

JONAH: THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Jonah ben Amitai is mentioned briefly in II Kings, where he delivered a short prophecy during the reign of King Jeroboam II (765-745 BCE) *who restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath unto the sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel which He spoke by the Lord of His servant Jonah ben Amitai* (II Kg. 14:25). This is the prophet purported to be the protagonist of the Book of Jonah.

Jeroboam II had the good fortune to reign before Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria (747-727 BCE), whose program of expansion built a mighty empire which eventually swallowed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. Assyria's glory lasted another 100 years, for "in the month of Av 612, Nineveh fell before the combined attack of Babylonians, Medes and Seythians."¹ It is against this historical background that the Book of Jonah was written.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Jonah contains no more than four chapters. Commenting on the seemingly simple style, Uriel Simon writes: "Biblical narrative tends to prefer expression over explicit, ideological, ethical or psychological statements. This tendency reaches its most radical manifestation in the Book of Jonah."² This is an excellent summation of this little book, for beneath its simple narrative one discovers a highly artistic and well-constructed work, revealing profound philosophical and theological problems. There are, as well, a number of inexplicable questions, such as: Why is Israel not mentioned? Is the story a fictional tale or an actual historical event?

The inner complexity of this tiny, remarkable book is astounding. I shall concentrate on two central issues. The first: Why did Jonah refuse the Divine mandate? Rashi, followed by other medieval commentators, suggests that Jonah was embarrassed. He knew that by calling the city of Nineveh to repent, they would respond fully, while Jerusalem would refuse to listen to the warnings of Israel's great prophets. There are others who argue that Jonah, a fervent patriot, a prophet foreseeing the destruction of the Northern Kingdom

of Israel by the Assyrians, and knowing that He is *a gracious God and compassionate, long-suffering and abundant in mercy* (Jon. 4:2), feared that if he called on Nineveh to repent he might succeed. There is a third opinion maintaining that Jonah refused for personal reasons, fearing he would be called a false prophet. Unlike the great Jeremiah, who complained, *Behold they say unto me, 'Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come now'* (Jer. 17:15), but still continued to warn Jerusalem of its impending disaster, Jonah was concerned that if he were to cry unto Nineveh without immediate catastrophic results, he would be derided as a charlatan.

The second central issue of the Book is the question: What is its message? Uriel Simon³ points to no less than four sets of contrasting interpretations: atonement vs. repentance, universalism vs. particularism, prophecy vs. compliance, and compassion vs. mercy.

The greatness of the Book consists precisely in the variety of possible interpretation. It is, I believe, a mistake of some scholars to seize on only one, to the exclusion of others. Thus, for instance, Pfeiffer singles out only Jonah's universalist aspect. He writes: "This contemptible attitude of some Jews, in the time of the author, represented by Jonah's bitter disappointment when God in His mercy failed to destroy Nineveh, is stigmatized in God's stinging rebuke to Jonah. The author's denunciation of narrow Jewish exclusivism of Nehemiah"⁴

PART I: THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

The sinner, what is his penalty? They asked Wisdom: *Evil pursues the sinners* (Prov. 13:21). They asked Prophecy: *The soul that sins, it shall die* (Ezek. 18:4). They asked the Holy One: He should repent and he will be forgiven (T. Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6).

Jonah is unique among the books of the Bible for two reasons: For the first time, we encounter a prophet who is a "conscientious objector" and who is an anti-hero. Some of the greatest prophets most reluctantly accepted the burden of prophecy. Moses' initial hesitancy was because of his humility; Ezekiel wrapped

himself in total silence for an entire year. A special case is that of Jeremiah, the most self-revealing of the prophets who in Chapter 20 of his book bewailed his fate; that having been overpowered by the Lord, he has become a

constant laughingstock and cursed the day he was born. Yet, *'I thought, I will not mention Him, no more will I speak in His name. But His word was like a raging fire in my heart . . .'* (Jer. 20:9).

