

Why Is the Prophet So Distraught? Five Readings of the Book of Jonah

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Introduction: The Text of Jonah

1. Jonah 1:1-3	1. יונה א:א-ג
¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me. ³Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the LORD's service. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the LORD.	¹ וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-יוֹנָה בֶן-אֲמִתַּי לֵאמֹר: ² קוּם לֵךְ אֶל-נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְדוֹלָה וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי-עֲלֹתָהּ רָעָתָם לִפְנֵי: ³ וַיֵּקֶם יוֹנָה לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיֵּרֶד יָפוֹ וַיִּמְצָא אֲנִיָּה בָּאָה תַּרְשִׁישַׁי וַיֵּתֶן שְׂכָרָהּ וַיֵּרֶד בָּהּ לִבּוֹא עִמָּהֶם תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה:

2. Kevin Youngblood, <i>Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy</i> , 2nd ed. (2019), pp. 56-57
Divine commissions in Hebrew narrative are typically followed by reports of the addressee's obedience in terms that exactly parallel the wording of the commission itself. The initial verb of 1:3a, "he got up" (<i>va-yakom</i>) baits the reader to expect the usual report of obedience in that it echoes the initial imperative of YHWH's call, "Up!" (<i>kum</i>). These expectations are immediately dashed, however, with the purpose clause that follows. Jonah does <i>not</i> get up to carry out his commission; rather, he gets up "to flee." With this action, the commission narrative is abruptly interrupted. The expected verbal objection is replaced with flight. Oddly, the author offers no explanation for Jonah's disobedience. The focus is firmly fixed on his actions. The silence regarding Jonah's motives is likely intentional. The author of the book of Jonah frequently suppresses information where the reader most expects or desires it in



order to reveal it later when least expected. This technique, called information gapping, builds suspense and sometimes exposes readers' assumptions and prejudices. Jonah will reveal his motives later (4:2). First the author directs the reader's attention to Jonah's actions and their consequences.

3. יונה ד:א-ב	3. Jonah 4:1-2
¹וַיֵּרַע אֶל־יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיֵּחָר לוֹ: ²וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה יְהוָה הֲלוֹא־זֶה דִּבְרִי עַד־הַיּוֹתִי עַל־אֲדַמְתִּי עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לְבָרֵךְ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי חַנּוּן וָרַחוּם אָרְךָ אַפִּים וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנֶחֱם עַל־הַרְעָה:	¹This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. ²He prayed 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.

4. Youngblood, Jonah, pp. 159, 158
Jonah's objection to the divine call is displaced. Rather than immediately following the commission as expected, Jonah's objection is strategically delayed until the second peak episode. The author thus makes the objection to the commission at the high point of the book's conflict and the trigger for YHWH's object lesson at the conclusion of the book... The author has aroused readers' curiosity by withholding this information until now, ensuring that readers will pay close attention to this dialogue. The author is about to reveal the key theological issue of the book and doesn't want readers to miss it.

Why Does Jonah Flee?

I. The Fear of Being Labeled a False Prophet

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 10	פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק י
Why did he flee? Because on the first occasion when (God) sent him to restore the border of Israel, his words were fulfilled, as it is said, "And he restored the border of Israel from the entering in of Hamath" (2 Kings 14:25). On the second occasion (God) sent him to Jerusalem to (prophesy that God would) destroy it. But	ולמה ברח, אלא פעם ראשונה שלחו להשיב את גבול ישראל ועמדו דבריו, שנאמר [מ"ב יד, כה] (ו)הוא השיב את גבול ישראל מלבוא חמת וגו'. פעם שניה שלחו לירושלים



the Blessed Holy One did according to the abundance of God's tender mercy and repented of the evil (decree), and God did not destroy it; thereupon they called him a lying prophet. On the third occasion (God) sent him against Nineveh to destroy it. Jonah argued with himself, saying, I know that the nations are nigh to repentance, now they will repent and the Blessed Holy One will direct God's anger against Israel. And is it not enough for me that Israel should call me a lying prophet; but shall also the nations of the world (do likewise)? Therefore, behold, I will escape from God's presence.	להחריבה, כיון שעשו תשובה, הקדוש ברוך הוא עשה כרב חסדיו ונחם על הרעה ולא חרבה, והיו ישראל קוראין אותו נביא שקר. פעם שלישית שלחו לנינוה. דן יונה דין בינו לבין עצמו, אמר אני יודע שזה הגוי קרובי תשובה הן, עכשו עושין תשובה, והקדוש ברוך הוא שולח רגזו על ישראל, ולא די שישאל קורין אותי נביא השקר, אלא אף אמות העולם, הריני בורח לי
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II. Protecting Israel (1)

