The Meaning of the Book of Jonah

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THE MEANING OF THE BOOK OF JONAH[1]

The Talmud ascribes the composition of the Twelve Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly (*Bava Batra* 15a). Rashi explains that the books were bound together in one scroll because each was so short that some might get lost if not combined into a scroll of greater size.

Together they span a period of some 250-300 years. Jonah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah were eighth century prophets; Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Obadiah prophesied in the seventh-early sixth century; and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied in the late sixth century. Of the twelve, Joel is the most difficult to date, and we will discuss him in the fourth chapter on the Twelve Prophets.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to find a comprehensive theory to explain the purpose of the book, or why Jonah fled from his mission. For millennia, great interpreters have scoured the Book of Jonah's forty-eight verses for their fundamental messages.

One midrashic line suggests that unrepentant Israel would look bad by comparison were non-Israelites to repent.[2] Another proposes that Jonah was convinced that the Ninevites would repent and God would pardon them. Jonah feared that he then

would be called a false prophet once his prediction of Nineveh's destruction went unfulfilled.[3]

Abarbanel does not find either answer persuasive. Perhaps Israel would be inspired to repent in light of Nineveh's repentance. Moreover, since the Ninevites did repent, they obviously believed Jonah to be a true prophet. Nowhere is there evidence of Jonah's being upset about his or Israel's reputation. It is unlikely that Jonah would have violated God's commandment for the reasons given by these midrashim.

Abarbanel (followed by Malbim) submits that Jonah feared the future destruction of Israel by Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital (cf. Ibn Ezra on 1:1). Rather than obey God's directive, Jonah elected to martyr himself on behalf of his people. However, the Book of Jonah portrays Nineveh as a typological Sodom-like city-state, not as the historical capital of Assyria. Jonah's name appears eighteen times in the book, but nobody else—not even the king of Nineveh – is named. Additionally, there is no mention of Israel or its king in the story. The Book of Jonah appears to have a self-contained message that transcends its historical context.[4]

Seeking another approach, the twentieth century scholars Yehoshua Bachrach,[5] Elyakim Ben-Menahem,[6] and Uriel Simon[7] cite Jonah's protest from the end of the book:

> He 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. (Jon. 4:2)

These scholars understand Jonah's protest as a rejection of the very idea of repentance. To support their reading, they cite a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud:

> It was asked of wisdom: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, Misfortune pursues sinners (Prov. 13:21). It was asked of prophecy: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, The person who sins, only he shall die (Ezek. 18:4, 20). It was asked of God: what is the punishment for a sinner? He replied, let him repent and gain atonement. (J.T. *Makkot* 2:6 [31d])

From this point of view, there is a fundamental struggle between God on the one hand and wisdom and prophecy on the other. Jonah was not caught up in the details of this specific prophecy; rather, he was protesting the very existence of repentance, preferring instead that God mete out immediate punishment to sinners. Although this approach is more comprehensive than the earlier interpretations, it remains incomplete. Much of the book has little to do with repentance or God's mercy – particularly Jonah's lengthy encounter with the sailors in chapter 1 who never needed to repent, and his prayer in chapter 2 where Jonah likely did not repent. Aside from downplaying the role of the sailors in chapter 1, Uriel Simon sidesteps Jonah's prayer by contending that it was not an original part of the story. [8] Regardless of its origins, however, Jonah's prayer appears integral to the book, and likely contains one of the keys to unlocking the overall purposes of the narrative.[9] Finally, most prophets appear to have accepted the ideas of repentance and God's mercy. Why should Jonah alone have fled from his mission?

Although these interpreters are correct in stressing Jonah's protest against God's attribute of mercy in 4:2, Jonah also disapproved of that attribute particularly when God applies it to pagans. It appears that this theme lies at the heart of the book, creating an insurmountable conflict between Jonah and God. Jonah was unwilling to accept God's mercy even to the most ethically perfected pagans because that manifestation of mercy was antithetical to Jonah's desired conception of God.

CHAPTER 1

Although they were pagans, the sailors were superior people. They prayed to their deities during the storm, treated Jonah with respect even after he had been selected by the lottery as the cause of their troubles, and went to remarkable lengths to avoid throwing him overboard even after he confessed. They implored God for mercy. When they finally did throw Jonah into the sea, they made vows to God.

