

Exploring the Spiritual Struggles of God's Servant in the Book of Jonah

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Abstract

This article focuses on the spiritual struggles of Jonah, as narrated in the book bearing his name. While negative evaluations of Jonah's character have dominated recent scholarly work (for example, as a disobedient, stubborn, nationalistic prophet or anti-hero), this article argues that such categorizations are too simplistic and flat. Jonah is, instead, a complex, round character who dares to disobey and argue with God in the course of his struggle to understand and respond to God's attributes and purposes. Throughout Jonah's book, we see God's patience and mercy at work as he commissioned, disciplined, rescued, recommissioned, and educated Jonah. The article includes an inductive summary of the words and actions of Jonah, a literature review, a re-reading of the text in dialogue with scholarly voices focused on the spiritual struggle of the prophet, and a discussion of key pastoral implications for the calling, discernment and character formation of those in Christian ministry.

Keywords: Jonah, Prophet, God's Servant, Vocation, Spiritual Struggles

Abstrak

Artikel ini merupakan kajian tentang tokoh Yunus sebagai nabi atau hamba Tuhan dalam menghadapi pergumulan rohaninya berdasarkan kitab Yunus. Banyak ahli yang menilai secara negatif Yunus sebagai nabi Tuhan yang menampilkan ketidaktaatan, keras kepala, fanatik, nasionalis sempit dan anti-pahlawan. Penilaian ini sangat simplistik dan datar. Dalam artikel ini penulis berpendapat bahwa Yunus adalah representasi sejati dari manusia yang memiliki karakter kompleks dan bundar, yang berani untuk tidak menaati dan berdebat dengan Allah dalam kaitan dengan pergumulannya untuk memahami dan meresponi atribut dan maksud Allah. Melalui kitab Yunus, kesabaran dan kemurahan Tuhan nampak jelas dalam mengutus, mendisiplin, menyelamatkan, mengutus kembali dan mendidik Yunus. Artikel ini meliputi ringkasan induktif dari perkataan dan tindakan Yunus, dan tinjauan pustaka sistematis yang mengumpulkan, mengevaluasi dan mensintesis berbagai pendapat para ahli tentang pergumulan rohani sang nabi, serta implikasi penting pastoral bagi

panggilan, pergumulan dan pembentukan karakter bagi mereka yang terlibat dalam pelayanan Kristiani.

Kata-kata Kunci: Yunus, Nabi, Hamba Allah, Panggilan, Pergumulan Rohani, Allah, Kitab Yunus

Introduction

Jonah is an unusual character in the biblical canon. Muldoon categorizes him as “a *rara avis* [rare bird] among biblical protagonists.”¹ Jonah appears to model defiance and obstinacy rather than the prophetic virtues of submission and receptiveness.² The trajectory of his response to God’s commission is less linear compared with other biblical figures, such as Moses, Jeremiah, Amos and Ezekiel. While they may initially resist God’s commission, (e.g. Moses in Exod 3:11-4:13), they all ultimately take up their prophetic task and complete it. Jonah, on the other hand, “dared to say ‘no’ to God.”³ He dares to disobey God’s commission and he argues with God. He seems to prefer death to participation in God extending his mercy to the Ninevites.

There are a number of tensions evident in Jonah’s character and the lessons to be drawn from the canonical book bearing his name. Modern studies of the characterization of Jonah tend to view him negatively, but this study will debate that assessment as too ‘flat’ or simplistic. Jonah is a complex, ‘round’ character whose spiritual struggles are able to inform the character formation of God’s servants, Christian ministers, today.⁴ The book of Jonah has much to teach Christian ministers about the struggle to understand God’s purposes, to obey God’s command and the spiritual dynamics of responding to a call from God.

¹ Catherine Lane Muldoon, “Îr Hayyônâ : Jonah, Nineveh, and the Problem of Divine Justice” (Dissertation, Boston College, 2009), 1, <https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir%3A101398/datastream/PDF/view>

² Eugene F. Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ruth, Jonah, Esther*, ed. Elmers A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2002), 95.

³ Rosa Ching Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, ed. Federico G. Villanueva, Asia Bible (Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2019), 2.

⁴ ‘Christian ministers’ is used to denote anyone involved in Christian ministry, lay or ordained, in any context. It encompasses pastors, missionaries, teachers, chaplains, and those who serve in theological education – anyone who is a servant of God.

Inductive Study of Jonah's Character

Jonah's character is revealed through his words and actions recorded in the narrative. Apart from the prayer of chapter 2, these are quite brief and at times ambiguous. It will nevertheless be fruitful to survey the explicit data of the text before turning to the literature survey.

In Jonah 1:1, 3 we read: "The word of the LORD came to Jonah... But Jonah ran away from the LORD... [he boarded a ship] to flee from the LORD."⁵ This initial response to a divine command set the scene for the whole book and is unambiguous. It is an act of disobedience, a rejection of a clear command from God to go to Nineveh. Whether there are subtler motives at play like cowardice, pride or confusion can only be discerned in the light of subsequent character exploration.

