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## JONAH AND THE PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE

The prophet reluctant to assume the mantle of prophecy is not rare in the Bible; but he who attempts to escape his mission after it has been given is unique. The first phenomenon assumes the proportions of a motif in Biblical literature. The latter, though occurring only once, should not on this account be considered but an isolated event. It, too is thematic to the idea of prophecy. Bound up in a style of writing which narrates facts and offers no conclusions, this theme is the heart of the Book of Jonah.

The Rabbis defended Jonah's unparalleled behavior in their interpretation that Jonah fled because he knew that Nineveh would repent, making Israel's failures to do so more marked by comparison. Like Moses after the incident of the Golden Calf, Jonah would rather perish than betray Israel.

Many scholars see the background of this book as the years following the Assyrian Exile. Jonah therefore harbored a bitterness toward all non-Jews, not the least of them the Assyrians themselves. Fearing that God in His mercy would forgive them, he tried to avoid heralding the prophecy that would give them an opportunity to repent. Certainly, he had no desire to see the worst of Israel's enemies saved by his indirect assistance.

Eric Fromm sees in Jonah a man bereft of love. Jonah "is a man with a strong sense of law and order, but without love . . . he wanted justice to be done, not mercy."

The approach to an understanding of this book rests in realizing its purpose. For one thing, it is not a prophetic book in the usual sense of the term; the actual prophetic material itself does not exceed five Hebrew words — "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed." (3:4)

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It is rather the story of a man's ascent to the level of a prophet. Therefore, there is no need for the author to present any historical details, something generally found in all of the later prophets. In contrast to Sodom and Gommorah, the sins of Nineveh are not delineated, nor is the name of the reigning king known to us.

In contrast to the many prophets who were reluctant to be seers, the false prophet always pursued prophecy for personal gain. Balaam could be bought for a "house full of silver and gold." Also, the false prophet tries to capture prophecy by magic. The true prophet realizes that prophecy comes only to the pure. He tries to escape the task because he recognizes the great personal sacrifice necessary for the position.

Jonah's running, then, may not have been only a reaction to the content of the prophecy he was to deliver, but also part of the general theme of prophetic reluctance. Whereas with other prophets, the self-sacrifice necessary may have involved physical deprivation, or incurring the abuse of others, Jonah's prophecy demanded a sacrifice of personality. His attempt at escape is as much an escape from self as it is from God. The Midrash comments that Jonah slept through the storm because of the anguish of his soul. The descent into the ship's hold symbolizes moral descent. This notion of hiding is likewise present in Moses' concealment in the cleft of the rock and in Elijah's concealment in the folds of his robe.

When the lot is cast and Jonah is judged responsible for the storm, he can no longer hide. This is the beginning of the transformation of his character, but it is by no means complete. Though he does not avoid his responsibility to the innocent sailors, and asks to be cast into the sea, he still seeks to escape from God's call in its stormy depth. The fish, like the whale symbolizes seclusion from God, notwithstanding the fact that God put him into both situations. Once again, Jonah is summoned to come face to face with reality; he is spewn up on the shore, all avenues of escape being closed off.

There is, after the sea incident, a rebirth of sorts in Jonah. God renews the call to him and restates the mission. Upon arrival, the prophecy of destruction is announced and taken

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seriously. The people of Nineveh repent and are forgiven by God, as Jonah knew would happen.

Once again, Jonah runs, from Nineveh, from God, and from himself. Saddled with a prophecy he could not bear, he delivered it regardless. Now they have repented and the prophecy will not be carried out. This was Jonah's premonition all along. Why, then, does he respond anew with resignation?

Jonah's original reluctance to bear the message was founded on his experience as a Jew. What inhabitant of Israel would want to be the harbinger of destruction to Nineveh knowing full well the real outcome of events? Yet, this transcendence of self was demanded of Jonah and he finally accepted it. Now the frustration is much deeper. The Midrash captures its essence. "Not enough that Israel should call me a false prophet, but also the nations of the world."

Originally saddened because he knew too much of God's ways with men, the prophet is scorned by men as one who knows too little. To cross one's own deepest feelings is painful, and the goal of a higher good is some compensation. But to have the sacrifice interpreted as a blunder is too much for any man to bear, Jonah included.

He takes up residence outside the city and waits. Perhaps repentance is not complete. Perhaps destruction will come and with it Jonah's vindication as a man in the eyes of others . . .

"No man is another's tool, no nation the pawn of a prophet. The plant was but the medium for shade and you mourned its passing. Would you accord the inhabitants of Nineveh any less?

"Do not worry over your image in the sight of others. Can you vindicate your actions to yourself? You are already better than they, who do not know what they are doing or why. They are the blunderers, but innocent nonetheless."

The book does not conclude with any action on Jonah's part. Rather, a change of heart was demanded of him. In addition to a sacrifice of personal attitudes, Jonah must relinquish any notion of success. The prophet must never allow his calling to become a static "plan" for the world, lest he be frustrated in its frustration. Prophecy is a dynamic process and the reactions of its subjects, the nations, a part of this process.

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Jonah may have a glimpse into the same process in history but he cannot, any more than another mortal, foresee the whole . . . So God told Moses in the sluice of the rock and so He restates it to Jonah.

Man is not subject to plan( as we understand it) because he has freedom. The people of Nineveh did not know “right from left” ensnared in sin they were not really free. Jonah’s prophecy opened their eyes to the alternatives. In the final analysis, Jonah was asked to relinquish part of his freedom so that others might find it. With the realization of this demand, Jonah himself was liberated from frustration. With this point made clear, the story breaks off suddenly.