Jonah, on the other hand, displays none of these lofty qualities. He rebelled against God by fleeing and then slept while the terrified sailors prayed. Remarkably, the captain sounds like a prophet when addressing Jonah— "How

can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish" (1:6)—while Jonah sounds like the inattentive audience a prophet typically must rebuke. The captain even uses the same words in 1:6 (*kum kera*) that God had in commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh in 1:2 (*kum lekh…u-kera*).

When Jonah finally does speak in the text, the narrator divides the prophet's words between a direct quotation and narrative:
"I am a Hebrew! (*Ivri anokhi*)," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land." The men were greatly terrified, and they asked him, "What have you done?" And when the men learned that he was fleeing from the service of the Lord – for so he told them . . . (1:9-10)

Although Jonah told the sailors what they wanted to know, that his flight from God had caused the storm, it is the narrator who relates those crucial words rather than placing them into Jonah's direct speech. Moreover, Jonah's statement that he was a Hebrew who worshipped the true God appears tangential to the terrified sailors' concerns. Why would the narrator frame Jonah's statement this way?
The term "*Ivri* (Hebrew)" often is used when contrasting Israelites with non-Israelites.[10] In this vein, Elyakim Ben-Menahem notes that Jonah's usage of *Ivri* in 1:9 is fitting, since he was contrasting himself with pagans. Jonah's perceived dissimilarity to the pagan sailors is the main emphasis of chapter 1. Ben-Menahem further suggests that the text does not report Jonah's response to the captain so that his dramatic proclamation in 1:9 could appear as his first words recorded in the book.[11] This contrast with the sailors was most important to Jonah; therefore, the narrator placed only these words in his direct quotation.

To explain the bifurcation of Jonah's statement, Abarbanel advances a midrashic-style comment: "The intent [of the word *Ivri*] is not only that he was from the Land of the Hebrews; rather, he was a sinner [*avaryan*] who was transgressing God's commandment." Abarbanel surmises that the sailors deduced from this wordplay on *Ivri* that Jonah was fleeing! For Abarbanel's suggestion to work as the primary meaning of the text, of course, the sailors would have to have known Hebrew and to have been as ingenious as Abarbanel to have caught that wordplay.

Though not a compelling *peshat* comment, Abarbanel's insight is conceptually illuminating regarding the overall purpose of chapter 1. Jonah emphatically contrasted himself with the pagan sailors; however, the narrator instead has contrasted Jonah with God. In chapter 1, Jonah was indeed Abarbanel's *Ivri*—a prophetic hero of true faith contrasting himself with pagans, and an *avaryan*—a sinner against God.

CHAPTER 2

After waiting three days inside the fish, Jonah finally prayed to God. Some (for example, Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel and Malbim) conclude that Jonah must have repented, since God ordered the fish to spew Jonah out, and Jonah subsequently went to Nineveh. However, there is no indication of repentance in Jonah's prayer.[12] One might argue further that God's enjoining Jonah to return to Nineveh in 3:1-2 indicates that Jonah had indeed not repented.[13] In his prayer, Jonah was more concerned with being saved and serving God in the Temple than he was in the reasons God was punishing him (2:5, 8).

Jonah concluded his prayer with two triumphant verses:

They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare, but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the Lord's! (2:9-10)

Ibn Ezra and Radak believe that Jonah was contrasting himself with the sailors who had made vows in 1:16. Unlike their insincere (in Jonah's opinion) vows, Jonah intended to keep his vow to serve God in the Temple. Abarbanel and Malbim, however, do not think that Jonah would allude to the sailors. In their reading of the book, the sailors are only tangential to their understanding of the story, which specifically concerns Nineveh as the Assyrian capital. Instead, they maintain that Jonah was forecasting the insincere (in Jonah's opinion) repentance of the Ninevites.

One may combine their opinions: the sailors and Ninevites both are central to the book of Jonah, each receiving a chapter of coverage. They were superior people—the sailors all along, and the Ninevites after their repentance—but Jonah

despised them because they were pagans. Jonah's prayer ties the episodes with the sailors and Ninevites together, creating a unified theme for the book, namely, that Jonah contrasts himself with truly impressive pagans. It seems that Rashi has the smoothest reading:

They who cling to empty folly: those who worship idols; *forsake their own welfare*: their fear of God, from whom all kindness emanates. *But I*, in contrast, am not like this; *I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You*. (Rashi on Jon. 2:9-10)

As in chapter 1, Jonah's contrasting himself with pagans is the climactic theme of his prayer in chapter 2. To paraphrase the prayer in chapter 2, Jonah was saying "*Ivri anokhi* [I am a Hebrew]" (1:9)! I worship the true God in contrast to all pagans—illustrated by the sailors, and later by the Ninevites. At the same time, Jonah still remained in his rebellion against God; he still was an *avaryan* [sinner]. According to this view, God allowed Jonah out of the fish to teach him a lesson, not because he had repented.