In Jonah 1:9, Jonah confesses: "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Following the other sailors' demand to know who was responsible for the calamity, Jonah witnesses to his ethnicity, his religious loyalty and practice, and testifies to the character of the Lord God. It is a positive step, despite being precipitated by Jonah's negative action of running away from the Lord (1:10). Jonah then advises them to throw him overboard, saying "I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (1:12). We see here Jonah's self-awareness, and acknowledgement of guilt in provoking the storm. This suggests a new concern for the lives of others (the sailors) and a humility or resignation to accept God's judgment on his act of running away.

Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 presents a traditional attitude of faith and trust towards God. Jonah 2:1 "Jonah prayed to the LORD *his* God." The personal pronoun is significant as it signals Jonah's relationship to God – Jonah has not disowned God. Jonah 2:2, "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me." To call on God is an act of faith and trust. To affirm that God has answered is an acknowledgement of God's care and power. Jonah 2:4a "I have been banished from your sight," suggests Jonah's acceptance of God's verdict on his earlier wrong action (fleeing). Jonah 2:4b then introduces a new note, "yet I will look again

⁵ Biblical quotations are taken from *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

toward your holy temple.” We see here a hope of deliverance and Jonah’s desire or intention to orient his life to God in worship. Verse 5, “the engulfing waters threatened me,” indicates Jonah’s awareness of God’s judgment on him personally. Jonah 2:6 then combines an expression of personal faith “you, Lord my God,” with a recognition of God’s power to save: “you... brought my life up from the pit.” Jonah 2:7 repeats the idea that Jonah, when nearing death, had a fundamental attitude of faith and trust “I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you.”

The closing stanza of Jonah’s prayer is stronger still as a reflection of a prophet’s role. Jonah 2:8 denounces idolatry, “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.” This hints that his own action of running away (turning away) from God amounted to idolatry, and may be a subtle expression of his own repentance. Jonah 2:9a then expresses gratitude and an intention to resume the actions of appropriate religious devotion, “I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.” Jonah 2:9b then contains a solemn vow, a commitment to obedience: “What I have vowed I will make good.” The prayer then concludes with a testimony of God’s saving power and character: “I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD,’” (2:9c).

In the light of Jonah’s transformation in the fish, as expressed in his prayer, he then acts obediently: “Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh” (3:3). Jonah then faithfully delivered God’s message of coming judgment: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown,” (3:4).

Chapter 4 then narrates a seeming regression on the part of Jonah, which stands in stark contrast to the tone of chapters 2 and 3. Jonah resents God relenting from the prophesied destruction. Jonah 4:1 state: “But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.” Jonah 4:2 is a most pointed and revealing verse that lays bare Jonah’s heart attitude.

He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.

Jonah is acutely aware of God’s compassionate character (“slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity”)

and would rather die than be a party to God's merciful treatment of the Ninevites. At Jonah 4:5, he sets up his shelter "and waited to see what would happen to the city." Again, this implies a desire to see Nineveh destroyed rather than saved. God's removal of Jonah's physical comforts in 4:7-8 doesn't yield a change of heart as Jonah still would rather die than live. Jonah's last words seem unrepentant and self-centered: "God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?'" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead.'" (4:9) And so the narrative of Jonah is book-ended by an act of rebellion (1:1) and an expression of self-absorbed pity or judgmentalism (4:9), while its central portion portrays a humbled, pious, grateful prophet committed to doing God's will (Jonah 2:1-3:4).

Method

The book of Jonah is more a biography of the prophet rather than "a collection of Yahweh's messages that the prophet communicated to the nation of Israel."⁶ This article therefore begins with an inductive summary of Jonah's words and actions that reveal his character (a sympathetic reading 'with the grain'). Having established the explicit indicators of Jonah's character, we then present a literature review that collects, evaluates, and synthesizes various opinions about the character of Jonah (these include critical readings: some literary, some psychological, and some post-colonial which sometimes employ a hermeneutics of suspicion, and read 'against the grain'). In the light of the divergent scholarly views, we then present a more detailed exploration of Jonah's struggles and God's response as narrated in the text, in dialogue with the scholarly literature. Finally, we will summarize the unique character of Jonah as a prophet, before drawing out some pastoral implications for Christian ministers today, particularly with regard to the notions of calling, discernment and character formation for Christian ministry. The literature used for this article contains recent

⁶ Carolyn J. Sharp, "Wrestling the Word : Submission and Resistance as Holy Hermeneutical Acts," *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 1 (2015): 5-19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861509700102>; Robert P French II, "Judgment , Anger , Benevolence , and Jonah : Exploring Human Responses to Divine Benevolence via the Framework of the Judeo-Christian Worldview," *Evangelical Journal* 33, no. 2 (2015): 82-88, <https://evangelical.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/f2015.5.french.pdf>.

journal articles, theses, monographs, and commentaries from a wide variety of scholars.