The Book of Jonah is unique also in the choice of Jonah as an anti-hero. All the prophets of the Bible, as messengers of the Lord, proclaim His word. But in the Book of Jonah some of the great messages are learned by what happens to the anti-hero Jonah.

His rejection of the task laid upon him by the Lord is based on his objections to the Lord's plan to give the Ninevites a chance to be saved. It is only in the final chapter of the book that we get an insight into what troubles him when he is grieved that the Lord renounced punishment of the Ninevites. He prays: *'This 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'* (Jon. 4:2).

It may be of significance that Jonah, quoting part of the Thirteen Divine Attributes, adds "*v'niham al ha'ra'ah* [He renounces punishment]." The renouncing of punishment is in contrast with the second part of the Thirteen Attributes: *and that with by no means clear the guilty*. Jonah may have been an advocate of a strict interpretation of God's justice.

There was precedent for the reasoning. God threatened to overthrow⁵ Sodom because of the grievous sin *'which is come unto Me'* (Gen. 18:21). He reveals His intentions to Abraham who, indeed, pleaded for the Sodomites. But Abraham was never asked to go and preach repentance to save the city from destruction.

Balaam, glorifying the Lord, exclaimed: *'God is not a man that He should lie Neither the son of man that He should repent* [vayitneham]' (Num. 23:19). This sentiment was echoed by Samuel when he told King Saul that the Lord had rejected him from being king: *'The Glory of Israel will not lie nor repent, for He is not a man that He should repent* [yinahem]' (I Sam. 15:29). Notwithstanding the righteousness of Josiah, *the Lord turned not from the fierceness of His great wrath against Judah because of all the provocations wherewith Manasseh had provoked Him* (II Kgs. 23:26). And finally: *For three transgressions of Judah, yea for four, I will not reverse it* (Amos 2:4).

Jonah, committed to the ironclad dogma of Reward and Punishment as a corollary of God's justice, maintained that Nineveh, just like Sodom, deserved to be *overthrown* and God's verdict should not be annulled. Nineveh's guilt is exacerbated since, as a symbol of Assyria, it was destined to annihilate Samaria. Thus, unwilling to be God's *navi*, he boards a ship to Tarshish to remove himself from the Lord's presence.

THE GREAT STORM AND THE GREAT FISH

Yosef Ibn Caspi, a 14th century philosopher, Bible commentator, and ardent admirer of Rambam the rationalist, felt that the episode of the storm and the great fish were dream visions.⁶ Both episodes can be viewed as stations in the education of Jonah. With superb artistic skill the author uses the terms of *going down* [yarad] and *great* [gadol] as counterpoints, the puniness of man against the power of the Almighty. Jonah *went down* to Joppa and *found a ship, and went down into it*.⁷ Facing this *going down* are the *great wind* and the *great tempest* and the *great fish* – all messengers of God.

On the ship, even as the storm rages, threatening to sink it, Jonah is still adamant in his resolve not to submit to the will of God. He had declared to the sailors: *'I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of Heaven who has made the sea and the dry land'* (1:10), but he omitted to add that the Lord is a God of compassion. It is precisely for this reason that God unleashed a storm, because Jonah had refused His mission of mercy.

Indeed, Jonah is so firm in his conviction that he is willing to forfeit his life. He is swallowed by a large fish *prepared by the Lord* which both rescues and imprisons him for three days. It takes this time for Jonah to realize that while in human society conscientious objection needs to be respected, it is unacceptable in one's relationship with God. He now begins to comprehend that he had to submit to God's imperative, compelling him to perform the prophetic warning which would result in the city's repentance and God's forgiveness.

Thus, for a start, we learn that God is desirous of saving Nineveh by the process of repentance, though, as a God of Compassion, He could have renounced His verdict of destruction by grace alone. Second, most surprisingly, as God Almighty, He is in need of man to perform His bidding. Jonah, the conscientious objector and anti-hero, is ready to do what he is impelled to do.⁸ And after offering a psalm-like prayer he is spewed out on dry land.

