



YHWH, Redemption and the narrative history of Jonah and the 'whale'

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Abstract

The Book of Jonah questions an elementary, persistent issue, as to how YHWH's revelation may be interpreted and accepted as being clear on what sin constitutes and what is immoral or moral. The work expresses the notion that people are responsible for their actions and need to assume responsibility for what they undertake. The book of Jonah shows that YHWH is morally strong and also highly compassionate and understanding. True repentance for sin is not based on human conduct alone since YHWH plays a key role in atonement. The creator is also very concerned about all the creatures He has made and not only humans. The book of Jonah prompts us to note that theological understanding is demonstrated in a person's actions and attitude towards challenges in life. Only once wisdom is attained by us, is YHWH's desire known to us. Although repentance is a very important theme in this book when individuals and entire nations sin, it is ultimately their contrition and atonement with YHWH that leads to forgiveness for all their misdemeanours. The book is more than a story of an unlovable man, but rather a challenge to an entire people to understand that the covenant relationship with YHWH was not only for His 'chosen people'.

Keywords: Jonah, scripture, redemption, atonement, forgiveness

Introduction

The Book of Jonah is one of the twelve books of prophets which form the closing section of the Old Testament part of the Holy Bible, and which comprise Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Jonah was thus one of the minor-prophets but with a great message, (McCurdy, 2008). Which are termed as such based on the succinctness of the writings. Their work follows on the writings of what are labelled the four Major Prophets, namely, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Jonah and Ruth were written at about the same time and the ideas that each express, are those which were in vogue when the Pentateuch was the sacred Law of Israel (Parmelee, 1963). The Jews were very smug and exclusive in their knowledge that YHWH had imparted the Law to them. Judaism frowned upon foreigners living in their midst as they believed they would contaminate Israel, especially if allowed into the temple. There were however a few people such as Jonah who viewed such an attitude as distasteful (Parmelee, 1963).

The book of Jonah is essentially a chronicle history, and an omen concerning a man which contrasts with other similar works which are merely traditional prophetic forewarnings. In about 780 BCE, during the reign of King Jeroboam II, there was an actual prophet named Jonah. He is in fact mentioned in II Kings 14:25 and this is where the author of the Book of Jonah probably got the name from. Jonah is comparable to other narrative sections of the Bible like some found in Genesis and Judges. It is a short story like Ruth or Esther. and also a prophetic narrative since the protagonist comes across as a prophet. It is in a sense similar to stories



concerning Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 5 which are also examples of what is considered to be "prophetic literature" (Petersen, 2002).

The main issue in the book is described either as Jonah's determination not to be a false prophet, or as analysing the relationship of conditional and unconditional prophecy, or as dealing with the deficiency of the realization of the prophecy against a nation (Childs, 1979). There are numerous conventional interpretations of Jonah which propagate the notion that the narrative's purpose is to approve of the influence of repentance in forestalling the wrath of YHWH. Others maintain that its purpose is to promote a greater thankfulness among YHWH-fearing people for divine mercy as opposed to justice. There are also others who proffer the idea that the book should be understood to be as an investigation of the problem of an apparent lack of divine justice (Lenchak, 2000; Bolin, 1995). Cooper (1993) believes that Jonah should be read relative to the other Minor Prophets. As such the message of Jonah should be understood as deliverance being an unrestricted act of YHWH's love. YHWH is also depicted as being free in His verdicts, either being enraged or merciful, to whomsoever He pleases.

McKenzie (2005) asserts that various signs in Jonah point to its genre and general resolve as being one of satire. He highlights elements of humour, hyperbole, satire, even derision. McKenzie says that Jonah is supposed to be a prophet but does whatever it takes to escape delivering God's word to the Ninevites. He finds it humorous that in 1:4, the vessel is personified since it thinks about breaking up. Also in the midst of the violent storm, Jonah is sleeping and the crew also come off looking far more virtuous than Jonah, and later in the book so do the Ninevites (Strawn, 2010).

Interestingly, others assert that the book is devoid of any non-literal meaning, while there are reviewers of theology who consider the book to be a fictional rendition with a moral propensity. Feuillet (1947) refers to the accumulation of improbabilities in the book he says are fictitious. To other theologians, the book is also viewed a parable which is the opposite of the Good Samaritan, and it is not considered to be historical at all. The book has also been described as a written sermon which is stated in story form based specifically on Jeremiah 18:8: "If that nation concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do to it". A common approach by some theologians is to interpret the story of Jonah as an allegory or "midrash" – essentially then a fictitious narrative which teaches an ethical lesson. The book of Jonah also enunciates the proselytizing which is evident in Isaiah 40-55. It should also be added that other prevailing literature such as 2 Kings 14:25 is alluded to, for example, where King Jeroboam seeks to expand his territory according to YHWH's wishes "...which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, (meaning "faithful" or "true") the prophet, who was sent from Gath-hepher' (Brockington, 1976).