Result and Discussion

Despite its short length, Jonah has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, much of it focused on the characterization of Jonah. Frolov summarises recent studies, saying: “modern commentators invariably view Jonah as a predominantly negative figure.”⁷ Maiaweng states that Jonah was a prophet who acted inconsistently with his calling.⁸ He wanted to constrain the extent of God’s love, reserving it only for himself and his nation.⁹ Scolnic describes Jonah as an anti-hero, who paradigmatically receives a second chance from God, just as did Israel and Assyria.¹⁰ As an anti-hero, Jonah’s behavior differs significantly from other canonical prophets. Schellenberg indicates that the incident on the ship confirms “Jonah’s status as an anti-hero and a complex character. While the sailors cried to their gods, Jonah ‘sleeps’ (1:5). Though he is not willing to obey God’s calling or even speak with God, he is willing to sacrifice his life.”¹¹ In this exchange, the gentile sailors show themselves to be “more righteous than Jonah” because of their commitment to preserving human life and honoring God – while Jonah seems not to care.¹² Jonah was willing (even eager) to die in disobeying

⁷ Serge Frolov, “Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999): 85–105, <http://doi.org/10.1177/030908929902408605>

⁸ Peniel C.D. Maiaweng, “‘Utuslah Aku’: Eksposisi Yunus Pasal 3-4 Tentang Pengutusan Nabi Yunus Berdasarkan Perspektif Allah Menyesal,” *Jurnal Jaffray* 10, no. 2 (2012): 16, <http://doi.org/10.25278/jj71.v10i2.51>

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, “The Prophet of Second Chances: Jonah, Israel and Assyria and Their Missed Opportunities for Redemption,” *Biblical Interpretation* 29, no. 3 (October 12, 2020): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00284P25>

¹¹ Annette Schellenberg, “An Anti-Prophet among the Prophets? On the Relationship of Jonah to Prophecy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39, no. 3 (2015): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089215577593>

¹² Mark K. Klooster, “The Literary Genre of the Book of Jonah” (Vrije Universiteit, 2019), 16, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333719627_The_Literary_Genre_of_the_Book_of_Jonah

God's assignment.¹³ When he went to Nineveh and pronounced the city's coming destruction,

He neither attempts to convince the people of Nineveh to turn from their evil ways, nor does he make an effort to convince God to change God's mind. ... That Jonah indeed is a rather strange prophet becomes most clear in his reaction to God's mercy toward Nineveh. Instead of being glad, Jonah is angry—because he pities himself.¹⁴

Jonah wanted to die because of God's benevolence and pardon to Nineveh. Jonah was different from his predecessors. Abraham and Moses tried to dissuade God from extreme anger, but Jonah protested against the extreme expansion of his pardon.¹⁵

On the other hand, some scholars do not consider Jonah a negative figure. They try to understand the action, attitudes, and struggles of Jonah. Frolov argues that Jonah is “a sacrificial turtle-dove” and the book of Jonah can be interpreted as a story about God who sacrificed his prophet to save sinners from destruction, while the prophet resists being made into a sacrifice, trying to maintain his dignity.¹⁶ Van Heerden notes that several scholars have applied psychological theories (existential approaches, Jungian theories, or psychoanalytical approaches) in interpreting the book of Jonah.¹⁷ He does not categorize Jonah as a negative or positive figure, but concludes that by using psychological approaches, modern readers may engage with fascinating characters (as mirrors to their own psychological profile) and secondly, experience the cathartic effects of entertaining then resolving forbidden emotions (especially anger at enemies being forgiven).¹⁸ Sharp sees the book of Jonah as employing irony to highlight the incongruity between God's benevolence extended to Nineveh/Assyria and God's ruthless willingness

¹³ Frolov, 89.

¹⁴ Schellenberg, 356-357.

¹⁵ Muldoon, 4-5.

¹⁶ Frolov, 85-105.

¹⁷ Willie Van Heerden, “Psychological Interpretations of the Book of Jonah,” *Old Testament Essays* 16, no. 3 (2003): 717-729,
<https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC85586>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 728.

to let Judah be destroyed by her enemies.¹⁹ Lasine describes Jonah as a “uniquely allusive and elusive narrative,”²⁰ which psychologizing interpretations fail to treat fairly due to interpretive bias and the tendency to project certain character tropes (such as petulance or egocentrism) onto the protagonist Jonah.²¹ Lasine does not categorize Jonah as either a negative or a positive character. He reminds us that the book of Jonah does not provide us with sufficient data to support any definite psychological profile of the prophet.²² Kaplan describes Jonah as a text that unsettles motifs found in other prophetic and wisdom books. He sees Jonah parodying prophetic call narratives and denunciations of gentile nations. Kaplan focuses on Jonah as a text that explores moral selfhood and agency, with a view to cultivating “introspection in its readers about the nature and extent of human agency.”²³ Employing postcolonial trauma theory, Claasens regards Jonah as the “traumatized [prophet] who represents his equally wounded community.”²⁴ Jonah and his community were traumatized by the ruthless empire of Assyrians.²⁵ Post-colonial interpreters of Jonah may find the narrative’s record of Jonah’s protest and silence empowering because he does not allow the wrongs of the colonial power to be ignored.²⁶

This brief literature survey highlights the diversity of possible approaches to interpreting Jonah. It is too simplistic to categorize Jonah as an anti-hero. Rather, Jonah represents the complexity of a person struggling to understand God’s purposes amidst experiences of personal and national turmoil and danger. Jonah dares to argue with God and to express his theological dismay to God. Therefore, the book of Jonah serves not as a script that blames Jonah, but as a debate between God

¹⁹ Carolyn J. Sharp, “Wrestling the Word : Submission and Resistance as Holy Hermeneutical Acts,” *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 1 (2015): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861509700102>

²⁰ Stuart Lasine, “Jonah’s Complexes and Our Own: Psychology and the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 2 (2016): 237–260, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089215641397>

²¹ Lasine, 239–241.

