophet of God included.

³⁰ The fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet often used at end of word to indicate feminine gender.

³¹ The rabbis tell that the pregnant female had 365 thousand (an interesting number) breeding spawn which limited Jonah's accommodations and comfort level. Thus they account for the masculine noun for fish דג (dag) in the first verse of Chapter two and the feminine דגה (dagah) with the added ה at the end.

Nevertheless a prayer which our Rabbis tell us, God wanted, for He desires the prayers of the righteous. Does Jonah's affirmation of justice place him among the righteous?

And what was his prayer?

Jonah starts with an elaborate admission of God's sovereignty and of His reign over the entire universe. He is not answered. He then goes into specifics and especially compliments God on His understanding of the inner ways and workings of the world and after extended adoration asks that he be saved from the deep. Still, nothing happens. Then he almost dares God to live up to His reputation as described multiple times in the Psalms; Jonah says; "You are known as the One who brings low and uplifts, who kills and restores life-well I've reached the point of death, now restore me to life." But there is no answer. The Rabbis say that he was not answered until he uttered the words which conclude his prayer here; "What I have vowed I will perform." At this point he is coughed up from the fish. Only after he had seen that to be saved he would have to do his duty, to go to Nineveh and there to preach, whether or not he approved of the consequences, only then could he return to a life among men where he would serve as the prophet of God.

IV The Non-Jews---Nineveh and the Sailors

There is no reason why Jonah, the patriot, the loyal son of Israel should have any desire at all to proceed to Nineveh and save it from its just desserts. If this is the Nineveh of Jewish tradition, then it perhaps more than any other city should indeed be destroyed. It is this antipathy towards Nineveh which makes Rabbi Nathan describe Jonah as a hero, willing to lay down his life so that this scourge of Israel might be destroyed.³² Nineveh was the aggressor and oppressor par excellence of its day. Nahum devoted a whole book to describing the vengeance that will be wreaked upon Nineveh, that..."city of crime, utterly treacherous, full of violence, where killing never stops!"³³ Nahum tells us \that "All who hear the news about you (your destruction) clap their hands over you, for who has not suffered from your constant malice?"³⁴

³² Viz; Yalkut Shimoni

³³ Nahum 3; 1

³⁴ Ibid; 3; 19

From the testimony of the book of Kings³⁵ and Amos,³⁶ we can easily understand how Nahum felt and how Jonah the Israelite nationalist felt. This was the capital of that Assyria, which had marched to and fro in the land, besieging and capturing, razing and destroying, taxing and exiling. That God's care and His mercy would extend to this city was hardly conceivable and if it did, it should not, out of a respect for justice.

Is this the Nineveh referred to by our author? Our Nineveh is not described as nor does it seem to fit the role of capital of a world empire. The description sounds almost legendary. The city is described as “an enormously large city a three days' walk across.”³⁷ And Jonah has but to enter the city, deliver his five-word prophecy, and within minutes of hearing the word of the prophet the city sets about its repentance. A fast is proclaimed, spontaneously it would seem, and sackcloth is worn. The message reaches the King of Nineveh, not described as the King of Assyria and all her dominions, and the King proclaims formally a public fast, and ordains the donning of sackcloth by both man and beast. He also advises his populace to “turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish,”³⁸ This mention of “his evil ways” and “the injustice of which he is guilty” is the only mention we have in the book of the sins for which the city was to have been destroyed.

Some would have us believe that the author was a country bumpkin writing of a city he had heard about only through the tales told by members of passing caravans. To be fair to the man we would have to say that he is more sophisticated than an average “backwoodsman”. Not only in his grasp of the ideas involved, but also by virtue of the fact that he knows that the custom of the non-Jews is to include their animals in both the fast and the wearing of sackcloth, a fact which indicates a relatively high level of knowledge of the world around him.

Let us remember that our author is not chronicling a history. He is making a point and consequently there are a great many things that he dabs in broad strokes, leaving it to the reader to fill the gap and understand. He chooses a prophet well known and even liked by the reader. In his flight he sends the

³⁵ Kings 2; 15; 29

³⁶ Amos 6; 14

³⁷ Jon; 3; 3

³⁸ *ibid*; 3; 9

prophet to Tarshish, to the reader the most out of the say place conceivable. He chooses Nineveh, a symbol of the very worst, a city which has reached the depths of degradation and will yet come back from the grave, He does not even have to spell out the evil done by Nineveh, to build the case against them for every one of his readers knows a great deal about the evil the city is accountable for. Every Israelite knows that of all the cities of the world, Nineveh is least worthy of God's care and love. Although the sin of Nineveh is described in briefest outline, because every reader knows it, and their repentance is given much more attention and is quite extensively explained, for this was the astonishing and inconceivable event to every Israelite who heard the story.

