

# **JONAH, THE RELUCTANT PROPHET: PROPHECY AND ALLEGORY**

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The books of biblical prophets are almost always composed of the speeches, admonitions or predictions of the prophet after whom the book is named. Not so the Book of Jonah. In the four chapters of which it consists there are only five Hebrew words of prophetic speech (in translation *Forty days hence and Nineveh will be overturned*). Even this warning was subsequently canceled by the Lord Himself. Jonah thereby must have appeared to his contemporaries as a false prophet according to the rules of true prophecy as promulgated in Deuteronomy 18:22. This appears to be the reason why the Talmud feels forced to defend the truthfulness of Jonah's prophetic status.<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of this book in the Hebrew Bible and the many references to it in the Talmud and Midrash show that the sages of the talmudic era saw in its text ideas or lessons valuable for all times. These theological aspects emerge clearly if allegoric interpretations are added to the narrative of Jonah's life. Because it is included in the Yom Kippur service, the Jonah story is generally associated with the value of repentance. The cancellation of Jonah's brief prediction that Nineveh was to be destroyed came about through the apparently genuine amelioration of the deeds and attitudes of its population. Repentance, so the story seems to proclaim, can avert misfortunes which would otherwise occur.

No doubt, this idea is one of the ingredients of this story. But it cannot have been the predominant theme for which this book was written, because it would render the first two chapters superfluous. For demonstrating the power of repentance the book could have started with the third chapter, which reports Jonah's address to the population of Nineveh. The prophet's reluctance to accept this mission could have been included as a short conversation, similar to the one between God and Moses at the scene of the Burning Bush. Why the dramatic story of the storm and Jonah's rescue in the belly of

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a fish? It appears clear that more is explored here than the efficacy of repentance.

I propose that the essence of the Book of Jonah is an exploration of the relationship of a prophet to God, the Donor of this extraordinary status. In my article on the Book of Job,<sup>2</sup> I tried to show that the story of Job portrays the travails and emotional growth of a person on the path towards prophecy. Jonah, in his short story, acquaints us with some interactions between God and prophets after they have attained the distinction of this status.

To understand Jonah and his flight from God we must be keenly aware that prophets, with the exception of Moses, received their Godly commands and communications in ways other than clearly enunciated speech. Already in Numbers 12:6, this rule has been succinctly expressed.

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, elaborates on this point. In Book I Chapter 45 he proves that the verb *amar* [speak] has different meanings when applied to speech among mortals and speech attributed to God. He states:

When we are told that God addressed the prophets and spoke to them, our minds are merely to receive a notion that there is a Divine knowledge to which the prophets attain; we are to be impressed with the idea that the things the prophets communicate to us come from the Lord, and are not altogether the product of their own conceptions and ideas.

The "hearing" of God's speech, therefore, requires preparation, intuition and a closeness to God, as Maimonides later explains in Book II Chapter 32. The prophets "hear" their messages in dreams, visions, or in their interpretations of events. It takes a special talent, training and superior sensitivity to understand the "voice" of the Lord because it contains no sounds which enter through the ears of the recipient.

If, therefore, the emotional and intellectual readiness of the prophet is a basic requirement of prophecy, it would appear that this relationship can be interrupted or discontinued if the prophet loses or suppresses his alertness or receptiveness to God's messages. Seen with this hypothesis in mind, Jonah's "flight" from God was not so much a physical running away as an attempt to shut out the messages from his own mind. A geographical flight may have been included. Perhaps, so he hoped, a change of venue would interrupt the

incoming messages and impressions. He did not want to interfere with the forthcoming destruction of Nineveh, because its people was the one which later would destroy ten tribes of Israel.

A new concept is now being taught to the readers. When the prophetic impulse has been initiated inside the seer, once he has been imbued with the sensitivity to God's wishes and commands, he cannot on his own return to the tranquility of the uninitiated. The "word" of God intrudes like a storm on the sea; no longer can he shut it off by going to sleep on the floundering boat as Jonah attempted to do. This story translates into a new maxim: Prophecy is a perpetual condition. Jonah's rescue by a mysterious fish allegorically describes the apex of attempted non-prophecy. A fish makes no sound; it is immune to the stormy movements of the waves. It is the opposite of prophetic stimulation. The inside of the fish raises this symbolism to its highest degree. What the attempted slumber on board ship could not accomplish, the stomach of the fish should perhaps have made possible. That is, total suppression of all prophetic in-take. The gigantic fish which saved Jonah's life becomes thereby an allegoric figure. It is transformed from an almost unimaginable event to a meaningful tale. Instead of referring to a fish much larger than a whale, without gastric juices or digestive process, which in spite of its size managed to swim so close to shore that it could redeposit the prophet on dry land, it becomes the symbol of Jonah's attempt to silence the prophetic inspiration within himself. From this point of view, the prayer which ended the three-day journey in the dark interior emerges as a combination of poetic creation and theological truth.