If we draw comparisons of the book of Jonah with familiar parables and metaphors extant in the Old Testament it is clear that the character of the book is unquestionably not in accord with the characteristics that the parable's and allegories display (Barton, 2004). There are no evident reasons to adopt the stance that the author of the book has borrowed any of his material. There are also no pointers as to why the author made Jonah the mouth-piece of the explicit moral teachings in the text. Levine (1984) views Jonah as a philosophical book imparting metaphysical truths.

These verses in the book do not explicitly state that Jonah was a prophet (Hebrew. *Navi*), for the Hebrew root *n-b-* is not specified at all in the entire book but what is critical is YHWH's stance and actions (Dozeman, 1989). It appears then that we are dealing with an ordinary man, and not a prophet in the true sense, who refuses to heed YHWH's word and fulfil the assignment given to him which was to openly announce a prophecy. The story is considered to be very important in both Judaism and Christian theology as its primary themes are iniquity and divine judgment, atonement and ultimately divine forgiveness. It is the prophet who is the villain as he miscomprehends the true nature of YHWH, while the scoundrels who are remorseful and generous are all people who do not acknowledge the YHWH of the Bible. The



fundamental conflict in the book exists in in Jonah's hesitation concerning the reliability of YHWH's justice. In the outcome of Nineveh's absolution in Jonah, the prophet criticizes the cat but asserts that the merciful outcome was somewhat inevitable. He also asserts that the Ninevites' contrition had nothing to do with their forgiveness (Green, 2007).

From its commencement, the book of Jonah highlights the important leitmotif of an individual running away from his assignment, his purpose and above all himself (Jonah 1:1-3). Jonah the son of Amittai is called upon in his personal capacity as the word of the Lord orders him to go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it, for the evil actions of the inhabitants has come before YHWH. Jonah is thus given the toughest conceivable task, to go to the capital city of Assyria, a nation that has no purpose to pay attention to Hebrew prophets. Jonah, however, decides to turn a blind eye to YHWH's call and he seeks to flee to Tarshish well away from the Lord's service and what was requested of him. He travels to Joppa and seeks out a sailing vessel bound for Tarshish. Jonah's intended destination of Tarshish is labelled as a city "at the ends of the earth," and the prophet Isaiah also stresses that the city is a place that has never heard of YHWH's fame" (Isaiah, 66:19). Jonah pays the fare and boards the ship to sail with the others to Tarshish, ignoring what he has been called to undertake. Ackerman (1981) sees Jonah as a of work satire and symbolism while Miles (1990) states that Jonah is considered to be somewhat of a caricature on a literary style and he identifies the standard in Hebrew literature. He views the narrative of prophetic careers as a pure stereotype in Scripture.

The chief characters are always prophets, the YHWH who calls them and of course an evil ruler or city. In such caricatures, the prophet is usually hesitant to do anything at the outset, but he then predicts destruction and usually is aggrieved at his failure to be successful in his calling. Jonah as a historical narrative has such scenes. There are others who disagree with this idea and who state that Jonah is very unlike other prophets who tend to respond to YHWH's call with a manifestation of inadequacy and reticence, in varying degrees (Sawyer, 1987), and he surpasses them all by stating nothing at all but rather by his actions (Urbach, 1950). He does exactly the opposite of what YHWH asks him to do. He decides to travel in a westerly direction whereas he was ordered to travel east. While repentance is important in this book in that an individual and even an entire nation sins, when the people of Nineveh repent and atone with YHWH they are finally forgiven for all their multiplicity of transgressions (Urbach, 1950). The book shows that YHWH is an all-merciful being and gracious in His approach. Nineveh was indeed worthy of severe and instant punishment for their transgressions but YHWH was enduring in His concern towards them. Jonah originally fled from YHWH's plan for him, before finally bringing a message of atonement to the people of Nineveh.

A concise summary of the story

The book of Jonah is Narrative History and a prophetic book which some commentators believe Jonah wrote personally in roughly 786-760 B.C. just prior to the Assyrian conquest of Israel's Northern Kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.). The principal characters include the prophet Jonah, the captain and the sailing ship and the inhabitants of Nineveh. The prophet Jonah is the son of Amittai, as stated in II Kings 14:25. In Jonah (1:17) YHWH directs him to go to Nineveh but Jonah defies YHWH, and boards a sailing vessel and headed for Tarshish. The crew of the ship become anxious because of a great storm that was brewing and Jonah explained to them that YHWH was pouring out His wrath upon him. The frightened crew cast lots, deciding that Jonah was accountable for the storm.

