

OT STORIES SERIES

Jonah: More than just a children's storyby Kendell Crown; July 28, 2010

Introduction

Most of us probably remember the familiar story of Jonah and the Whale from a Sunday School class when we were children. But although we might remember it as a children's story, in reality the book of Jonah reads more like an adult piece of literature. The story of Jonah contains complex literary devices like satire, irony, parallelisms, metaphor, symbolism, word play, and foreshadowing. So today I'd like to interpret Jonah as a piece of literature and illuminate what I believe to be some of the book's key messages. First, when we try to run from God and from our responsibilities, we run the risk of getting "swallowed." Second, God's power and sovereignty extend over the whole of creation. And third, God's love and mercy extend to all peoples.

Summary

So first let's begin by reviewing the basic plot of the book of Jonah. In chapter one we are told that God commanded Jonah to preach a message of repentance to the people of Ninevah. But Jonah instead boards a ship and flees, heading for Tarshish. The Lord then sends a violent storm upon the ship, causing panic among the sailors. Jonah, who is found sleeping below deck, confesses to them that he is running away from the Lord and assures them that if they throw him overboard the sea will again become calm. Reluctantly the men follow these orders, pleading with the Lord not to hold them accountable for killing an innocent man. But rather than allow Jonah to perish in the sea, we are told that God "appoints" a great fish to swallow him. Jonah remains inside the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Then in chapter two, Jonah while inside the fish prays to the Lord a prayer that echoes those found in the Psalms, "promising to make good on what he had vowed" (2:9). After this God commands the fish to spit Jonah out and the fish vomits him up onto dry land.

In chapter three, the Lord again commands Jonah to preach the word to the city of Ninevah and this time he obeys. And the Ninevites believe God and repent. They declare a fast and put on sackcloth. Even the king, we are told, exchanged his royal robes for sackcloth and sat down in the dust. He commands his people not to eat or drink anything, extending this decree even to the animals, and to "call urgently" on God (3:8). When God saw this, he had mercy on the people of Ninevah and spared them from destruction.

In chapter four, Jonah then becomes angry at God for bestowing this compassion upon the people of Ninevah and he retreats to an isolated place outside the city, waiting to see what would happen. During this time, God appoints a bush to Jonah for shade to ease his discomfort. But the next day he appoints a worm to chew up the bush, causing it to wither. He also appoints a scorching east wind and Jonah, now in great discomfort, wants to die. But the Lord reprimands Jonah for his attitude, reminding him that "the bush sprang up overnight and died overnight" (4:10), and thus should not justify Jonah's extreme attachment to it or anger over its death. Ninevah, however, God reminds him, is a great city with more than 120,000 people "who cannot tell their right hand from their left" (4:11), and asks why Jonah cannot understand his concern for this city.

Satire, Irony, and Parallels

So now that we have a clear plot structure, we can begin with our analysis. When we interpret the book of Jonah, one of the biggest questions we have is 'what kind of literature is it?' That is, is it historical or is it fictional. Critical scholarship has convinced most scholars that the story of Jonah is not a historical account, but rather "an artistic, imaginative creation designed to carry a message. In fact, many scholars have labeled Jonah as a specific kind of fiction called satire. Satire is a literary composition in which human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule. Another definition goes further to say that satire principally ridicules its subject (in this case Jonah) as an intended means of provoking or preventing change.

So how does the book of Jonah fit this model of satire? Well, the primary focus of the book of Jonah seems to be illuminating what kind of character Jonah has. And his character, as with other satirical works, is not presented in a good light.

In chapter one, Jonah flees from the Lord, from Yahweh. When talking with the sailors, however, Jonah says, "I am a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh, the God of the sea and the land. Here we have another literary device at work: irony. Jonah specifically states that he worships the God of the sea, and yet he is fleeing from God on the sea. Thus his declaration rings hollow. Satire and irony often go hand in hand and the book of Jonah is no exception.

We also see irony at work when we compare Jonah's attitude toward God with the attitude of the sailors on the ship. When Jonah tells them that he worships the God of the sea and the land, they are terrified. They show a much more genuine display of fear and awe toward God than Jonah does. And when Jonah tells them to throw him overboard and the sea will become calm, they cry out to the Lord, pleading with him not to hold them accountable for killing an innocent man.