PART II: THE POWER OF REPENTANCE

And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying: 'Arise, go unto Nineveh the great city and make unto it a proclamation that I bid it' (3:1,2). This differs significantly from the first time that Jonah had been commanded to proclaim judgment on Nineveh *'for their wickedness has come before Me.'* It contains Divine disappointment in Jonah, who as a true prophet should have fulfilled God's bidding. Now he is merely commanded to *'proclaim to it what I tell you'!* Subdued, but still hesitant, Jonah warned the people of Nineveh that in 40 days the city would be overthrown. His warning brought about an astonishing complete repentance of all its inhabitants. Seeing *how they were turning from their evil ways* God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them. This turn of events *so greatly displeased* [ra'ah gedolah] Jonah that he begged of the Lord to take his life. God's response: *'Are you that deeply grieved?'* (4:4), was more than a rhetorical question. It was a taunt and a rebuke.

Implied in this rebuke is a profound theological concept. Already the rabbis of the Talmud were aware of the inner contradiction of two attributes of God: *midat ha'din* [justice and retribution] and *midat ha'rahamim* [mercy and compassion]. Obviously, Jonah praying for death is in disagreement with God's judgment. The author undoubtedly wished to convey the thought that Jonah's vision of the Lord, as God of justice, or even as God of compassion ready to offer an opportunity to spare Nineveh, was counter to his conscience. God's sarcastic question, *'Are you that deeply grieved?'* suggests that Jonah is unable to gauge God's thoughts and ways. It was arrogant on Jonah's part to pit his judgment against that of the Lord. God is not man, as already stated by the great prophet Hosea who, exhorting Ephraim to "return" before it is too late, made the remarkable statement: *'I will not execute the fierceness of Mine anger For I am God and not man . . .'* (Hos. 11:9), a total reversal of Samuel's remarks to Saul.

The use of the term *Nineveh the great city*, that appears four times in the Book of Jonah (1:2, 3:2, 3:3, 4:11), may hint at God's wish to save the city. Is it the size of the city that motivates the Lord? The term *gadol* [large], used to describe the storm and the fish as well as the city, indicates that they are the

handiworks of the Lord. Thus Nineveh, as the handiwork of God, is deserving of His concern.

And indeed, when the Ninevites repented *God renounced* [va'yinahem] *the punishment He had planned to bring upon them* (3:10). It should be noted that in so doing the Lord goes a step beyond His Thirteen Attributes, for these contain the clause "*nakeh lo yinakeh* [yet He does not remit punishment]" (Ex. 34:7). While the Thirteen Attributes still emphasize retribution, true repentance will bring about unconditional forgiveness.

Jonah had submitted to the will of God, doing what he was told to do, but his heart was not in it. He still entertained the hope that either God would annul His forgiveness, or that the repentance of the Ninevites was merely transient. And so he waited on the outskirts of the city to see what would happen. There was still one more lesson that Jonah had to learn.

THE EPISODE OF THE GOURD

The episode of the gourd which God had provided to protect Jonah from the burning sun, followed by His *appointing* a worm to destroy the gourd thus exposing Jonah to the withering heat, marks the climax of the Book of Jonah. Jonah's response is disappointing, for he does not comprehend the implied lessons. On the contrary, distressed by being deprived of the protective shade of the gourd, he wishes and prays for his death.

It is the third time that Jonah wished for death: The first time, when he defied God's mandate (1:12), the second time, because he had been eminently successful as a *navi* to the hated Ninevites (4:3), and now because of personal "discomfort." In fact, we note sarcasm in God's reply to Jonah's plea: '*Please God, take my life . . . 'Are you that deeply grieved?*' (4:8).

In the light of this almost pathetic wish for death, the motivation for the two prior ones calls for closer examination. At first, when Jonah got the call to proclaim judgment upon Nineveh, he objected to being singled out for this mission. He attempted escape by boarding a ship to Tarshish, the farthest possible distance from Nineveh.