CHAPTER 3

Did Jonah obey God when he went to Nineveh? Radak assumes that he did. In contrast, Malbim believes that Jonah rebelled even as he walked through the wicked city. He should have explicitly offered repentance as an option, instead of proclaiming the unqualified doom of the Ninevites.

The Ninevites, on the other hand, effected one of the greatest repentance movements in biblical history. The king of Nineveh even said what one might have expected Jonah to say: "Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish" (3:8-9). We noted earlier that the same contrast may be said of the captain of the ship, who sounded like a prophet while Jonah rebelled against God.

Nineveh's repentance might amaze the reader, but it did not impress Jonah. Abarbanel and Malbim (on 4:1-2) suggest that Jonah was outraged that God spared the Ninevites after their repentance for social crimes, since they remained pagans. This interpretation seems to lie close to the heart of the book. Jonah did

not care about the outstandingly ethical behavior of the sailors nor the impressively penitent Ninevites. Jonah still was the *Ivri* he proclaimed himself to be in 1:9, sharply contrasting himself with the pagans he encountered, and thereby remaining distanced from the God he knew would have compassion on them.

CHAPTER 4
This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He 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. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (4:1-3)

Outraged by God's sparing of Nineveh, Jonah revealed that he had fled initially because he knew that God would not punish the Ninevites. In his protest, Jonah appealed to God's attributes of mercy, but with a significant deviation from the classical formula in the aftermath of the Golden Calf:
The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness . . . (Exod. 34:6)

For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)[14]

Jonah substituted "renouncing punishment (*ve-niham al ha-ra'ah*)" for "faithfulness (*ve-emet*)." Jonah's God of truth would not spare pagans, yet God Himself had charged Jonah with a mission to save pagans! Thus, God's prophecy at the outset of the narrative challenged Jonah's very conception of God. Jonah would rather die than live with a God who did not conform to his religious outlook. Ironically, then, Jonah's profound fear and love of God are what caused him to flee initially, and to demand that God take his life.

In an attempt to expose the fallacy of Jonah's argument, God demonstrated Jonah's willingness to die stemmed not only from idealistic motives, but also from physical discomfort:
"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 . . . . Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." The Lord replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?" (4:1-4)

And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, "I would rather die than live." Then God said to Jonah, "Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?" "Yes," he replied, "so deeply that I want to die" (4:8-9)

God added a surprising variable when explaining His sparing of the Ninevites. Although it had seemed from chapter 3 that the Ninevites had saved themselves with their repentance, God suddenly offered a different reason[15]:
Then the Lord said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!" (4:10-11)

God had been willing to destroy the Ninevites for their immorality, but forgave them once they repented. Although the Ninevites had misguided beliefs, God had compassion on them without expecting that they become monotheists. After all, they could not distinguish their right from their left in the sense that they served false deities. For Jonah, however, true justice required punishing even the penitent Ninevites because they still were pagans.

To paraphrase God's response: You, Jonah, wanted to die for the highest of ideals. However, you also were willing to die rather than face heat. Your human limitations are now fully exposed. How, then, can you expect to understand God's attributes?[16] God has little patience for human immorality, but can tolerate moral people with misguided beliefs. Jonah's stark silence at the end of the book reflects the gulf between God and himself. He remained an "*Ivri*" to the very end.

CONCLUSION

The story of Jonah is about prophecy, the pinnacle of love of God, and the highest human spiritual achievement. But prophecy also causes increased anguish, as the prophet apprehends the infinite gap between God and humanity more intensely than anyone else. Jonah's spiritual attainments were obviously far superior to those of the sailors or the people of Nineveh – he most certainly could tell his right hand from his left. The closer he came to God, the more he simultaneously gained recognition of how little he truly knew of God's ways. This realization

tortured him to the point of death.

God taught Jonah that he did not need to wish for death. He had influenced others for the better and had attained a deeper level of understanding of God and of his own place in this world. Despite his passionate commitment to God, Jonah needed to learn to appreciate moral people and to bring them guidance. He had a vital role to play in allowing God's mercy to be manifest.