It is this repentance of Nineveh's, which earns the book of Jonah a place in the afternoon Yom Kippur liturgy, reminding all that though the hour be late there is still time to repent It is Nineveh's repentance which plays a crucial part among the four concepts that Kaufman avers are the burden of the book, "Sin, punishment, repentance, and forgiveness."³⁹ The emphasis on the four seems to me unwarranted for the first two are given very little time or place in the book. It is Nineveh's repentance, late and instantaneous which strikes the reader at first reading, but to my mind too much weight has been put on this aspect of the story. This has resulted in a neglect of the other significant group in the book, the sailors. They have not received their due, and though they are often passed off as being merely nice fellows, they play as important a role as Nineveh, in the lesson our author would have us learn.

Who are the sailors? They are of heterogeneous origin, for "in their fright, the sailors cried out, each to his own god."⁴⁰ The Rabbis say that there were sailors from each of the seventy nations. A crew recruited from all over the world, a cross section of all mankind. They are heathens, but it is they who pray while Jonah sleeps through the storm. They are heathens but they learn through the storm to fear the God of Jonah who "made both sea and land." They have among them a strange passenger whom they have previously ignored, but who becomes a center of crucial interest when the lot falls upon him. In the midst of a storm, which threatens all their lives, they will not condemn immediately, but out of a respect for the sanctity of life, they try to see that justice will be done. They know what Jonah has done, for he tells them, but they hesitate to be the executors of God's justice, and throw him

³⁹ The Religion of Israel. From its Beginning to the Babylonian Exile; Translated and Abridged by Moshe Greenberg .The University of Chicago Press 1960. pp. 282-286

⁴⁰ Jon; 1; 5

overboard. Jonah has told them that throwing him overboard will calm the sea, and it would be only natural to throw the man overboard first and ask questions later. This they will not do, for though Jonah is convinced that this is just, they are not, and they would not injure an innocent man, even were it to cost them their lives. They try to row to shore. This fails, for the sea grows ever more stormy. They protest to God that they would not spill innocent blood, for they do not know if God holds the man guilty, but at last seeing no alternative they cast Jonah overboard. The Rabbis, describing the sailors in glowing terms say that Jonah was not turned loose until the sailors had used every device to save him.

They took the ship's utensils and cast them into the sea to lighten its weight, but that did not avail them. They tried to row hard to dry land, but they could not. What did they finally do?

They took Jonah, and, stationing themselves at the side of the ship, they said, "God of the universe, Lord! Do not lay upon us innocent blood that we may not be doomed because of the life of this man, whose character and deeds we do not know but who keeps saying loud and clear, 'This trouble is yours because of me.' " Then they took him and lowered him into the water up to his knees, and the sea's wrath abated. When they hoisted him to their own level into the ship, the sea resumed its raging at them.

Then they lowered him to his neck, and the sea's wrath abated once more. But when they lifted him up again to their own level into the ship, the sea again resumed its raging at them. Finally, after they put all of him in, the sea's wrath ceased.⁴¹

The sailors are indeed "rachmanim b'nei rachmanim, merciful descendants of merciful ancestors. They are the first in the book to show Jonah the necessity to temper justice with mercy, for man is but human, and can err in the dispensation of that which is divine.

And perhaps this is why they are so important to our story, and should not be relegated to receiving a nod in passing. Our writer gives them as much attention as he gives Nineveh and he is not one to waste words. They are as different from Nineveh as day from night. Where Nineveh is sin ridden they

⁴¹ Sefer Ha'agadah Bialik & Ravnitzky; Dvir Tel Aviv Israel 1952

do all in their power to avoid the spilling of innocent blood. But the most important contrast lies in the fact that the sailors are the dispensers, albeit hesitantly, of justice, whereas Nineveh is to be the recipient of justice. Jonah on the one hand is the recipient and when he goes to Nineveh he is the toll of the dispenser of justice. In the different attitudes taken lies the burden of the book.

V The Burden of the Book—A Dilemma

The author is wrestling with a problem which has very ancient roots in the Jewish tradition. His characters act out that dilemma in our narrative.

How shall humans live in an unjust world? How can the righteous flourish in the mist of unrighteousness. How shall one weigh the merits of justice and mercy? This is the dilemma and burden of the book. This deals with all the elements in the book, God, Jonah, the sailors and Nineveh. If the main argument of the book is T'shuvah, as its location in the Yom Kippur liturgy implies, then the sailors' chapter is largely irrelevant, for they are the very embodiment of good. And our author is not one to waste words. If it is Kaufman's sin, punishment, repentance and forgiveness, then we would have to explain why is it the author does not deal except in passing with the first two categories, sin and punishment which would seem to be of great significance to his message. The New Testament and classic Christian interpretation of the book as prefiguring the death and resurrection of Jesus, is clearly a stretch, unacceptable to a Jewish interpreter.