Jonah urged them to throw him overboard if they wished to survive. Firstly, they attempted to row to shore, but the waves increased in amplitude. Fearful of YHWH, the crew agreed to finally toss Jonah into the sea, and the sea instantly became calm. The crew then made a



sacrifice to YHWH and made pledges to him. When the sailors flung him into the sea he was swallowed by a huge fish. "And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17). While he was in the belly of the whale, Jonah atoned and cried out to YHWH in entreaty after entreaty. He praised YHWH, and ended by stating the disconcertingly prophetic declaration, "Salvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).

After spending three days in the belly of the fish, YHWH made the fish cough him up onto dry land. After this deliverance from the bowels of death, Jonah submitted to YHWH's will and went to Nineveh to fulfil his assignment. Once he arrived in the city, Jonah preached a message of repentance and much to his astonishment, the errant city repented: "Then the people of Nineveh believed in YHWH; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5).

In Jonah 3: 3 it states:

"Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. 4 Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 The Ninevites believed YHWH. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. 7 Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on YHWH. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? YHWH may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

YHWH then deals with Jonah and imparts to him knowledge about His love and compassion for all of creation: [He]"...knew that You are a gracious and compassionate YHWH, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah, 4:2). Jonah then questions YHWH, because he was annoyed that Israel's enemies had been spared death. Once Jonah stopped outside the city walls to seek respite, YHWH provided a vine to shelter him from the extremely hot sun. Jonah was immensely happy with the vine, but the next day YHWH provided a worm that ate the vine, and it withered.

In Jonah 4:5-9 we read:

"So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. 6 And the LORD YHWH prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So, Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. 7 But YHWH prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. 8 And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that YHWH prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. 9 And YHWH said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. 10 Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: 11 And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

Jonah protested again as he grew weak in the scorching sun and also about the plant which had withered. The plant has been identified as a castor-oil plant *qīqāyōn* which is known in botanical terms as *Ricinus* or Palma Christi and has leaves in the shape of hands. YHWH reprimanded Jonah for being troubled about a vine, but not about the city of Nineveh. In Jonah 3:10 we read that when YHWH saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had great compassion for them and did not bring upon them the destruction which He had

threatened to do. In Jonah 4:11 we are told that Nineveh had more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who were unable to tell their right hand from their left, and they also kept many cattle as well. YHWH inquires if He should not be concerned about that great city and seek its salvation. YHWH clearly expresses concern even for the wicked whom He seeks to reconcile to Himself. The Ninevites thus believed Jonah's message and repented, and YHWH had compassion for them and did not destroy them. Nineveh's repentance was surely transitory since it was destroyed in 612 B.C.



Figure 1. Jonah's deliverance

Source: <http://www.skete.com/images/products/icons/P73lg.jpg>

The Book of Jonah teaches us that YHWH is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. He, knows, feels, wishes and acts. YHWH utters and carefully reasons, and He is all-holy, a devoted Father who is righteousness. YHWH detests evil but is gracious and forgives. He has total control of nature and can stir the sea and raise powerful winds. YHWH is utterly resolute in His intentions and actions and controls creation. He governs creation directly and no natural laws obstruct his omnipotent resolve. He uses the storm to demonstrate His displeasure with Jonah and brings calm when desired.

YHWH uses a great fish/whale for His purposes. He makes a plant serve as a cover and it grows in a single night. He makes a worm to destroy the plant. YHWH finds Jonah on the sea, but Jonah in like manner finds YHWH there as well. YHWH saves him from his spinelessness and self-centeredness. Jonah prepares to lay down his life to save a heathen crew and the passengers on the sailing vessel. Ultimately it is YHWH who is all compassionate (Dozeman, 1989).

Some parallels with Christ's life and teaching

Jesus considered the book of Jonah to be based on historical fact and thus it was not a fable or myth. Jesus likened himself to Jonah, showing that the latter existed and that the story was indeed an historically accurate happening. In the New Testament, Jonah is cited in Matthew 12:38–41, 16:4 and also Luke 11:29–32. There are strong resonances between the story of Jonah and the whale and the life of Jesus Christ. In Matthew (12:40) Jesus states: "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). From this short verse, it seems that Jonah may have truly died and gone to "hell". "Out of the belly of hell [Hebrew *Sheol*] cried I,"



said Jonah, "and thou heardest my voice" (Jonah 2:2). Jesus states a similar notion: "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [*Sheol*]; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption" (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27). Jonah also prayed: "Yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my YHWH" (Jonah 2:6). His prayer ended: "Salvation is of the Lord" (v. 9), and this is in fact the meaning of Jesus name. Jesus, as both YHWH and man, calms the tempest in which the disciples were asleep on the boat on the Sea of Galilee, as He did when Jonah jumped ship. He controls the whale in the Book of Jonah as he guided fish into the nets of the disciples in Matthew. Like Jonah, Jesus prepares to lay down his life to save a sinful world. In John we read "YHWH so loved the world ... " (John 3: 16) and this is evident in Jonah's tale. Jesus Christ states: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah; for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' Since Jesus refers to the sign of Jonah, this illustrates that he was conscious of their implicit belief in the fish incident or else the reference would have been ineffective.

