

Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Jonah

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Though brief, the book of Jonah is packed with action and a powerful message. Its parabolic narrative aims to critique gently the received wisdom of certain aspects of the prophetic tradition, while drawing out certain other—perhaps more subtle—strands in that tradition.

There are roughly two halves to the book—Jonah’s attempted escape from God’s call and Jonah’s proclamation to Nineveh. Both parts contain, importantly, an account of non-Israelites responding positively to the God of Israel.

A peculiar prophet

Jonah is a very unusual prophetic book. It emphasizes not so much the words of the prophet as the actions of the prophet, and the things that happen to him.

Jonah’s story is full of humor, irony and exaggeration, with memorable scenes like an attempt to run from the God of all creation, sleeping through a violent storm, prayer from inside a fish, animals fasting and wearing sackcloth, and outrageous anger over the death of a plant.

The book’s most shocking feature, though, is its unflattering portrayal of the prophet. Jonah resists God’s will at first, and even when he eventually goes along with it, the result leaves him bitter and angry with God.

In the other prophetic books God’s will almost always is carried out *through* a prophet, not *in spite of* the prophet. The book of Jonah raises the

question of what the actual role of the prophet is.

The book starts with “the word of the Lord came to Jonah” (1:1). This is a typical way for the Bible to introduce the careers of prophets (See also Micah 1:1, 2 Samuel 7:4). Prophets must receive God’s word directly before they can preach that word.

We never really are told what makes a prophet a prophet, except God’s free choice. We don’t know what qualifies Jonah to be a prophet, other than God calls him. So, Jonah’s story starts like a typical prophetic story, but it will turn out to be anything but.

There is one other Old Testament reference to Jonah the son of Amittai, in 2 Kings 14:25. There, he prophesies favorably for King Jeroboam’s plan to expand Israel’s borders. We see in spite of Jeroboam’s wickedness, God had pity on Israel and showed her favor.

Now, interestingly, Jonah will be the agent of God’s favor for another nation, the most dreaded, hated empire in the world at that time: Assyria.

Prophetic disillusionment

Jonah famously runs the opposite direction from where God sends him (1:3), but God’s call won’t let him go. After a storm at sea (note the pagan sailors’ plea to the God of Israel, 1:14) and a rescue by way of a fish’s belly, Jonah grudgingly goes to Nineveh and proclaims its doom (3:4).

Jonah clearly suspects God will show mercy to the city because of God’s nature (4:2). But elsewhere in the prophetic tradition (such as the oracles of Isaiah 13-23), when destruction is pronounced against the enemies of Israel, the idea is it’s final, it’s going to happen. Those who threaten Israel won’t get away with it.

A different line of thought stands out clearly in Jonah: God is perfectly happy—and free—to allow for repentance even among gentile nations. What Jonah feared might happen does: The entire population, at the king's behest, repents of their sins, and Nineveh is spared (3:6-10).

Jonah sits dejected, irate, disillusioned. Perhaps he feels like a failure—a true prophet should be an agent of God's judgment against Israel's foes. From Jonah's perspective, the city's destruction would have validated him as a prophet and validated Israel's special place among the nations.

But the more important point of prophecy, the book tells us, is it produces in its hearers a positive response. To God, following through on a promise of destruction is less important than saving lives (See also Ezekiel 18:21-23), even if those lives are "outside" the fold. This is Jonah's dilemma, and the heart of the book's message.

The book's central lesson is "salvation belongs to the Lord." It emphasizes God's freedom to show compassion even to Israel's greatest enemies. This message goes directly against the condemnation of foreign powers like Assyria seen in, for instance, the book of Nahum, which celebrates the final destruction of Nineveh.

There are echoes here of Jeremiah's message about God's rights to withdraw judgment from a nation on which he intended to bring disaster (Jeremiah 18:7-8). The book of Jonah says to Israel—and to us: "It isn't just about you. God's blessings on you are not just for your sake."

Israel's purpose is set within the bigger picture of God's purposes in history for all the world. But the book also gives a comforting reminder to disobedient Israel: If God should change his mind and forgive a city as awful as Nineveh, how much more will he forgive Israel, his firstborn.

A story for us

Jonah's story is left open-ended with God's pointed question (4:10) about whether it is not right that God should have compassion on so many people—and animals.

We don't get Jonah's response, so the question is aimed directly at us as readers and hearers. Will we remain, like Jonah, in bitterness that God is bringing outsiders in? Or will we receive the radical truth of God's compassion for all and, in the process, be transformed ourselves?

In our preaching, as in our everyday witness as Christ-followers, we should keep in mind this sobering lesson offered by this strange little book. It isn't just about us. We don't claim ownership to the grace we've received.

We must be on guard against letting our prejudices and presuppositions impinge on our calling. Our work for the kingdom isn't for our own validation, but for the ultimate intent of God to reconcile the world to God.

Sometimes when we speak the truth of the gospel, that message can turn right back around to condemn us in our pride and self-centeredness. But if we receive the correction, mercy always follows.

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