Jonah exemplifies justice. A noble and absolute justice which must be done no matter what the cost. It is justice for all humankind, Jews and non-Jews, and even God's own prophet. Aboard ship, during the storm, Jonah recognizes that he is about to get what is coming to him for having fled from God. He is now the recipient of God's all-knowing justice. He tells the sailors, calmly, acknowledging with great equanimity, that he is going to have to pay the price of his own actions, "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came upon you on my account."⁴² He goes to his fate uncomplainingly, knowing and acknowledging that what is happening is just. This is perhaps the reason he does not pray initially, either from the ship or from the bowels of the fish when he is first imprisoned there. What is the use of approaching a God of

⁴² Jon; 1; 12

justice, who is in the midst of an act of justice? It is as if Jonah were saying; “I am receiving what I deserve.” If there is to be justice, it must be so for all men, Jonah ben Amittai, the prophet of God included.

When Nineveh, the most malevolent of cities, is saved by its repentance, by its return to the human camp, is this not Jonah’s protest; O Lord! Isn’t this jut what I said when I was still in my own country...For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment”⁴³ To Jonah, a most grievous accusation against and if true a fault in a God who has tried to create a just world. And Jonah adds, “Please, Lord, take my life for I would rather die than live.”⁴⁴ At his noblest, Jonah is saying one is better off not having been brought into such a world. One would be better off dead than living in a world where there is no justice. If Nineveh could be let off after a lifetimes of evil (evil descendants of evil ancestors-a counterpoint to the sailors?)), by one hour of repentance and good deeds, and not be recompensed for her interminable corruption and violence, then the very creation of such a world was a mistake. It is for justice that Jonah stands- untempered, and undiluted. He well understands the price that must be paid if the world is to be just, but he himself demonstrates, that he for one is willing to pay that price. Even the great mercy extended under severe duress in the midst of the storm to him by the sailors does not temper his position

And what of the sailors? Counterpoint to Nineveh, they are both good and merciful. They hesitate in deciding what is just and what is not in the direst of circumstances. They recognize their human limitations, and would leave the divine attribute of justice to God, for they will not risk taking an innocent man’s life, if there is the slightest chance that person is innocent. They are human and they know that being human means that they and others are prone to err. Justice is God’s and they would not err in dispensing that which is divine.

The evidence they have that Jonah is guilty is as compelling as is the case against Nineveh. They are not as quick nor as cocksure as Jonah is, in judging who shall be punished and who shall not. Though they see God’s hand in the storm which threatens their lives, they will not raise a hand against the prophet, until they have no alternative, for justice must be in

⁴³ *ibid*; 4; 2

⁴⁴ *ibid* 3; 3

God's hands "Oh, please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person! For you O lord, by Your will have brought this about"⁴⁵

But if there are those in the world who retreat from the human camp into a world of almost absolute evil, as did Nineveh, then justice must be done, fully and unequivocally. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"⁴⁶ But if it is less than that, as it must of necessity be when Nineveh repents, then mercy must enter upon the scene. For Nineveh had demonstrated her desire to return to the land of the living. She has demonstrated that she still has the vestige of the desire to be human and being human is subject to all the errors and vagaries that the name implies. And by so doing she has made herself once again a candidate for God's mercies, for in accordance with the Rabbis, if the world were only to be judged by the criterion of justice, it would surely be destroyed.

And this, God would not have, for all were made human and God knows that they "do not yet know their right hand from their left"⁴⁷ and were justice to be dispensed absolutely, there would be an end to the world. So He will pity Nineveh, if only they will agree to be human and not bestial, and so will He have compassion upon Jonah and not requite his sin, if only he will go to Nineveh and preach there.

Then God teaches Jonah a lesson about mercy. God starts where Jonah is. Jonah has gone to a spot outside the city to see if justice will yet be done, and the city destroyed. As Jonah sits in the blazing sun, God has a plant grow quickly to provide shade. Jonah is glad for the shade. The next morning the plant dies and an east hot wind exacerbates Jonah's discomfort. Jonah becoming faint begs for death saying; "I would rather die than live"⁴⁸ It is *self*-pity, perhaps a mixture of pity for a gourd with self-pity but a place to start, perhaps an opening for building mercy. God makes the very point of humanity's existence to Jonah.

You will live in an unjust world! You will not be given the option to stop living because it is unjust. This is the world into which you are born and in which you must live. If you would live well in it, have pity and one day

⁴⁵ *ibid*; 1; 14

⁴⁶ *ibid*; 3; 4

⁴⁷ *ibid*; 4; 11

⁴⁸ *ibid* 4; 8

mercy upon its creatures, in their evil as well as in their good for they are all but human, and “do not yet know their right hand from their left”...

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