

Jonah

A Ticket to Tarshish

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The story of Jonah is a combination ancient legend/psychological thriller that's all about the wonder of God's mercy. It's a tapestry of meanings layered one upon another; a quilt of interpretations of a simple story; a personified account of a tale of reluctance/even defiance over against call; a complex study of inner human dynamics, and a dramatic portrait of the struggle for God's love to be made real and lasting- despite a personal determination to negate it.

And you thought Jonah was just a fish story.

Like a child who is told by a stern parent to tell another child that he or she is sorry at whatever it is that's been done (whether or not it actually took place that way, or that anything wrong happened in the first place is beside the point); Jonah is sent to bring a message of forgiveness to an enemy people. This is just an opening hint of the emotional undercurrent and the feeling of reticence that fills Jonah as the story opens.

This, then, is a story on multiple levels, written for adults in a child-friendly way ... It's a simple story, but by no means simplistic, a truth-telling tall tale made for one and all.

We all know the basics, but it's best to hear it first straight from the Bible: (Jonah 1:1-3) Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

First allow me to outline my approach for you. We first need to remember the whole story line. Next I'll point out some of the underlying psychological drama going on here. Finally, we'll look at what the story really says to us, now, from God's perspective.

The story opens with God's call for Jonah to go to the wicked people of Nineveh and charge them with the sin of worshipping false gods; for him to set them straight so that they might repent and believe in the one, true God. It's a simple equation: sin plus

repentance equals mercy. And against this difficult but doable command, Jonah says, “No.”

He does so by buying a ticket for a ship headed for Tarshish, a city as far away from Nineveh as you could go in the eighth-century B.C. world, on the southern coast of Spain, at the other end of the Mediterranean Sea, as far away as Jonah could possibly travel.

Jonah flees from God, who he assumes he can leave behind, which, of course, he can't. Once at sea, it isn't long before a huge storm comes and the waters rage and the ship threatens to break up and come apart. On board a ship manned by pagan sailors, they cast lots to determine on whose account the storm arose. When the lot falls on Jonah, he suggests they throw him overboard. The sailors are reluctant to carry this out. According to a Midrash - a Rabbinical teaching on this, they first dipped his feet in the waters, then his knees, then his hips. At each immersion the sea calmed, and so, sensibly enough, they relinquished their qualms, and Jonah, to the sea.

Jonah then finds himself in the water, drowning beneath turbulent waves; and soon inside an immense sea creature, which has been provided by God.

He slips inside this huge fish, hand-in-glove, with no trauma, no ill effects for he or the fish. Fish and man survive for three days and nights, in perfect symbiotic balance.

While Jonah is in the wet and dark belly of the fish for three days and three nights he comes to himself and asks God's help. God relents. The fish spews Jonah out on the shore - spits him back up for a second chance at life. This time Jonah does what he first refused to do. He goes to Nineveh. He swallows his pride, obeys God's command, and with eight words sentences the people of Nineveh to their doom: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

Jonah hoped this would come true. He really didn't like these people.

This was far worse than a rivalry between Baltimore & Pittsburgh. Nineveh was a city in Assyria, which in the 7th & 8th centuries B.C. literally plundered and looted Palestine. This was like a Jewish refugee in the 1950's going back to Germany to preach repentance- it wasn't going to happen. But after three days in the belly of a fish, what are you going to do? Like William Sloane Coffin once said, “It is right to love your enemies; but let's not be too sentimental about this thing.”

So, reluctantly, Jonah preaches. Everyone believes him. For a prophet worried about his credibility, this turned out to be the last of his concerns. The people of Nineveh fast and repent, and force their animals to do the same. They heed the prophesy of the reluctant messenger, and it works.

Even God changes his mind about the prearranged plans of impending calamity. Now, you might think Jonah would be pleased, even privately elated by his success ... He did what God wanted and saved thousands.

But Jonah is far from pleased. In fact he's so unhappy that he tells God that it's better for him to die than live.

He knows that God is merciful and gracious, but this is too much.