Jerusalem Talmud (Vilna), Sanhedrin 11:5	תלמוד ירושלמי (וילנא) סנהדרין יא:ה
You find that when the Blessed Holy One told him, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me," Jonah thought: 'I know that the nations repent easily and if I go and prophesy to them and they repent, the Blessed Holy One will exact punishment from the enemies of Israel. What must I do? Run away.' "Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service."	את מוצא בשעה שאמר לו הקב"ה [יונה א:ב] "קום לך אל נינוה העיר הגדולה וקרא עליה כי עלתה רעתם לפני", אמר יונה: "יודע אני שהגוים קרובים תשובה הן, והריני הולך ומתנבא עליהם, והם עושין תשובה, והקב"ה בא ופורע משונאיהן של ישראל. ומה עלי לעשות? לברוח!" [שם ג] "ויקם יונה לברוח תרשישה מלפני ה'".

III. The Jews Are "Inward-Looking" (the antisemitic approach)

1. The Navarre Bible (Dublin, 2005), p. 164
The narrative... teaches that God's activity, his blessing, extends to all peoples; this was something that not all Jews yet realized, because they were inward-looking and forgetful of their mission to be the Lord's witnesses to the world at large. The depiction of Jonah in the book pokes fun at such people; they are so attached to their views that they refuse to listen to God.



2. Daniel Timmer, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah (Downers Grove, IL, 2021)

1. The author presents Jonah's reaction to YHWH's mercy to Nineveh in the strongest terms. Incredibly, Jonah considers it to be a *great evil*, something worse in his eyes than was Nineveh's *evil* in God's eyes (1:2)! The statement is so arrogant and blasphemous that it can hardly be understood. Jonah, the Israelite who benefits in countless ways from God's past mercy towards and self-revelation to his people, who shows no awareness of his sin and does not repent even when faced with death (ch. 2), finds a way to condemn the very God who delights to show mercy to the undeserving. In short, Jonah stands in judgment over God, and arrogates to himself the right to decide who 'should' or can fittingly receive divine mercy– he may receive it, *and non-Israelites may not*. His arrogance is confirmed by his anger with God (p. 76).

2. A thread of truth appears in the otherwise erroneous theological tapestry Jonah weaves: he appreciates the fact that the God of Israel has, in a stunning way, shown to non-Israelites the same mercy he has frequently shown to Israel (this is the only passage in the OT that applies Exod. 34:6-7 to non-Israelites) (p. 77).

3. Jonah 'knows' God's character to be as described, yet refuses to adjust his beliefs and attitudes accordingly. In addition to refusing to let God be God, Jonah indicts God on the basis of his own self-revelation... He 'knows' that God is gracious and compassionate only when it is in his or Israel's favor, and cannot tolerate the knowledge that it could be in favor of his and their enemy (pp. 77-78).

4. Jonah exemplified attitudes that were at least real dangers to, if not characteristic of, a sizable portion of ancient Israel's population, and this brought the book's message home very directly to its original audience (p. 82).

3. Daniel C. Timmer. *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Mission, Salvation and Spirituality in the Book of Jonah* (Downers Grove, IL, 2016)

1. When Jonah speaks, his words reveal what must have been, even in the period of the OT when Israel and the nations were generally separated, a shocking antipathy toward non-Israelites and an aversion to seeing God's mercy extended to them. What is more, this theological parochialism was already fomenting as soon as the call of 1:1 came to him, a detail that explains his otherwise nonsensical flight from his commission in chapter 1 and which accounts for the blithe self-centeredness of his prayer from the fish's belly (pp. 119-120).



2. Here in Jonah 4 the author draws the veil back on the deepest motivations of both God and Jonah, and while God's delight in mercy is consistent with the warning he issued to Nineveh and his relenting once she repented, the incongruity between Jonah's mission and his unchanging antipathy for displays of grace to non-Israelites is alarming. When Jonah's deepest convictions and dispositions are contrasted with YHWH's gracious and compassionate character, the book portrays with immense power the deviant nature of Jonah's attitudes and beliefs (p. 123).