The Book of Jonah is a larger-than-life story of every individual who seeks closeness with God. There is a paradoxical recognition that the closer one comes to God, the more one becomes conscious of the chasm separating God's wisdom from our own. There is a further challenge in being absolutely committed to God, while still respecting moral people who espouse different beliefs. A midrash places one final line in Jonah's mouth: "Conduct Your world according to the attribute of mercy!"[17] This midrash pinpoints the humbling lesson Jonah should have learned from this remarkable episode, and that every reader must learn.

[1] This chapter is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "'*I am a Hebrew*!': Jonah's Conflict with God's Mercy Toward Even the Most Worthy of Pagans," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34:1 (2006), pp. 3-11; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 259-269. It also appeared in *Yom Kippur Reader* (New York: Tebah, 2008), pp. 59-70.

[2] See, for example, *Mekhilta Bo*, J.T. *Sanhedrin* 11:5, *Pesahim* 87b, cited by Rashi, Kara, Ibn Ezra, and Radak.

[3] *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 9, cited by R. Saadyah (*Emunot ve-De'ot* 3:5), Rashi, Kara, Radak, and R. Isaiah of Trani.

[4] See further discussion and critique of the aforementioned views in Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), introduction pp. 7-12.

[5] Yehoshua Bachrach, *Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu: le-Hora'at Sefer Yonah al pi ha-Mekorot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Religious Department of the Youth and Pioneering Division of the Zionist Organization, 1967), p. 51.

[6] Elyakim Ben-Menahem, *Da'at Mikra: Jonah*, in *Twelve Prophets* vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction pp. 7-9.

[7] Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction pp. 12-13.

[8] Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction pp. 33-35; commentary pp. 15-17.

[9] See further critique of Simon in David Henshke, "The Meaning of the Book of Jonah and Its Relationship to Yom Kippur," (Hebrew) *Megadim* 29 (1998), pp. 77-78; and see response of Uriel Simon to Henshke, "True Prayer and True Repentance," (Hebrew), *Megadim* 31 (2000), pp. 127-131.

[10] See, e.g., Gen. 39:14, 17; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32; Exod. 1:15, 16, 19; 2:7, 11, 13; 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3. Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 42:13: R. Judah said: [*ha-Ivri* signifies that] the whole world was on one side (*ever*) while [Abraham] was on the other side (*ever*).

[11] Ben-Menahem, *Da'at Mikra: Jonah*, pp. 6-7. In his introduction, pp. 3-4, Ben-Menahem adds that chapter 1 is arranged chiastically and Jonah's proclamation in v. 9 lies at the center of that structure, further highlighting its centrality to the chapter.

[12] Cf. Rashi, Kara, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency. Even Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Malbim, who assert that Jonah must have agreed to go to Nineveh, grant that Jonah was unhappy about this concession. Adopting a middle position, Sforno suggests that Jonah repented, but the prayer included in the book is a psalm of gratitude after Jonah already was saved. Rob Barrett ("Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between Y-H-W-H and Jonah," *JSOT* 37:2 (2012), p. 244) suggests additional ironies in Jonah's prayer: Jonah proclaims that he has called out to God (2:3), but in fact has refused to call out to Nineveh or to God while on the boat. Jonah states that God saved him because he turned to God, while he is fleeing God's command.

[13] Ibn Ezra counters that Jonah specifically stayed near Nineveh so that he would be ready to go with a second command. Alternatively, Ben-Menahem (*Da'at Mikra: Jonah*, p. 13) suggests that Jonah might have thought that God had sent someone else.

[14] For further analysis of the interrelationship between Joel, Jonah, and Exodus 34, see Thomas B. Dozeman, "Inner Biblical Interpretation of Y-H-W-H's Gracious and Compassionate Character," *JBL* 108 (1989), pp. 207-223.

[15] For fuller exploration of this and related disparities, see Hayyim Angel, "The Uncertainty Principle of Repentance in the Books of Jonah and Joel," in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 148-161.

[16] See further discussion in Bachrach, *Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu*, pp. 66-68.

[17] *Midrash Jonah*, ed. Jellinek, p. 102, quoted in Simon, *JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, introduction p. 12. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that during the entire episode, Jonah needed to learn important lessons in becoming a prophet. God therefore sent him on this initial mission to Nineveh. Only after this episode did God send him on a more favorable prophetic mission to Israel (II Kings 14:23-27). “Commentary on Jonah” (Hebrew), *HaMa’ayan* 51:1 (Tishri 5771-2010), pp. 8-9.