Quickly, he leaves Nineveh and goes out to build a hut to sit in, some distance from the city. There he sits, sulks, and watches, waiting for destruction to rain down. But it never happens. And Jonah stays mad, even after God gives him a shade tree, then takes it away and tells him that if he's more angry over the loss of a shade tree than what might have happened to the 120,000 people of Nineveh and their animals, had they not repented, then; well, (Well, we never actually find out what comes next. That's the end of the story, just like that.)

In the end, the story line of Jonah might well leave us wanting, but the analysis and application just keeps going.

As a combination ancient legend and psychological thriller, Jonah keeps on giving. The story itself has been psychoanalyzed far more than you know. As Sigmund Freud proposed two Moseses in his work *Moses and Monotheism*, claiming that the first one was killed in the desert and replaced by another, so some have posited two Jonahs, or at least two distinct personalities demonstrated in the main character. Jonah's descent into the fish may well be into his own inner self, as he descended into his own inner depths, not to emerge until after days and days of searching; reminiscent of Freud's essays of the neurotic devolutionary process, where, as one grows sicker and sicker, one sinks back through time into weird primeval forces of the self. Literally, headed back toward the beginning, when we were animalistic, even fishlike, uncommunicative, sullen, submerged in self...

Thus, as analysis tells us, having achieved a great distance from God - within himself - Jonah is eventually confronted by nothing less than the liberating and inescapable presence of the living God. (Now, that's deep!)

In traditional Judaism the story of Jonah is read at Yom Kippur services, The Day of Atonement, when assurance of God's forgiveness is proclaimed. Jonah is also, of course, one of the favorites of children's stories, beloved for its simplicity and vivid imagery.

Ultimately, Jonah himself embodies the classic cycle of the religious life: of sin, forgiveness, and the beginnings of new life, not new life itself, but nonetheless real beginnings of new life. Jonah is the quintessential human being, the classic model of the human species, for he possesses the one ineradicable flaw in his character, one that can't be erased by his own will. And that is a desire to control his own destiny and to determine who should and should not be forgiven.

Many commentators believe that Jonah stands for Israel because the name Jonah in Hebrew means "dove," and the dove was a symbol for Israel. Israel hadn't done what she was supposed to do. She had looked into herself too much. God had called Israel to be a light to the nations, but she had gotten off track. So God punished her. The Assyrians had pillaged Jerusalem and carried off its inhabitants into exile. And many believe that the big fish stands for Babylon. So, down into the depths of despair went Israel and Jonah--down into exile, only to emerge wounded, spiteful and inward looking. (That's also a pretty deep analysis- isn't it?)

So, finally, what is this story saying to us- now? Try this on for size: The Jonah story suggests those times in our lives when we have heard God's voice and said, "No."

We all have bought our own tickets to Tarshish, have invested in a journey to a place other than where God wants us to go.

This story is made real in our lives when we hear God speaking but listen only to ourselves, mind no warning and heed nothing but our own wants and druthers and set off on our life journey towards the Tarshish that we decide is what we are about in this world.

And then, on the way, the storms rise and the seas rage, and even after we're thrown over along with our baggage and a few other people, we end up struggling, even

drowning, only to find ourselves in the belly of the fish, where we spend three days and three nights or three months or three years, poking around in the darkness until we finally get it and are set right. And only then are we thrown back up on the shore, exhausted but still alive and with a second chance. Only after that do we begin to listen as we haven't before, listen to hunches and intuitions as well as to deep aches in our soul, to pay attention to our inner voice and wonder about the concerns that nag at us for year after year, (and we know why).

My guess is that everyone of us has said 'no' to God and headed to Tarshish once or twice, had our ship -be it career, marriage, health, hope, dreams, sanity, self- come apart in a tempestuous storm, done time in the belly of the fish and then have been spewed out with a different idea of who we are and what life is about and what God may want for us.

In the end, God has more mercy than we can sometimes stand, or agree with; and the lesson is that it is better to be in step with God than to step away- because we will, in the end, be brought back.

So today, may we open ourselves up to the possibility that what God has in mind for us is better than what we want for ourselves.

And that's no fish story. Amen.