As Jesus calls on us to be 'good' Samaritans, and paragons of virtue, so the writer of the Book of Jonah seeks to illustrate the opposite kind of character as he shows Jonah to be an prejudiced extremist who is devoid of any human compassion. In the book of Jonah, the author is concerned not in discussing the reason for Jonah's flight, but rather in exploring whether any person can escape from their destiny. Indeed, this is an existential question which is important as we consider if Christ could have in fact avoided His crucifixion. Early Orthodox Christian tradition has likened the Resurrection of Jesus after three days in the tomb to Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale (Matthew 12:38-41). Therefore, almost a millenium before Christ died on the Cross and rose again, Jonah died and rose again. This was thus a prophetic kind of miracle that the Lord would accomplish at Golgotha to bring salvation and life to a world dead in sin. YHWH's omnipotence directs a whale or great fish to save Jonah, and after three days he is able to preach repentance and salvation to Ninevites. YHWH as in Christ, died on the Cross for the sins of the world, and YHWH delivered His own soul back from hell and, three days later, Jesus rose again. Surely "a greater than Jonas (Jonah) is here" (Matthew 12:41).

Jesus makes a reference to Jonah in the gospel of Matthew when he is asked for a miraculous sign by the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Jesus states that the sign will be the sign of Jonah. By this Jesus infers that Jonah's renewal after three days inside the great fish anticipates His own glorious resurrection after the ordeal on Golgotha.

39He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here." (Matthew 12:39-41).

Jonah's seeks to limit the extent of YHWH's mercy merely due to self-interest. How he then receives divine mercy is important as he is delivered from the whale and the announcement that release is of YHWH. Yet, Jonah is reluctant to see YHWH's grace extended to the people of Nineveh and this clearly an immoral notion. In Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is teaching that in order to obtain YHWH's mercy one must be willing to forgiveness to others. This is one message in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12). The idea of forgiving others is also further teased out in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18.23-35).

Jesus' notion of heavenly mercy can be likened to the apprehension as felt by Jonah which was namely to obtain YHWH's mercy and nonetheless to resent it's offering to other human beings. The brother of the prodigal son in the parable of Jesus, is a good analogy for Jonah.



He is furious at his father's forgiveness of his recalcitrant son and resents his father's generosity to his undeserving younger upstart brother (Luke 15.28). Jonah's resentment at YHWH's compassion and grace towards the Ninevites is similar. Jonah's objects not to the fact that YHWH is merciful to evildoers but His mercy is considered to be lop-sided since, according to Jonah, when people are undeserving it is scandalous to be kind to them. Jonah expresses himself clearly on his affection for the gourd which provided him shade and relief, he can now be shown up as he has tried to deny YHWH His strong love for creatures who are far more important than the gourd (Feinberg, 1977). YHWH is able to forgive with ease whereas Jonah struggles to come to grips with such an approach.

YHWH makes use of nature rather than revealed theology' (Trible,1998) to teach Jonah that he is selfish, so that when the bush sheltering Jonah withers, Jonah's concern is not the withering of the plant as but more so the loss of his shelter from the scorching sun and his resulting distress (Jonah 4.8). Jesus tell us by contrast to love all people even our enemies. If Jonah was indeed wise, with knowledge gleaned from the Torah, he would have displayed compassion for those who lack that wisdom and not show haughtiness or contempt for them, as he did. Jonah's imperfect understanding of holy revelations which are in essence basic within Scripture and in faith in general, deserved harsher treatment. It is such basic truths which Jesus imparts to humanity so that true knowledge of YHWH in Christ can result. However, Jesus says that those with ears should hear and those with eyes should see. Jonah was partly deaf and blind in this sense.

Nonetheless, he is viewed as an important man-of-YHWH and he is viewed as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church liturgical calendar and his feast day is on September 22 and the Book of Jonah is chanted in its entirety at the Divine Liturgy on Holy Saturday before Pascha.

Core messages

Jonah is shown to be wrong in refusing to preach the word of YHWH to the Ninevites and also in being annoyed at their repentance and ultimate forgiveness. In YHWH's divine providence even non-Israelites are able to seek Him in repentance and worship Him. YHWH is a highly compassionate God who induces Jonah to show compassion for a plant with a very short life and then asks him if there is indeed far greater reason for Him to have the welfare of the Ninevites and all its innocent infants and innocuous cattle at heart (Jonah 3:3- 4:11). Jonah ultimately carries out his task and the people of Nineveh repent but the author of the book is unsure if his fellow-countrymen will respond to the challenge of having compassion for others. Ironically, he is "displeased ... greatly" (Jonah 4:1) and would rather die due to his final comprehension that YHWH is all-merciful.