From this plea, we can see that the sailors have great reverence for God as well as for human life, a reverence which Jonah clearly lacks. When the storm first hits, he is sleeping below deck, apathetic to the effect his actions have had on others. He also seems apathetic to the people of Ninevah. He doesn't want to preach the message to them because he doesn't see them the way God sees them: as people worth saving. So the author of Jonah has clearly

pitted the character of Jonah against the character of the sailors in a way that is meant to illuminate his foolishness.

If we skip ahead to chapter three, we can find a similar parallel between Jonah and the Ninevites. After ordering the sailors to throw him overboard (essentially opting for assisted suicide), Jonah is swallowed by a great fish, which after three days and three nights, spits him out onto dry land, where he receives the word of the Lord a second time: "Get up, go to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you" (3:2). This time he obeys and sets out for Ninevah. Ninevah was the capitol of the Assyrian empire and it was full of every form of corruption. The author tells us that a visit to Ninevah required three days. This would make Ninevah about 50 miles in diameter. No city in the ancient world was that large. So the author is using satirical exaggeration here, presenting Ninevah as not merely a city, but a symbol of the world's most impressive evil, magnified and intensified. Jonah is now in the belly of another large fish. A large fish swallowed him for three days. Now the city of Ninevah--an immoral cesspool of terror--swallowed him for three more.

On the first day of his journey, he proclaims the message: "Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" (3:4), a sermon of only four words in Hebrew. Surprisingly, however, the Ninevites take this message to heart immediately after they hear it, declaring a fast and putting on sackcloth. In this moment the Ninevites adopt a genuine attitude of fear toward God similar to the attitude adopted by the sailors in chapter one. For sackcloth represented mourning over evils and falsities. It was a token of humiliation, and likewise repentance. So when Jonah received a message from God he responded eventually, but first he bolted. And when he did carry out God's message he was displeased with the results. He was angry at the compassion God showed them, forgetting that God showed Jonah himself compassion despite his futile attempt to flee. The Ninevites responded to the message immediately, while Jonah had to be swallowed by a fish first to learn the error of his ways.

Symbolism

So we have explored the elements of satire, irony, and parallels in the book of Jonah. Now let's look at some of the author's uses of symbolism in the text. For starters, Jonah is fleeing on the sea. Water is often used as a symbol of transition or rebirth in literature (ex. baptism). He is then hurled into the sea and swallowed by a fish and this is when Jonah has a change of heart. He is humbled by God at this point in the story; he shifts from acting out of his own will to following God's will. The great fish, as previously alluded to has been said to symbolize Ninevah, which oddly enough means "house or place of fish". The specific symbolism of the plant and the worm are harder to pin down, but they are nonetheless used in a symbolic way to teach Jonah lessons, lessons which he never seems to fully learn.

Word Play

Another literary device used in the book of Jonah is word play. God spared Ninevah from destruction and we read in Jonah 4:1 that "this was very displeasing to Jonah." Literally it reads, "Jonah was displeased with great displeasure." The Hebrew term ra'ah, translated

"displeasure" here, is used to describe the evil of the Ninevites. Jonah was sent to warn them that God was going to judge their evil (ra'ah). They were forgiven because they repented but now that same evil applies to Jonah. Another example of word play can be found in the word "appoint." This word is used four times throughout the book of Jonah. The Lord appoints a great fish in chapter one, and a plant, a worm, and a scorching east wind in chapter 4.

Foreshadowing

The last literary device we can identify in the book of Jonah is foreshadowing. Foreshadowing is the act of providing vague advance indications or representing beforehand. Jonah foreshadows Jesus, for Christ said in Matt.12:40, "For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." We can also see similarities between Jonah 1:3-12 where Jonah is on the ship headed for Tarshish and Mark 4:35-41, where Jesus calms the storm. Jonah was fleeing from God in an attempt to avoid carrying out God's message. Jesus on the other hand had boarded a ship with his disciples for the sole purpose of preaching God's message. Both Jonah and Jesus are confronted with storms and both are found sleeping below deck. Jonah wants to give up. He wants the sailors to hurl him into the sea. But Jesus overcomes the storm. Verse 39 reads, "He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." Instances of this kind of foreshadowing occur quite often throughout the Old Testament in relation to Jesus. And where the Old Testament prophets fail due to human fallibility, Jesus succeeds due to divine power.