It is noteworthy that Jonah's address to his God does not include a plea to be delivered out of this very restrictive surrounding. We might have expected such an entreaty as the first and foremost subject. Yet, no reference is made to this obvious need. The prayer refers to past communications with the Lord, seemingly referring to prophetic closeness with God prior to his current attempt at disengagement. The first five verses read as follows:

*In my trouble I called to the Lord  
And He answered me;  
From the belly of the lower-world I cried out  
And You heard my voice.  
You cast me into the depths,*

*Into the heart of the sea.  
The floods engulfed me;  
All Your breakers and billows  
Swept over me.*

*And I thought 'I was driven away, Out of your sight (2:3-5).*

At this point, in the middle of the fifth verse, the prophet switches suddenly from the past tense to the future. It appears to be the moment when Jonah perceives that the attempted disengagement is not an option. This newly discovered awareness is preceded by the word "*akh*" which can have a number of different meanings.<sup>3</sup> In this case, I would chose the translation "however," so that the second part of verse five reads: *However* [being unable to disengage] *I shall continue to gaze at your holy temple.* The prophet, then switches back to the past tense, seemingly repeating the emotions he had described in the earlier part of this prayer. Then at verse 10, the end of his address to God, he again switches to the future tense and accepts the continuation of his prophetic calling.

This concluding verse reads: *But I, with loud thanksgiving, Will sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform, Deliverance is the Lord's.* This prayer conveys the acknowledgement that the prophetic spirit, once invoked, cannot be silenced. For three days Jonah remained in the depth of non-communication; on the third day the interrupted contact was restored. Jonah re-enters the dry land where God repeats the original command.

The story of the storm, the fish and Jonah's re-instatement is the allegoric parallel to what Jeremiah expressed in prose: *I said I will not mention Him, No more will I speak in His name. But [His word] was like a raging fire in my heart. Shut up in my bones, I could not hold it in, I was helpless (Jer. 20:9).* We could try to reason that perhaps the same rule applies to sinful and anti-God behavior. Maybe, if such traits have entered the soul of men they cannot be neutralized. Maybe, if one man or a whole nation has absorbed a tendency for sinful or violent behavior such an infusion cannot be silenced any more than Jonah could silence God's messages.

The continuation of the story brings the refutation to this erroneous belief. The text describes how God's decree can be cancelled, how humans have the ability to expel from their hearts the viciousness and sinfulness which may have afflicted them. It is the proximity of God which prophets can never ex-

pel. The absence of God can be remedied through repentance, as demonstrated in the case of Nineveh.

Why did Jonah not leave the scene after he had delivered his message? Why did he linger in the proximity of the town instead of returning to his own people and his country? The sojourn of Jonah in the foreign country repeats and re-emphasizes the maxim which had been revealed in the earlier part of this book. Greater Nineveh became the Tarshish, a foreign city, to which Jonah had set out in his futile attempt to silence prophecy. Once again, the prophetic excitement could not be silenced. The text explains Jonah's reluctance to return to his own country with the words: *Now Jonah had left the city and found a place east of the city, He made a booth there and sat under it in the shade, until he should see what happened to the city* (4:5). We are left to wonder why he had to remain there to see what happened. Could we not suppose that Jonah's prophetic abilities would reveal that to him? Yet, he chose the "shade" of the booth, allegorically representing the tranquility of non-prophecy.

When reading this final chapter of the book, we must again remind ourselves that the "conversation" between Jonah and God is not a record of actually spoken words. It is a communication which takes place without any audible reception, a message which the prophet receives through his acute sensitivity to God's wishes.

When the shade-giving gourd suddenly sprouts Jonah perceives that not as a fortunate natural occurrence – as most people would – but as a gift from the Lord. Similarly, the wilting of this plant is a message for him from the Lord. The author emphasizes this fact by using the Hebrew word *vayeman* [usually translated as "provided"] for the growth of the plant, and a second time for the appearance of the insect which destroyed it, and a third time for the subsequent arrival of the heat and windstorm which made Jonah's life so extremely uncomfortable. This same word *vayeman* had already been used for the sudden appearance of the life-saving fish when Jonah had been tossed into the water. In the entire Bible, this word appears only five times, and four of them are here in the story of Jonah.<sup>4</sup>

The repetition of this word reveals a clear parallel between the events before Jonah went to Nineveh and the ones after he had delivered his message there. The fish, as we interpreted it, was the symbol of flight from prophecy

and it was introduced with the word *vayeman*. The *kikayon* [gourd], the shade-giving plant – a plant never before or afterwards mentioned in the Bible – seems a symbol for the same concept. It was to provide the comfort of a sedentary life, free of the prophetic demands. But, like the life in the interior of the fish, it was not destined to last. The God-sent [*vayeman*] insect and the ensuing desert storm (parallel to the storm of the sea) re-awaken the prophetic instinct. Jonah then perceives the concluding message from God, namely, that the saving of human life is so important to the Creator.

And so the story of Jonah ends with a re-affirmation of the maxim with which it began. The prophetic storm, once infused, can never be silenced or expelled by the human recipient.

## NOTES

1. See: TY Sanhedrin 11:8
2. Fred Blumenthal, "The Book of Job: A Prelude to Prophecy," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXVII:4 (October-December 1999).
3. Compare Russell Jay Hendel, "The Meanings of *Akh*," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXXIII:2 (April-June 2005).
4. The fifth time is in Daniel 1:5, where it refers to the allocation of food from the king to his staff.



## עשה תורתך קבע

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**  
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2007

|        |           |         |
|--------|-----------|---------|
| April  | Joshua    | 1 – 24  |
|        | Judges    | 1 – 3   |
| May    | Judges    | 4 – 21  |
| June   | I Samuel  | 11 – 31 |
|        | II Samuel | 1 – 7   |
| July   | II Samuel | 8 – 24  |
|        | I Kings   | 1 – 10  |
| August | I Kings   | 11 – 22 |
|        | II Kings  | 1 – 16  |