There is no linkage whatsoever between Jonah's anger that the fact that there is indeed animosity between Israel and the Ninevites (*Mekhilta, Tractate De-Pishah* 1). Jonah was exceedingly angered by YHWH's handling of the Ninevites with love and understanding as opposed to what Jonah would have expected, namely wrath (Frankel, 1981). Jonah felt that harsh action was required to be meted out by YHWH against the Ninevites and this would be the way to bring justice to the situation and oblige the sinners to conform to YHWH's will (Simon, 1999). Repentance is the access to YHWH and to all that is decent. Only sin can separate us from YHWH, and so we require repentance, and to atone for our sins and return to YHWH. Salvation is not a simple random act but rather an ethical one which is why we need to reconcile with YHWH whose love for all of his creation and His awesome power over nature, is evident throughout the entire book of Jonah.

The Bible teaches: "I have put before you, life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). Jonah could thus select a way of life that diverges to his exclusive being, that will ultimately lead him to damnation, but YHWH urges us to select life, and to



accept the responsibility of filling our lives with content and meaning that suits our unique personalities (Fichman, 1948). Each person must contemplate his ways, and the myriad of his responsibilities and the likelihood of achieving his purpose and tasks. It is not an easy ask for people to live with their weaknesses and to accept themselves with all their limits. Just for example, as sin is in one's attitude rather than in their acts, so it is with salvation.

YHWH sought out the sinner and found him in the sea and Jonah had no place to hide. Even the sailors aboard the sailing vessel were amazed at Jonah's action and ask: "Why hast thou done this?" They display a resolute understanding of the situation and cannot understand why Jonah has opted to disobey YHWH. They pray fervently to YHWH. Jonah only prays when he is delivered onto dry land from the belly of the whale. Sin stirs the anger of YHWH while it is also the time YHWH displays his deepest love and compassion for creation. Sin must be rebuked and Nineveh, in all its Assyrian conceit and splendour, must succumb if sin is not done away with. Yet sin manifests in Jonah more than in Nineveh (Caldwell, 1902: 378-379).

Jonah is somewhat disillusioned and his highly sombre view of human nature leads him to have misgivings concerning the redemptive worth of atonement (Perry, 2006). He does not accept that an act of contrition can be enough to undo the collective evils of an epoch. For Jonah, there can be no clean-up of the past in Nineveh (Lewis, 1972). To Jonah's anguish, YHWH appears not to abide by His word of passing a verdict on the perpetrators of evil. Rather, on the contrary, through His mercy YHWH seems to side with Israel's enemies. In this way, Jonah appears to agree with the people with whom the prophet Malachi wrangles who state that: "It is pointless to serve YHWH" (Malachi 3.14) and who question what the difference is "between the person who serves YHWH and the person who does not serve him" (Malachi 3.18)?' (Fretheim, 1977). Jonah was a man who thought, "I will not," but later repented and went to conduct his task even though he did this unhappily and without real love, and was a brooding man who sought the destruction of the remorseful Ninevites, along with his very own.

Jonah in essence is reduced to a common denominator with the heathen sailors. Yet they demonstrate fear of the supernatural and genuine care for their fellow men. They are equally ethical beings and religious (Bickerman, 1967). Jonah was bound to respect them men as they try to save his life, when he has virtually almost caused their deaths. YHWH is clearly no respecter of persons and loves all of his creation. YHWH is indeed merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for all of his creatures. Jonah's survival after being inside a sea creature is equally remarkable to inter alia, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego enduring the "burning fiery furnace" in Babylonia (Daniel 3:27). Jonah acknowledges that his deliverance comes through prayer and he cries out to the Lord (Jonah 2:3). To be saved we all need to have a penitent heart.

People need to recognize their innate capabilities and skills and to put them to good use in an appropriate way so as to improve the world we inhabit (Sherwood, 2000). YHWH is undoubtedly "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness" (Jonah 4:2). When people possess true theological understanding this is demonstrated in their attitudes and action towards others and creation (Ben Zvi, 2003). YHWH shows loving care for all nations and he delivers all penitents from any and all actual and impending perils which plague them. As such the book of Jonah ". . . is part of the evidence for the most important truth imaginable, namely that the Almighty YHWH seeks to bring men to repentance and will pardon those who truly repent" (Allen, 1976).