²² *Ibid.*, 247.

²³ Jonathan Kaplan, “Jonah and Moral Agency,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43, no. 2 (2019): 146–162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089217725258>

²⁴ L. Juliana Claasens, “Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as a Postcolonial Trauma Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 4 (2021): 576–587, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03090892211001396>

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 580–581.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 585–586.

and Jonah.²⁷ In this debate, presenting God's actions towards Nineveh as essentially good and defensible, while characterizing Jonah's stance as unjustified is too black-and-white.²⁸ A more nuanced assessment is possible by granting that Jonah is struggling to understand God's ways, and therefore is reluctant to obey an incomprehensible command. Jonah's struggle takes place under a canopy of God's surprisingly wide-reaching mercy.

The Struggle to Understand and Obey God's Commission

The book of Jonah begins with God's word and commission for Jonah to go Nineveh to declare God's judgment upon them (1:1-2). However, Jonah disobeyed God's call (1:3). The narrative indicates no surprise or judgement for this action.²⁹ He did not go to Nineveh. He went to Tarshish. In chapter one, the narrator is silent about the reason for Jonah's disobedience. But this commission was unique: "Before and after Jonah, God has never sent a prophet to prophesy to any foreign country because of the merits of that foreign country."³⁰

Jonah went to Tarshish by ship. He paid the fare, went down into the ship, and slept. Then God stirred up the violent storm and the ship was threatened with breaking up. The sailors panicked, prayed to their gods, and threw the cargo overboard. However, Jonah has fallen sound asleep (1:3-5). Shao contrasts Jonah and the sailors. Jonah was sleeping deeply, but the sailors were praying frantically. Jonah was unaware of the situation, but the sailors were trying to find a way out.³¹ Jonah's sleep is unusually deep and it marks his continued descent towards death (he went down to Joppa, then to the ship, then down into the ship's hold, and he is soon to be cast down (*yarad* 1:3, 5; 2:7) into the depths).³² Stuart states that Jonah's deep sleep was a signal of his depression because he

²⁷ Muldoon, 5.

²⁸ Ibid., 24.

²⁹ Kaplan, 151.

³⁰ Chesung Justin Ryu, "Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 2 (December 11, 2009): 211, <http://doi.org/10.1177/0309089209356410>

³¹ Shao, 28.

³² Jo-Mari Schader, *A Literary-Exegetical and Social Scientific Analysis of the Book of Jonah: An Exposition of Its Ancient Social Values* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2017), 88.

decided to end his career as a prophet and exile himself from his home and country.³³

After the captain reproached him and asked Jonah to pray, the sailors cast lots and finally concluded that Jonah was the reason for the storming sea. When the sailors asked Jonah about his identity, he identifies himself as a Hebrew, but then uses universal rather than nationalistic terminology to describe his religious practice and beliefs. He says he fears/worships YHWH, the creator of the sea and land, rather than YHWH, the God of Israel.³⁴ At this point in the narrative, Jonah cannot be accused of ethnic exclusivism or religious zealotry.³⁵ Muldoon notes that even at 4:2, when Jonah's anger at God's mercy is clear, there is no explicitly racist motive or hatred towards gentiles on Jonah's lips.³⁶ Although he was in full flight from YHWH, he nevertheless described himself as the one who fears YHWH.³⁷ The exchange with the sailors gives no hint that Jonah felt guilty for disobeying God.

Then Jonah instructed them to hurl him into the sea, voicing his assurance that this would calm the sea (1:12). As Frolov summarises this moment: Jonah "was determined not to fulfill God's assignment and was ready to destroy himself in order to avoid it."³⁸ We might speculate that Jonah believed his death would frustrate God's intention to have his word proclaimed in Nineveh. But God had a different view. After hurling Jonah into the sea, God acts to rescue him from death by appointing the great fish to swallow him up.

Chapter 1 portrays the struggle of Jonah to understand and/or obey God's commission. This commission caused turmoil in his soul. For Ben Zvi, Jonah is unable fully to understand God's purpose, while the narrator and intended readers see more clearly.³⁹ Ben Zvi fixes on 3:4 and the word "overthrown" (*hapak*), noting that another possible reading for *hapak* is to turn around or change. If God's proclamation is that, "Nineveh

³³ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah. Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 31 (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 458-459.

³⁴ Muldoon, 15-16.

³⁵ Eugene F. Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2002), 98.

³⁶ Muldoon, 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁸ Frolov, 89.

³⁹ Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah. Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 25.

will turn around,” no wonder Jonah struggles to comprehend it. It is noteworthy that God did not punish Jonah for his disobedience. God disciplined him and preserved his life by means of his time in the belly of the great fish.