The second time, submitting to the will of God, he wished for death seeing that his call to the Ninevites for repentance had been crowned with success, much to his chagrin, *And God renounced the punishment* [va'yinahem al ha'ra'ah] (3:10).

The various motivations for Jonah's death wish put the validity of his objections into serious question, especially when they are compared to the unfolding glory of the Lord in His final rebuke to Jonah: *'Should not I care about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left?'* (4:11).

Now this concern for Nineveh, a pagan city, merely confirms His universalism, unequivocally stated in Genesis 1. But there is here a significant element that goes beyond universalism. The Lord's concern for Nineveh also includes *the many beasts* – the final words of the Book of Jonah. *For His tender mercies are over all His works* (Ps. 145:9).

The Book ends abruptly, leaving open the question of whether Jonah has been finally reconciled to the admission that man is not in a position fully to comprehend God's ways.

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS

It was natural for Jews to single out the Book of Jonah, called by Yehezkel Kaufmann "the classic statement of the Israelite ideal of repentance."¹⁰ It is as the prophetic reading (*Maftir Yonah*) for the Mincha service on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. For the Book of Jonah is not only the classic statement on repentance, but is also disclosing views on God, man, sin, and redemption from sin, that are not shared by other faith communities.

Introduced in this book as a God of Justice, ready to execute a verdict of destruction of the Ninevites, He sends Jonah on a mission to reverse His decision. Precisely because God is not man, He is willing to change His mind, saving the Ninevites who obeyed their king's call: *'Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty'* (3:3). On which the Talmud comments (Taanit 16a):

Neither sackcloth nor fasting were effective, but only penitence and good deeds. For we find that of the men of Nineveh Scripture does not say: "And God saw their sackcloth and their fasting" but *God saw their works that they turned away from their evil ways, and God renounced their punishment* (3:10).

Underlying the great concept of repentance is that of the nature of sin and redemption from sin. Sin [*het*] is not some genetic defect inherent in man,

stemming from the Fall of Adam, but a missing of the target. (See this meaning in Judges 20:16 and Proverbs 19:2.) It is a deviation from the Divine path of righteousness and ethical deeds. Redemption from sin is not achieved through a mediator, neither by adherence to proper faith, nor by Divine grace alone, but by the will and capacity of man to return from his errant ways.

As we have seen, this theme is repeatedly found in the Book of Jonah. God deplored the ethical sins of the Ninevites. Nowhere is it stated that the Ninevites turned to Jewish beliefs; apart from some sacrifices, they remained pagan. It is not stated that what they believe in redeemed them but only their deeds.

There is another prophetic reading on Yom Kippur taken from Isaiah:

Behold, this is the fast that I esteem precious: Loosen the chains of wickedness, undo the bonds of oppression, let the crushed go free, break the yokes of tyranny. Share your food with the hungry, take the poor to your home. Clothe the naked when you see them, never turn from your fellow (Isa. 58:6).

This then is the essence of *teshuva* [repentance].

NOTES

1. Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, *The History of the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1927) p. 107.
2. Uriel Simon, *The JPS Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999) p. VII.
3. *Ibid.*, *Introduction*
4. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 588.
5. "Overthrow" and "wickedness coming unto Me" are terms repeated in the Book of Jonah (see: 1:2; 3:4).
6. Eisenstein's *Otzar Yisrael* as quoted in Mossad Harav Kook Commentary on Jonah.
7. Raphael Shuchat, "Jonah the rebellious prophet: a look at the man behind the prophecy based on biblical and rabbinic sources" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. 37 (January – March 2009) pp. 45-52.
8. "Already in the days of Ibn Ezra the view was held that the 'prayer' is rather a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance, than an appeal for help . . . and the suggestion was made that the 'prayer' was recited after Jonah had reached land" [Soncino].
9. In using the term *vayinahem* [He renounced] the author, it would seem, rejected Samuel's statement *the Glory of Israel will not repent* [lo yinahem].
10. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toldot ha'Emunah ha'Yisraelit, II* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947) p. 285.