Jonah's main problem is that he recognizes the scriptural arguments but cannot comprehend their true connotation. The prophet does however recalling the instant when he had lost all hope of survival. However, in verse 7 he exults: "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple". When he is cognisant of the astonishing nature of his escape, he is sure he will be saved. Jonah then



vows to YHWH: 'I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pray that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord' (9). YHWH asks Jonah two important questions. Firstly, in Jonah (4:4) YHWH deals with deliverance and secondly in Jonah (4:9) He deals with destruction. YHWH illustrates to Jonah that he has challenged YHWH on two respective fronts concerning justice. Jonah has audaciously challenged the appropriateness of both YHWH's salvation and His actual judgment. YHWH's deliverance and destruction is not restricted to Nineveh but rather includes Jonah and also the entire YHWH's chosen nation, Israel (Floyd and Haak, 2006). YHWH is determined to impart the idea that while His grace was given to Israel in the first instance, separately from the question of justice, the loss of this favour or other analogous favours to others should not raise the issue of justice (Fretheim, 1978).

The Book of Jonah is thus appealing not to Scripture but to reason. It calls on us to be analogically wise and to see YHWH in all of His creation (Gaines, 2003). Jonah questions if the Israelites will sit ensconced behind the city walls of Jerusalem, as he did in his bower, brooding over their wickedness and holding on to their faith with all their might, while sailors such as those on the ship who were shown to be caring human beings or the receptive Ninevites who seek the preaching of the word of God are not preached to because of the egocentricity of the Jews. Surely, the covenant relationship with YHWH was not only for his people? (Guillaume, 2006). This is indeed a challenge that all Christian churches face to this day. Similar to Jonah's lesson, YHWH's people also had to learn that YHWH's compassion was extended to all peoples, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Jonah in Islam

The Qur'anic narrative of Jonah has some similarities as well as considerable differences to the Hebrew Bible and Christian story. Jonah (Yunus) is also referred to as *Dhan-Nun* (Arabic: ذو النون - The One of the Whale). Yunus A (Jonah) was a Rasul (Messenger) of Allah (God). He was from the town of Nineveh, now in modern day Iraq. The inhabitants of Nineveh were idol worshippers and indulged in reprehensible deeds.

Badiuzzaman Said Nursî a Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian who wrote the *Risale-i Nur* Collection, a body of Qur'anic commentary (Michel, 2013), explains a lesson to be taken by the people today from the episode of Hz. Yunus being saved from the stomach of the fish as follows:

Now we are in a situation one hundred times more awesome than that in which Hz. Yunus (Jonah) first found himself. Our night is the future. When we look upon our future with the eye of neglect, it is a hundred times darker and more fearful than his night. Our sea is this spinning globe. Each wave of this sea bears on it thousands of corpses, and is thus a thousand times more frightening than his sea. Our fish is the caprice of our soul which strives to shake and destroy the foundation of our eternal life. This fish is a thousand times more maleficent than his. For his fish could destroy a hundred-year lifespan, whereas ours seeks to destroy a life lasting hundreds of millions of years. This being our true state, we should in imitation of Yunus (pbuh) avert ourselves from all causes and take refuge directly in the Causer of Causes, that is, our Sustainer. We should say:

La ilaha illa anta subhanaka inni kuntu mina'z-zalimin. (O Lord! There is no god but You, Glory be unto You! Indeed I was among the wrongdoers.)



Allah (God) sent Yunus A (Jonah) to teach them to live their lives according to the what Allah (God) desired. Allah states: "Was there any town community that believed after seeing the punishment, and its Faith at that moment, saved it from the punishment? (the answer is none) - except the people of Jonah; when they believed, We removed from them the torment of disgrace in the life of the present world, and permitted them to enjoy for a while" (Holy Qur'an 10:98). The Ninevites were all idolaters who lived a brazenly crude life. Prophet Jonah was directed to teach them that they should worship Allah. The Ninevites objected at his interference in their manner of worship, and asserted: "We and our forefathers have worshipped these gods for many years and no harm has come to us." The people failed to heed his call and he counselled them that if they kept on with their foolishness, Allah's punishment would be swift and decisive.

The Ninevites simply continued in their iniquitous ways and were not in the least afraid of what could transpire (Ego, 2003). Jonah thus left Nineveh, fearing that Allah's wrath would be poured out in a short time. The Holy Qur'an says: "Remember Dhan Nun (Jonah), when he went off in anger, and imagined that We shall not punish him (the calamities which had befallen him)!" (Holy Qur'an 21:87). The people were filled with great fear when they saw the sky above their city change colour promising a huge storm and soon remembered the destruction of the people of 'Ad, Thamud and Noah. Faith gradually filled their hearts. They all gathered on the mountain and started to implore Allah for His mercy and forgiveness to be poured out onto them. Allah promptly removed His rage and showered His blessings upon them as he had done in the past. Once the storm lifted, the people prayed for the return of Jonah so that he could guide them effectively. Jonah had however already boarded a small ship in the company of a number of other passengers and it sailed into calm waters and had a good wind blowing the sails.