Jonah 1 also displays the futility of asserting human effort against God's will. Jonah cannot escape God's will even in seeking to die.⁴⁰ Scholars reading against the grain see Jonah as a heroic resistance fighter, unwilling to succumb to a sovereign God willing to make a fool of him or sacrifice him.⁴¹ By contrast, traditional interpreters note that God is sovereign not only in showing his power, but also in showing his mercy to Jonah, to the sailors, and later to the Ninevites. Jonah's disobedience sets the scene for God to provide him with a new opportunity. God has been patient with Jonah, like a father to his erring son.⁴²

The Struggle of Facing God's Discipline

Jonah 1:17 marks a scene change in the narrative and a reset for Jonah's struggle with God: “Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” The fish is ambiguous: it may be viewed as the agent of divine punishment and judgment, but more likely it is God's means of deliverance.⁴³ Left in the sea, Jonah would surely have drowned. Swallowed by the fish, Jonah's life was preserved.⁴⁴

Jonah's prayer of 2:2-7 echoes elements of formal prayers in the Psalter, such as Psalms 18:3-6; 88; 120 all three of which provide strong verbal parallels (Jnh. 2:2,3; Ps 18:6; 88:16; 120:1). Jonah's prayer is labelled by Stuart as a psalm of thanksgiving which consists of distress, deliverance, praise, and promise.⁴⁵ Critical scholars label the pious sentiments of the prayer as hypocritical or satirical.⁴⁶ The narrator,

⁴⁰ Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness. The Book of Jonah Re-Examined* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 95.

⁴¹ Sharp; Frolov, 92-98.

⁴² Shao, 36.

⁴³ Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019); Shao, 37.

⁴⁴ Stuart, 474.

⁴⁵ Roop, 125-126.

⁴⁶ Sharp, 16; John C. Holbert, “‘Deliverance Belongs To Yahweh!': Satire in the Book of Jonah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 6, no. 21 (October 2, 1981): 75, <http://doi.org/10.1177/030908928100602103>

however, passes no judgment on Jonah's sincerity so the silence of the text neither supports or disproves a rebellious attitude of Jonah's heart.⁴⁷

Jonah's near-death experience has the effect of arresting his flight from God, and the prayer can be read as an honest plea for God's help, rather than a satirical protest against traditional forms of piety. As Jensen says, "extreme piety and extreme impiety are, I suggest, caricatures that do not do justice to the contradictions between the poetry and the narrative, which imply a more complex and rounded interpretation of Jonah's character."⁴⁸ Being confronted with the danger of death turns Jonah to prayer, and God's subsequent deliverance of Jonah gives him a "genuine appreciation of the power and mercy of God."⁴⁹ However, there was no statement of Jonah's repentance in this prayer. What is expressed is a renewed commitment to be a dutiful follower of the Lord. In contradistinction from idol worshipers, Jonah commits himself to sacrifice and fulfil his vows (2:9). In the light of his re-commitment, Jonah may reasonably expect God's deliverance.⁵⁰

But Jonah's lack of repentance is significant. While he has experienced a chastening and God's discipline, he is not yet a humble prophet surrendered to God's will as were the major prophets (contrast Elijah in 1 Kgs 17:9-10, or Isaiah, "Here I am, send me!" Isa 6:8).

Jonah comes closest to recognizing his fault in 2:4 when he admits "I have been banished from your sight." But this is acknowledgement of the consequence of his disobedience, rather than contrition. Jonah expresses commitment to God, while not surrendering his own autonomy.⁵¹ It is this that makes him a complex character, neither entirely rebellious nor entirely pious. Chapter 2 concludes with a further expression of God's sovereignty and a new opportunity for Jonah to respond to God's commission, "the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land," (2:10). This gives Jonah "a new lease of life to fulfill God's mission."⁵² Chapter 2 demonstrates that God was

⁴⁷ Stuart, 128-129; Shao, 43.

⁴⁸ Philip Peter Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, *Library of Hebrew Bible*, vol. 496 (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 59.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁰ Steven T. Mann, "Performative Prayers of a Prophet: Investigating the Prayers of Jonah as Speech Acts," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79 (2017): 30-31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cbq.2017.0001>

⁵¹ Kaplan, 155-156

⁵² Shao, 47.

prepared to persevere with Jonah, despite Jonah's initial refusal to obey his commission.

The Struggle to Understand God's Persistence

Chapter 3 begins with a terse description that recapitulates the events that opened the book, but this time with Jonah obeying the word of the Lord, rather than running away from the Lord (contrast 1:3 and 3:3). Verse 4 then recounts Jonah delivering "the shortest sermon in world history."⁵³ While it is unclear if 3:4 represents a summary of Jonah's preaching, or the totality of his proclamation, the brevity of the message implies to Muldoon that Jonah is only minimally complying with God's commission.⁵⁴ Jonah is frequently described as the reluctant prophet.⁵⁵ The narrative does not immediately reveal the emotional life of Jonah, but it is fair to conclude on the basis of 4:1-2 that Jonah did not expect Nineveh to repent so swiftly or sincerely.⁵⁶ Everyone in Nineveh responded with the ritual of confession and repentance. The reluctant obedience of Jonah still causes a big impact. Nineveh is saved from destruction because of God's will and not Jonah's performance.⁵⁷ This is evident because Jonah disappears from the narrative for five verses focused on the king and the people of Nineveh, 3:5-10.⁵⁸

Based on the interaction between Jonah and God, this section upholds divine persistence above human freedom. God's will could not be ignored or frustrated by any human act.⁵⁹ If God chooses a prophet, then there is no escape clause. Jonah must ultimately do God's will, which in this instance was to warn Nineveh of impending judgment (3:4). This chapter shows God's mercy not only for Nineveh (3:10), but also for Jonah in his reluctant obedience (3:1 "the word of the LORD came to Jonah *a second time*").

