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Jonah's and God's Way in the World



Jonah had a variety of responses to **God's** call on **his** life. The conversation between **ADONAI** and **Yonah** begins and ends with what ought to be done about the wicked and ignorant people in **the great city of Nineveh (1:2** and **4:11)**. **Jonah's** view of strict justice verses **God's** desire to forgive even the most heinous sinners is the subject of the debate. **Yonah's** last substantive argument summarizes **his** perspective: **That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:2b**, also see **Joel 2:13). Jonah** doesn't like it, but **God** insists on it.

Common sense seems to be in **Jonah's** favor. **The Assyrians** were the bullies on the block and they needed to be taught a lesson. **Yonah's** view of *strict justice* would say, "What goes around comes around." When the bully says, "I'm sorry, I'll never do it again," our human nature is not impressed. Most people still believe that the wicked should pay the consequences for their crimes, not have the consequences removed through forgiveness. As long as a violent threat exists, it constitutes a present danger.

Yonah learned through a series of personal experiences that **God's** compassion and clemency were not weakness in **God's** justice, but were *better justice* than our human nature would dictate. Jonah personally felt the weight of **ADONAI's** judgment in the storm at sea. He experienced his own false moral superiority (to **God's**) in being willing to die for his position while sinking beneath the waves. **He** died and was resurrected. Then **he** realized the value of **God's** *better justice* when

it was directed at **him**. By Yonah's own standards, he knew he deserved to die for his rebellion. But he was taught that his own purposeful rebellion as well as Nineveh's ignorant rebellion both required **God's** intervention.

The reluctant prophet became angry again at **the Ninevites'** escape from death. In realizing the needs and longings of his own humanity, **Yonah** points out all creation's basic reliance on **God's** forgiveness to temper strict justice and grant grace, or undeserved deliverance. The book's special contribution to the canon of Scripture can be seen in **God's** question: **And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals' (4:11)? God's** concern is for the part of **His** creation that is ignorant of **His** ways and yet responsible for their actions.[12]

1. The book of Jonah asserts that God has created, controls and cares for the natural world. Jonah's confession at the midpoint of the storm in **1:9** speaks of **God's** work in making the sea and the dry land, that is, of making all that exists. It is clear that **ADONAI** has not retired from the scene after creating the heavens and the earth. **God** controls the macro and the micro creatures and the forces of nature. The story begins with **the LORD** hurling **a great wind on the sea (1:4),** and ends as **ADONAI** again sends **a scorching east wind,** this time directed at **Yonah (4:8). HaShem** appoints **a great** sperm **whale (1:17)**, but also **a** tiny **worm** and **a plant (4:6-7). God's** care for **His** creatures is movingly expressed in the last words of the book: **and also many animals' (4:11). The animals** had also taken part in **Nineveh's** repentance **(3:7-8).** The planet does not exist for our sake alone, **God** is also concerned about **the animals.**

2. Alongside these assertions of God's creating and sustaining work in nature, Jonah's prayer testifies that God rescues those who call upon Him in times of trouble. Yonah, having been **swallowed** by **the sperm whale,** tells us of **his** experience. Three statements speak about **God's** saving ability: **In my distress I called to ADONAI, and He answered me (2:2a) . . . When my life was slipping away, I remembered the LORD (2:7a) . . . Salvation comes from ADONAI (2:9b).** Taken together, these words of witness speak comfort to all believers who are experiencing distress, whose lives are slipping away. **Jonah** had experienced a resurrection from death. Here **he** tells others about that experience and speaks of **ADONAI** who rescues.

3. The book of Jonah testifies that God cares about all the people of the

world. Jonah's statement: **I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:2b)** is a typical biblical expression of **God's** love for the people of Isra'el **(Exodus 34:6-7; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13).** The only Israelite in this entire story is **Yonah**. **God's** love for Isra'el is illustrated in **His** compassion, patience and love in dealing with this **prophet**. If the story had ended with **1:16**, the point would have been clear: Do not try to run away from **the LORD**! **God**, however, continued to work with **Jonah**, putting up with **his** rebellion, resurrecting **him**, giving **him** a second chance to complete **his** missionary assignment to **Nineveh**, and patiently trying to teach **him**. The point is clear: like a parent's love for a child, even a child who runs away, **God's** love for one of **God's** own people never gives up **(Hosea 11)**.

These attributes of **HaShem** are seen in a new and nontraditional way **in 4:2. God is described as gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love –** this time not toward the people of Isra'el but toward the people of **Nineveh**! **God** cares about the people of the world. One cannot miss the positive portrayal of the Gentiles in this story. **The sailors** along with **their captain** are **men** of virtue and action **(1:5-6)**, decent human beings **(1:12-14)** who are eager to do the right thing in the eyes of **God** about whom **they** have heard little **(1:14)**. **They** finally come to worship that **God (1:16)**. After only a few words from **the reluctant prophet** about the corrupt state of **their city the people** of **Nineveh** and **their king**, even **their animals**, all repented and turned **their** life around **(3:5)**. The story begins with **God's** decision to send a **prophet** to this **great**, but wicked **city** and ends with **His** declaration of concern for its **people** and even for **the animals** that live there.

4. The story of Jonah makes clear that God may change His mind about punishment. When King Darius signed a decree, it could **not** be changed, even if the king himself wanted to grant amnesty **(Daniel 6:8-15). God** is not bound by any legal documents or pronouncements, even pronouncements **ADONAI Himself** has made! When a people repent, **God** may call off an announced disaster, even a disaster announced by a prophet. Will **God** *always* do this? **The king of Nineveh** is a good enough theologian to respond: **Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish (3:9).** The story of **Jonah** illustrates the sayings of **Jeremiah** about **the potter and the clay (Jeremiah 18:7-10).**

5. The book of Jonah assumes that the LORD is the only true God. When

writing **his** book, **Jonah** was aware of religious pluralism, describing the piety **(1:5-6)** and practices **(1:7)** of **the** Gentile **sailors** without judgment or comment. The sailors, however, are not left to try to find the one true **God** through **their** own religions but become believers in **the God of Abraham, Isaac** and **Jacob**. **The people** of **Nineveh** also respond positively to **his** message. The book makes clear that **ADONAI** is the only true **God (Deuteronomy 6:5; Psalm 31:6; Isaiah 44:9-20** and **45:5-6)** with the declaration that **those who worship worthless idols turn away from God's love for them (2:8).** This suggests that slipping over into the worship of **worthless idols** must have been a real temptation for those first hearers of the story of **Jonah**.

6. The story of Jonah indicates that those who experience the LORD's deliverance are invited to respond in thanksgiving, witness, and praise. There is a pattern to the story. **The sailors** are in distress, are delivered, and then respond by worshiping **ADONAI**. **Jonah** drowns, is resurrected, and responds with words of witness, praise and acts of worship in his prayer. The story of **Jonah** not only pictures the **God** who creates, sustains and delivers, but also provides a model for the response of those who have experienced **the LORD's** blessing and deliverance. The story invites both the people of **God** and the peoples of the world to join in with the song of praise emerging from the belly of **the great whale.**[13]