Key Messages

So what can we gain from this kind of literary analysis of this very short book? Well, here are a few key messages that I found meaningful when reading Jonah:

The first message is quite straightforward. Don't be like Jonah. Now of course he can be found in all of us. We can probably all identify ourselves as being a Jonah at one point or another in our lives. I can think of several times in my life where I've chosen to run away from God and hide below deck on a ship so to speak. And every time I choose this approach, I find that I get swallowed by large metaphorical whales. This happens when we follow our own desires instead of following God's will for our lives. One of these "whales" for me has been addiction. I became addicted to alcohol and while I was living in my addiction, I was not in control, even though at the time I thought I was. But I was powerless. As with most addicts, I had to hit my rock bottom before I could really begin to heal. Jonah hit his rock bottom in the belly of the whale. It is here where he realizes that he could not run from God or from the person he was meant to be.

A second message we can take from the book of Jonah relates to God's power and might over all of his creation. Throughout the book we can see several examples of imagery related to God miraculously manipulating nature. In chapter one, he sends a violent storm and appoints a great fish. In chapter two, he commands the fish to spit Jonah out and he obeys without hesitation. In chapter three, we have imagery of the animals of Ninevah, also under

the decree of the king. "Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered in sackcloth" (3:7-8). And finally, in chapter four, God appoints a bush, a worm, and a scorching east wind. God is sovereign over all living things. We should take comfort in this fact. This means that even when we are at our lowest points in life, even when we are in the belly of the whale, God is still in control.

The last and perhaps most important message of the book of Jonah is that God's love and mercy extend to all peoples. Biblical scholar Leland Ryken calls Jonah "a subversive work that challenges the human tendency to rest content with its prejudices" (Ryken, 340). What did he mean by this? We can see that from the beginning Jonah did not want to preach the message to the people of Ninevah. He declares somewhat arrogantly in chapter one that he is a Hebrew. He perceived himself as separate from the sailors who prayed to their individual gods and from the Ninevites, who were evil and corrupt in their ways.

When the Ninevites repent, however, God spares them. He extends his love and mercy to them just like he did with Jonah, and with the nation of Israel. This frustrates Jonah. His problem is not theology. Jonah says to God, "I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2). This basic confession occurs nearly verbatim six times in the Old Testament. Jonah recites a theological cliché. But his attitude and actions indicate that he is not happy about this grace, compassion, and love being extended to the people of Ninevah. Jonah represents an exclusivistic view of God. He sees God as the God of Israel, the God of the Hebrews. I think we too sometimes have a tendency to view God as exclusivistic. But this perception is a foolish one and we are warned against seeing the world in this way. We are shown in the book of Jonah that God's love extends far beyond the borders of Israel. And the same is true of God today. Borders are still irrelevant. So what does this say about the Immigration issue we are currently facing? Does God really care about the Rio Grande border that separates our country from Mexico? Ultimately no. God cares about people. His Spirit moves in all people without being concerned about geographical borders, or religious and ethnic background.

Conclusion

So I hope that we have come to the conclusion that Jonah is more than just a whimsical story we may have heard in Sunday School class when we were children. Although only composed of four chapters, Jonah contains elements of a complex work of literature. It is flooded with satire, irony, parallels, symbols, word play, and foreshadowing, and probably some others I have neglected to mention. Furthermore, this book contains some very important messages. It is foolish to run away from the Lord and from the purpose we have in him. When we do this, as I have experienced in my own life, there are negative consequences. We might feel like we are being swallowed and spit out by the world. But remember too that God hears us when we cry out to him in this state as he did Jonah from inside the belly of the fish. We should take comfort in the fact that he has power over all creation. And we should remember that God is forever compassionate and merciful to all peoples all over the world.