That night all changed as a terrible storm materialized and it threatened to rip the ship apart. Just behind the ship, a large whale was in the water and opening its mouth widely. Almighty Allah ordered the whale to surface and it obeyed and followed the ship. As the storm raged, the crew decided to lighten the ship's heavy load and they threw their baggage overboard, but more weight had to be thrown overboard for safety's sake. The crew agreed to throw one person overboard to solve their problem. The captain ordered the crew to draw lots and so one person's name would be drawn and he would be thrown into the sea. Jonah was aware of this tradition when facing a severe tempest at sea. This practice was based on polytheistic traditions, and thus began Jonah's crisis. The prophet was now subjected to polytheistic rules that considered the sea and the wind to have gods within them that the ship's captain had to appease. Jonah grudgingly joined in the lot, and his name was added to the list and his was the one drawn. Due to the respect the crew had for him, they opted to redraw lots. Once again Jonah's name arose. They then decided on a third lot draw, and Jonah's name again appeared first.

They gave him a final chance and drew a third lot. Unfortunately for Jonah, his name came up again. Jonah soon recognised that Allah was acting since he had abandoned his assignment without Allah's permission. It was then decided that Jonah should throw himself into the raging sea. Jonah kept declaring Allah's holy name as he plunged into the raging sea and disappeared beneath the huge waves where the whale found Jonah floating on the surface. It swallowed Jonah and imprisoned him in its huge stomach as it dived to the bottom of the sea, and into the void of darkness.

Three sheets of darkness encased him, one above the other; the darkness of the whale's stomach, the darkness of the bottom of the sea and also the darkness night. Jonah believed he was dead but his heart was stirred by recalling Allah and his compassion. Jonah called out: "*La ilaha illa Anta* (none has the right to be worshipped but You (O Allah), Glorified (and

Exalted) be You (above all that evil they associate with You), Truly, I have been of the wrong doers" (Holy Qur'an 21:87). All the sea creatures in the vicinity gathered around the whale and began to rejoice the praises of Allah, each in its own manner and language. Allah the Almighty was aware of the earnest repentance of Jonah and heard his supplication while trapped in the whale's stomach and he ordered the whale to surface and spit Jonah out onto dry land. Jonah's body was inflamed because of the huge acidity inside the whale's stomach and he was ill.

Once the sun rose, its rays scorched his inflamed body and he was in great pain but he endured and sustained his supplication to Allah to spare him. In his kindness, Allah ordered a vine to grow near him to protect him and Allah forgave him. Allah declared to Jonah that his incessant praying to Him allowed him to be spared from remaining in the whale's stomach until the very Day of Judgment.

Allah explained:

"And, verily, Jonah was one of the Messengers. When he ran to the laden ship, he agreed to cast lots and he was among the losers, Then, a big fish swallowed him and he had done an act worthy of blame. Had he not been of them who glorify Allah, he would have indeed remained inside its belly (the fish) till the Day of Resurrection. But We cast him forth on the naked shore while he was sick and We caused a plant of gourd to grow over him. And We sent him to a hundred thousand people or even more, and they believed; so, We gave them enjoyment for a while. (Holy Qur'an 37: 139-148).

Progressively Jonah recuperated and returned to Nineveh where he was very surprised to notice the change that had occurred there. The whole population turned out to welcome him back and they explained to him that they had decided to believe in Allah. Together Jonah and the Ninevites led a prayer of thanksgiving to their Merciful Lord.



Figure 2: An Islamic depiction -Jonah thrust out onto dry land
Source:<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/>-



The issue of the Whale

Orthodox Church exegetes, state that the story of the prophet Jonah being swallowed and then spewed out onto dry land by a 'great fish' is merely didactic narrative, an impressive tale told to create a religious point of view on redemption and resultant salvation.

YHWH "assigns" (מנה) fanciful creatures, namely the big fish of Jonah 2:1,13 and the fast-growing *qîqāyôn* plant of Jonah 4:6, both of which adjust the course of the narrative, and in the case of Jonah 2, the physical and spiritual direction of Jonah. A number of cynics have criticized the reference to a "whale" in Matthew 12:40. They assert insisted that the notion of a person being swallowed by such a creature and then going on to survive is outrageous. However, there is historical precedent for such a happening, Jonah contends that the sea creature in the story was orchestrated transcendently by YHWH for the purpose intended and thus YHWH explicitly "prepared" (*mahnah*—appointed, constituted, readied) a great fish (Gesenius, 1847). The text of the book of Jonah states that "the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah" (Jonah 1:17).

The Hebrew term (*dahg*) that triggers the English translation "fish" (1:17; 2:1,10) is a wide-ranging term that "always has the collective meaning 'fish'" (Botterweck, 1978). Keil has asserted that '[great fish', was not a whale (Keil and Delitzsch, 1977). However, a "whale" is not a "fish" but rather, a mammal. But in the Hebrew language as employed in the Old Testament, a "fish" (*dahg*) would be used to describe any sea creature. Thus, any leviathan (tan-neen) of the deep, or a sea-monster or such like, would fit the bill such as the "sea-monsters" in Genesis 1:21 (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, 1967).