⁵³ Frolov, 85, quoting J. Day "Problems in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," in A.S. van der Woude (ed.), *In Quest of the Past: Studies on Israelite Religion, Literature and Prophetism* (OTS, 26; Leiden: EJ. Brill, 1990), 34.

⁵⁴ Muldoon, 124.

⁵⁵ Roop, 134.

⁵⁶ Shao, 59.

⁵⁷ Zvi, 25.

⁵⁸ Roop, 142.

⁵⁹ Stuart, 483.

The Struggle to Understand God's Attributes and Actions

Craig suggests that chapter 4 is the high point of Jonah's story, since it is only here that Jonah's feelings and motivations are revealed, while here too God actively disputes with Jonah and reveals his agenda.⁶⁰ Chapter 4 begins with an argument between Jonah and God, that is the climax of a repeated pattern in which Jonah's engaging with gentiles (first the sailors, then the Ninevites) leads to a crisis and intensified communion with God.⁶¹ Shao uses the phrase "wrestling match" to characterize this exchange in a desolate spot away from the preceding narrative action.⁶² Indeed, there may be an ironic echo of Jacob's encounter with God (Gen 32), which yielded a new beginning for Jacob as a servant of the Lord. By contrast, Jonah seems determined *not* to be blessed by God or to see God's purposes fulfilled. The argument is not resolved by the end of the narrative. Neither Jonah nor God clearly 'win' the debate. There is an unavoidable complexity to the issues that defies easy resolution.⁶³

The narrator now explicitly states Jonah's emotional response to Nineveh's repentance and God's merciful restraint: "to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry" (4:1). Frolov explains Jonah's anger as being caused by his unwillingness to be proven a false prophet.⁶⁴ Schellenberg places some weight in the theory that Jonah is a nationalistic prophet who resents God extending mercy to gentiles.⁶⁵ Neither of these explanations is satisfactory, as we will explore further now.

Anderson, in elaborating the interpretation of Jonah as a nationalistic prophet highlights the irony and absurdity of Jonah resenting the grace shown to Nineveh by YHWH, while freely accepting the grace experienced by him in his rescue and second chance.⁶⁶ But this

⁶⁰ Kenneth M. Craig Jr., *A Poetics of Jonah. Art in the Service of Ideology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 154-156.

⁶¹ Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 155.

⁶² Shao, 67.

⁶³ Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness. The Book of Jonah Re-Examined* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 149, 176.

⁶⁴ Frolov, 89-90.

⁶⁵ Schellenberg, 361.

⁶⁶ Joel Edmund Anderson, "YHWH's Surprising Covenant *Hesed* in Jonah," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (2012): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107911431222>

interpretation fails to allow that Jonah is honestly and sincerely struggling to understand God's attributes and actions. The extent of God's mercy is hard to comprehend. It is a natural human tendency to tie divine benevolence to human worthiness.⁶⁷ If the historical setting of Jonah is the early eighth century BC, when Assyria was aggressively dominating the ancient Near East, then Nineveh epitomizes Assyria's reign of brutality and oppression. In this light, Jonah is upset by God pardoning Israel's oppressors. To his mind, Nineveh/Assyria's resurgence will result in Israel's downfall.⁶⁸

Muldoon argues that the main problem of Jonah was with God and not with Nineveh. He did not have a problem with the Ninevite's repentance, nor was he concerned about the shallowness of their penitence.⁶⁹ Jonah's problem was not about Nineveh's repentance, but it was about the ultimate reliability of God's word.⁷⁰ God seemed to have revoked his judgment on Nineveh too readily. Jonah considered that God's administration of justice was inconsistent and flawed, and that was what angered him.⁷¹ Jonah was displeased that "God would let compassion override justice."⁷² God's mercy in the light of Nineveh's evil was precisely what Jonah could not agree with. God's action made a parody of a serious human attempt toward justice.⁷³ Ryu argues that in sparing Nineveh, God undercut the traditional covenant theology in which God chose Israel as God's people.⁷⁴ This issue was between 'God chose Israel as God's people' and 'God withdraws God's favor of Israel and instead showed that favor to the archenemy of Israel'.⁷⁵ In this light, Jonah's anger was reasonable and natural.⁷⁶

Faced by Jonah's anger, God does not punish him, but responds with a question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4). Jonah is silent and gives no reply, instead he went to the east of the city and built a booth and waited for what would happen (Jonah 4:5). The unanswered

⁶⁷ French II, 83, 86-87.

⁶⁸ Youngblood, 164.

