



The Book of the Twelve

Jonah

Jonah Introduction

We have already encountered some strange examples of prophetic literature in this course, but Jonah is weird in a very unique sense: despite being classified as a prophet, the book itself contains almost no actual prophesying. Nor does it contain any of the hallmarks of prophetic texts we have come to expect so far. There is no first-person perspective, and it is presented in its entirety as a narrative – a story. A text like Jonah might be more at home in the Writings with other texts like Esther or Ruth, but instead we find it here, in the Book of the Twelve. It's hard to say for sure why exactly this is the case – Jonah was obviously still perceived as a prophet, and in fact his father seems to be mentioned in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Kings. Ultimately, however, this text seems to be satire. As a genre, satire plays on readers' expectations of other well-established genres by establishing norms and then inverting those norms in order to comment on the original expectations. Jonah, consequently, opens as we might expect a prophetic book to do so – however, it rather quickly diverts from any common, expected features of prophecy.

Jonah as satire

Even for those who have studied the Hebrew Bible previously, this may well be the first time you have encountered the idea of Jonah as satire, or even the idea that the Bible contains satire in the first place. The entire Bible, and especially the Hebrew Bible, is first and foremost literature; literature that comes to us from the ancient world. We might think that genres are a later development in literature, but the Bible contains reworked mythic and legendary texts from the ancient world about the origins of the world; it contains narratives, poetry, drama, satire, and a plethora of other genres. The idea that everything in the Hebrew Bible is true in a historical sense is a much later idea – after all, history is not the sole domain of truth.

What makes Jonah a satire? Put simply, it does the opposite of everything readers of a prophetic work might expect. Sometimes the intended ridiculousness can take some extra work on our end to figure out, separated as we are by time and culture, but it is nonetheless there. Consider: in the opening verses, God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, the great capital of the Assyrian empire during the 8th century BCE, situated to the west of Israel; Jonah proceeds to head in the opposite direction immediately, to Tarshish, in the east. God spends the whole narrative trying to get Jonah to do what he is supposed to do. The great irony of the mariners on the boat is that they are foreigners; yet they immediately recognize that the storm is happening because someone has angered a god, and upon learning it is Jonah (who, prior to this, was sleeping soundly while the storm raged), the

mariners immediately pray to and worship YHWH in order to save themselves and the boat. They are far more pious than Jonah, the supposed prophet. Even the great fish that swallows Jonah is more obedient: in addition to saving his life, it spits him out back on land, closer to Nineveh than he was before. When Jonah, at last, arrives at Nineveh in Assyria, even these great foes of Israel are far more obedient. Jonah prophesies once, using approximately 8 words, commanding them to repent, and they do so immediately. Surely, by this metric alone, one might crown Jonah the most successful prophet ever.

Does satire still have a message?

Satire is a powerful vehicle for conveying important messages, and this is no less true in Jonah. Ultimately, Jonah's desire to run away from his task is rooted in xenophobia; Jonah is worried that, if he goes to Nineveh and they do indeed repent, they will be saved from the destruction that would otherwise await them. Jonah *wants* Nineveh to be destroyed, and he is willing to defy God's commands in order to see it happen. Jonah is more concerned with what he wants than what God might want. While the Hebrew Bible tends to reflect Israel's anti-foreigner, xenophobic attitudes, even here the narrative impresses upon the reader the gravity of what Jonah is trying to do: he wants to condemn a city of 120,000 people to utter destruction. These are real human beings who don't deserve to die for the sake of Jonah's grievances, especially after they listen to YHWH and repent. This is another example of the nature of biblical prophecy: it is not simply future-telling, but future-telling in order to affect the present and avert the coming disaster. Biblical prophets are not doomsday-preppers – they are passionate advocates for change so that the doomsday never happens in the first place. Jonah doesn't want the present to change, he doesn't want Nineveh to change their ways - hence the commentary of the book.

Despite being a satire, the Book of Jonah has enjoyed a very long afterlife. The idea of the great fish especially becomes important in Christianity, which is particularly fascinating given the original genre; of all the books in the Book of the Twelve, Jonah is perhaps the most well-known, especially in popular culture, and yet it is unlike any of the other prophetic texts in the collection. Such is the power of satire: this work has become an enduring source for the generation of new imagery and new ways to think about God.