In the New Testament Septuagint in Greek, the verse under discussion in this article (Matthew 12:40), Christ refers to the great fish of Jonah as a "whale". Matthew chronicles that Jesus used the Greek term *ketos* to denote to the 'big fish' in Jonah. The same term was used by the Septuagint translators in Jonah 1:17. In 1957 Arndt and Gingrich defined a *ketos* as a "sea-monster" whereas in 1971, Newman also called it a "large sea creature". Barnes (1949) maintains that the Greek word *ketos* which is generally translated as whale, in the New Testament, may in fact "denote a large fish or sea-monster of any kind". We should also note that the generic word in Greek for "fish" is *ichthys* while the word *ketos* refers generically to any kind of sea monster, Thus, from a biological species point of view, we are uncertain as to what swallowed Jonah. Skeptics ridicule the idea of a whale or fish swallowing a man whole. They question how one could survive at all for any period of time.

Jesus Christ Himself believed the story and made it an archetypal device for the doctrine of His resurrection. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:40).

In Old testament times, all living thing other than the creeping things (Psalm 104:25) in the seas is located in the class of "fishes". We should also note that there are several species of whale and of sharks in existence to this day, which have esophagi large enough to swallow a man whole. In any event, the Scripture says that "the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jonah 1:17). This event was undoubtedly miraculous.

People have been swallowed by whales and lived, for example, in 1891 a seaman, James Bartley, who served on a vessel named the Star of the East, was found missing after an eighty-foot sperm whale had been caught. He was presumed to have drowned. However, the next day, when the crew dissected the whale, Bartley was discovered alive inside its belly. If Jonah's three days in the whale were counted like Christ's three days in the tomb, after the Semitic manner—that is, as smaller parts of three different days, or only slightly more than twenty-four hours in total, then we may assume on a balance of probabilities, that it is indeed possible that Jonah could have been expelled by that 'great fish' after three days, as the story relates. This however, would be a purely natural elucidation of the incident.



A more literal interpretation is that Jonah undeniably experienced a positive miracle, and several different types of miracles have been proposed, such as "suspended animation on Jonah's part or a fish with a remarkably large air supply and decidedly mild gastric juices" (Keating, 2011). It may also be possible that Jonah truly died and was resurrected by YHWH. This is implied in his account of his experience expressly Jonah 2:2. The point is nothing about the story is totally impossible: There are "fish" large enough to swallow a man; men have been known to survive inside a "fish";

Conclusion

The book of Jonah makes it clear that spiritual growth, must be an interminable process. If we view Jonah as an allegory or "midrash" which teaches an ethical message, then Jonah, represents the narrow-minded Jews whose notion of YHWH was as an exclusive Jewish God. God's mercy is an important aspect in the story and YHWH is viewed as a universal God who treats all peoples impartially - even the Assyrians of Nineveh and not only the Jews. This ethical message is consequently similar to that of the "Good Samaritan" in the New Testament, which teaches inter-alia that to distinguish people along ethical lines – by their good or evil comportment – is more important than the otherness of nationality or race. Nineveh survives and thrives, but in Jonah's eyes as s stated in 4:11, its future looks dim.

While a few scholars doubt the authenticity of the biblical narrative and the individual called Jonah, there are biblical indication that he lived and Jesus Christ indeed refers to him as a factual being. The work teaches us that YHWH commands everything in His Creation and He is in control. Whether it was a great fish or a whale that gulped Jonah is irrelevant and the point of the story is that YHWH provides a supernatural method to liberate His people and other creatures. Jonah was opinionated and believed he knew better than YHWH and he learned a treasured lesson about the Lord's mercy and forgiveness, which ranges well beyond Jonah and Israel and is given to all people who repent and believe irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender or nationality. Nineveh's devastation was at the same time the salvation of all persons who had agonized under her heavy yoke. The prophet Nahum says, "I have afflicted you; I will afflict you no longer" (Nahum 1:12). As the apostle Paul says, God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). God's servants are to required obey YHWH even when the situations are conflicting with their diverse expectations and hopes.

The story tells us a great deal about YHWH and the fact that he enjoys complete control over everything. He is compassionate to even those who do not know Him and he pities them. He is patient with people and also the evil ones. The book teaches that when we are in trouble we should pray (Jonah 2:1). YHWH comforts those who prayed to Him (Jonah 2:2-10).

We need to be grateful for we obtain and thank YHWH (Jonah 2:9). Even when we are angry, we must emulate Jonah and still pray (Jonah 4:2). We cannot run away from God's call. Notwithstanding human weaknesses in those whom YHWH chooses, He is still able to use them in His service. The account offers a perceptible distinction between God's mercy and forgiveness and the shortcomings of Jonah.

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