⁶⁹ Muldoon, 27-29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷² Roop, 150.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷⁴ Ryu, 211.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

question of 4:4 should prompt readers to reflect on Jonah's feelings and their own in these circumstances.⁷⁷

Next, God teaches Jonah about his merciful character through the *qiqayon* story. Kaplan describes Jonah as having an 'obsessive desire' for the shade of a plant, whose death causes Jonah's anger. "The rise and death of the *qiqayon* plant serve as a moral exemplar."⁷⁸ Just as Jonah was concerned about the plant, so God was justified in being concerned about the residents of Nineveh, no matter their origin or ultimate fate. God wanted to teach Jonah about divine mercy.⁷⁹ Bolin concludes that this story teaches Jonah about the radical divine freedom to forgive at will and to withdraw that forgiveness as well.⁸⁰

While the narrative ends with God's question unanswered, that does not necessarily mean that Jonah is completely powerless, or that his agency is completely annulled.⁸¹ Drawing on the context of God's covenant with Israel, Jonah dared to argue with God about Nineveh's escape from punishment.

With Jonah 4:11, the narrative might conclude for God and Jonah, but not for the readers. The readers are left to resolve God's final question or statement, while aware of both the angst of Jonah and the mercy of God.⁸² The readers can wonder whether Jonah was or was not yet satisfied. "The cry for divine justice runs deep in the biblical tradition and the human soul."⁸³ God has shown his compassion to the repentant Nineveh, but it is intimated that for Jonah, Nineveh's repentance was an insufficient basis for her forgiveness.⁸⁴ Jonah could not grasp and understand the mystery of God's compassion. Maybe Jonah was more comfortable with the concepts of retributive or distributive justice. However, beyond justice lies the mystery of God's compassion.⁸⁵ Craig concludes that "God does not condemn Jonah, but invites the prophet to condemn himself and admit that his anger has no merit. The Lord offers

⁷⁷ Roop, 151.

⁷⁸ Kaplan, 161.

⁷⁹ Craig Jr., 157.

⁸⁰ Thomas M. Bolin, "Should I Not Also Pity Nineveh?" Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 67 (1995): 109–121, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908929502006706>

⁸¹ Kaplan, 160–161

⁸² Roop, 148.

⁸³ Ibid., 154.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 154–155.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 155.

Jonah a practical lesson.”⁸⁶ Through this narrative arc, the reader of Jonah is also drawn to reflect on their own standards of justice and mercy.

Muldoon points out that there is no explicit condemnation of Jonah's position by the author.⁸⁷ We are left to infer whether Jonah even achieves a level of self-awareness of his own wrong.⁸⁸ To the extent that Jonah's final stance is ambiguous, so too, the readers may be left with an unresolved struggle to understand God's ways.⁸⁹ Bolin concludes that the book of Jonah is about “the absolute freedom, power, and sovereignty of Yahweh over all creation... attributes [that] are beyond the bounds of any human notions of justice, mercy, or logic.”⁹⁰ While some readers may stand in silent awe of this portrait of God, others may yet, like Jonah, seek to grapple with these mysteries of God's universal love which is at the same time deeply particular to the Israelites, the Ninevites, to Jonah, and to all readers.⁹¹

The Uniqueness of Jonah

No other prophet in the Old Testament behaved like Jonah.⁹² Jonah confronted God on theological grounds (4:1,2).⁹³ While other prophets like Abraham and Moses argued with God to extend his compassion (Gen 18; Exod 32), Jonah objected to divine compassion being extended to Nineveh.⁹⁴ There is a matrix of divine election, justice and mercy, according to Flaumenhaft, and Jonah's story works to hold all three in dynamic relationship.⁹⁵ This struggle to understand God and his ways is a central task for the maturing Christian. Accordingly, it is too simplistic to evaluate Jonah as a ‘flat’ narrative character, whose motivations and actions are predictable and consistent. Those scholars

⁸⁶ Craig Jr., 160.

⁸⁷ Muldoon, 15.

⁸⁸ Kaplan, 155.

⁸⁹ Kaplan, 161.

⁹⁰ Bolin, 183.

⁹¹ Shao, 4, 81; Craig Jr.

⁹² Zvi, 57-60.

⁹³ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁴ Reuven Kimelman, “Prophecy as Arguing with God and the Ideal of Justice,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 68, no. 1 (2014): 17–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964313510860>

⁹⁵ Mera J. Flaumenhaft, “The Story of Jonah,” *The Review of Politics* 76, no. 1 (2014): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000867>

who characterize Jonah as the reluctant prophet, the recalcitrant prophet, the unrepentant prophet, a model of disobedience and stubbornness, or narrow nationalistic, use these tropes to explain away Jonah's words and actions. A more nuanced approach allows the ambiguity or multivalence of the text to impact the reader, causing each reader to be more reflective on the themes of God's sovereignty, God's mercy, and God's justice, as experienced by Jonah and in their own lives.

Zvi shows considerable sensitivity to the moral, ideological and theological struggles of the character Jonah. Jonah was upset at being "a pawn in the chain of events initiated and controlled by YHWH" that led to the salvation of Nineveh.⁹⁶ Although Jonah was "powerless before a mighty and merciful God... [he was also] a beloved of God who goes to substantial lengths to teach him a lesson."⁹⁷ God commissioned, disciplined, rescued, recommissioned, and educated the prophet of Jonah. "The main concern of YHWH in the narrative, and as expressed by YHWH's words and pattern of actions, is Jonah."⁹⁸ This highlights God's particular and personal concern for those he calls to act for him in the world. Although Jonah resisted and argued against God's commission, God did not abandon Jonah to his limited horizons of self-concern or his under-developed notions of covenant faithfulness, justice and mercy. Although Jonah's attitude and actions as a prophet of God seem unusual to us, through the story of Jonah we can learn about the honest struggle faced by anyone called to carry out God's commission and to participate in God's dealings with the world.