IV. Protecting Israel (2) (Or: Does God Love Our Enemies?)

1. Exodus 34:6-7	1. שמות לד:ו-ז
⁶The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: "The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, ⁷extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet he does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."	⁶וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפִּים וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת: ⁷נֶצַח חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים נֶשֶׁא עֹון וּפֶשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנְקֶה פֶקֶד עֹון אָבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים:
2. Exodus 20:5-6	2. שמות כ:ה-ו
⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, ⁶but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.	⁵לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבָדֵם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קָנָא פֶקֶד עֹון אָבֹת עַל-בָּנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים לְשֹׂנְאֵי: ⁶וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים לֹא-יִשְׁכַּח וְלִשְׁמֵרֵי מִצְוֹתַי:
3. Numbers 14:11-19	3. במדבר יד:יא-יט
¹¹And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? ¹²I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!"	¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה עַד-אַנֶּה וְנִאֲצָנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד-אַנֶּה לֹא-יֵאֱמִינוּ בִּי בְּכָל הָאֲתֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ: ¹²אֶכְנוּ בְּדִבְרִי וְאוֹרְשֻׁנוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אֶתְךָ לְגוֹי-גָדוֹל וְעַצוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ:



abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. ³ Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.”	מותי מחי:
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6. Nahum 3:1	6. נחום ג:א
Ah, city of crime, Utterly treacherous, Full of violence, Where killing never stops!	הוי עיר דמים כלה כחש פרק מלאה לא ימיש טרף:

7. Rabbi David Altschuler, Metzudat David to Jonah 1:2	7. מצודת דוד יונה א:ג
Jonah feared that the prophecy would come to him again and make clear to him what to proclaim and he would have no choice but to go. And because Nineveh's salvation would be bad for Israel, he didn't want to be a messenger in this matter, since in his eyes it would be good for them to persist in their wickedness and be destroyed and they would not be a source of woe for Israel.	כי פחד פן יבוא לו הנבואה עוד פעם ויפרש מה יקרא ויוכרח ללכת ועל כי העמדת נינוה היה רעה לישראל לכן לא היה חפץ להיות שליח בדבר כי היה טוב בעיניו שיעמדו ברשעם ויאבדו ולא יהיו לשטן לישראל:

8. Rabbi Isaac Abravanel, Commentary to Jonah 4	8. אברבנאל יונה פרק ד
Jonah was not incensed because Nineveh would be forgiven but because of what he saw of God's intentions for Nineveh, that God planned to destroy Israel (through them). Therefore Jonah asked to die, so that he not live to see the destruction of the tribes at the hands of the Assyrians. God was rebuking Jonah for his anger, saying "Are you that deeply grieved?" which is to say, is there a trait worse than this trait of yours, that you are aggrieved that I have been good to Nineveh? And so also did Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra explain in the name of Yefet, Are you angry that I will be good to whomever I choose? It is not the way of a good person to be aggrieved when God is good to someone else, for "God is good to all, and God's mercies are upon all God's creatures" (Psalm 145:9). Support for this interpretation is that Jonah does not respond to what God says. If it were more than a rhetorical	לא היה מתרעם יונה מסליחת נינוה אלא ממה שהיה רואה כוונת הקב"ה לנינוה שהיה מכין להשחית את ישראל ושלכן שאל את המוות כדי שלא יראה בחרבן השבטים על ידי האשורים. והנה ה' הוכיח את יונה על כעסו באומרו ההיטב חרה לך ר"ל היש תכונה רעה כתכונתך שחרה לך ההטבה שאני מטיב את נינוה, וכ"פ הראב"ע בשם יפת החר לך שאיטיבה אני למי שארצה, ואין זה מדרך האיש הטוב שיחר לו על ההטבה כי טוב ה' לכל ורחמיו על כל מעשיו, והראיה המורה על הפירוש הזה שלא תמצא תשובת יונה על זה המאמר, ואם היה אומר ההיטב חרה לך שאלה היה



question, we would expect that Jonah would answer as he does later (v. 9), "Yes, so deeply that I want to die."
It is also possible that Jonah did not want to answer the question because he knew with certainty that all is revealed before the throne of the Holy One. He knew that the Blessed Holy One knew his true intention, not that he was aggrieved about the goodness bestowed upon Nineveh, but about the future destruction of Israel that would result from it.

וראוי ששייבוהו היטב חרה לי כמו
שאמר אחר זה אלא שהיא תוכחה.
ואפשר לומר ג"כ שיונה לא רצה להשיב
על המאמר הזה בהיותו שאלה לפי
שיודע בודאי שהכל גלוי לפני כסא
כבודו ושהקב"ה היה יודע אמתת כוונתו
שלא חרה לו על הטבת נינה כי אם על
השחתת ישראל העתידה לבוא ממנה.