Application from Jonah for Contemporary Christian Ministers

Having summarized the unique character of Jonah as a prophet, we now turn to consider some pastoral implications for Christian ministers today, particularly with regard to the notions of calling, discernment and character formation for Christian ministry.

Zvi states that the book of Jonah is not only a prophetic book, but is also a book of self-reflection that introduces a necessary self-critique.⁹⁹ Shao poses a question for her audience: "Is there a Jonah inside us?"¹⁰⁰ As

⁹⁶ Zvi, 106.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁰ Shao, 70.

contemporary Christian ministers (understood in the broadest sense of anyone who serves God in churches, schools, mission or the community), reading Jonah can prompt us to undertake self-reflection and self-critique. When an individual today perceives a call from God, whether that is to carry out some particular service or to take on a particular ministry, they may often silently ask, "Why me?" The desire to run away or to preserve a quiet life can be strong. Our similarities to Jonah extend beyond the matter of call and response. The opening chapter of Jonah introduces us to the struggle to rightly discern and respond to a call or commission from God. Anyone who wishes to serve God must grapple with their own ego, their own dreams and presuppositions about the trajectory of their life, and may need to sacrifice those dreams to obey God. Leaving behind career prospects, or a personal relationship with someone who doesn't share the call, is costly and may cause many people to reconsider following God's word.

While the Jonah narrative is framed as an individual struggling alone with God's call, today wise Christians will seek the support and confirmation from their church leaders and peers before heeding a perceived call to ministry. Part of any process of responding to a call from God will be intense reflection on our own character. Just as Jonah is a complex character, with both positive and negative traits, admirable and dubious attitudes, so too are most of us. There may be both saint and sinner jostling within our own selves.¹⁰¹ The narrative of Jonah demonstrates that God is with us no matter where we run, or what we encounter along the way to fulfilling his commission. We therefore need to cultivate those attitudes exemplified by Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 – trust in God's power, thankfulness for God's presence and deliverance, a desire to worship God 'come what may'. Like Jonah, we may use times of prayer to argue with God or bargain with him. This may be a sign of immaturity, or it may be a valid pathway of expressing our own autonomy and coming to a balanced understanding of how we fit into God's global purposes. If this process of discernment and questioning and arguing is drawn-out, we can take heart that God is very patient in dealing with his servants. He can comprehend our spiritual struggles. He commissioned, disciplined, rescued, recommissioned, and educated Jonah, and therefore, he can do all this for those considering ministry

¹⁰¹ Roop, 129-130.

today too. God can empathize with us when we cannot grasp fully God's attributes and actions.

As Christian ministers, sometimes we pray in times of despair and hope that God will help us. God's mercy and benevolence are greater than our weakness. God frequently shows his help despite our spiritual condition and virtue (or lack thereof). Jonah also teaches us that God's sovereign call is irresistible. We have to obey God's commission although in our hearts we struggle to fully agree with it. If we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and God as greater and more powerful than us, that necessitates us adopting an attitude of humility. We are God's servants. He is our Lord and Master. The benefit and impact our ministries may have for others will derive more from God's power and purposes, God's mercy and justice, if we hold them foremost, and have a chastened view of our own wisdom and capabilities.

Furthermore, while it is common for Christian ministers to face criticism and the negative opinions of others, like Jonah, we should seek to stand honestly before God and wrestle with his calling and commission. Personal integrity is a vital quality needed by all Christian ministers.¹⁰² Instead of our limitations, disagreements, disobedience, or discouragement in fulfilling God's commission, we can hold on to the truth that God always preserves with us. Through the book of Jonah, we can see the patience and mercy of God in dealing with the prophet of Jonah. As Christian ministers, we can also experience his patience and mercy. For every people, including his servant, He is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity (Jon. 4:2).

Conclusion

Jonah has, for centuries, intrigued and inspired interpreters who seek to mine the text for a simple and compelling summary of the prophet's character. Is he recalcitrant, hypocritical, nationalistic, psychologically-unstable, honest, satirical or one who refuses to play God's games? The ambiguity and richness of the text refuses to yield to only one possibility. Jonah is both disobedient and obedient, angry and chastened, arrogant and pious. In short, Jonah is a complex, round,

¹⁰² Peter Anggu, "Integritas Diri Sebagai Karakter Pelayan Tuhan," *Jurnal Jaffray* 3, no. 1 (2005): 59, <http://doi.org/10.25278/jj71.v3i1.139>

character who defies simplistic categorization. It is this quality of his portrayal that makes the book of Jonah so rich a field for psychological interpretations, but also, we have demonstrated, for pastoral reflection for those exploring Christian vocation. We have argued that just as God commissioned, disciplined, rescued, recommissioned, and educated Jonah, so too, God can use this book to shape the discernment and formation of Christian ministers today. Just as we see the patience and mercy of God at play in Jonah, so too we need it in our lives. The struggle to understand and respond rightly to God's character and purposes continues in the contemporary world, and Jonah has much to teach those who are willing to be 'thrown into the deep' in the course of following God's call.

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