

JONAH

SHOULD CHRISTIANITY CARRY
A HEALTH WARNING?

How should we read Jonah?

- Genre? Is he a prophet? Significant similarities with Ruth and Esther or Tobit in the Apocrypha.
- Who is he? Son of Amittai (2 Kings 14.25) or pseudepigrapha?
- Date? Christians disagree about this! Some say the reign of Jeroboam (786-746 BC), most scholars think 500-300 BC, ie. after the return from exile in Babylon in 538 BC. Certainly pre-200 BC (Sirach 49.10).
- Theme/Purpose? The need for repentance? The non-fulfilment of prophecy? Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles? Must sin be punished?
- As Jews and then as Christians.

MISINTERPRETING JONAH

What are we supposed to 'get out' of Jonah? Easy Christian answers include the dangerously antisemitic:

'Don't be like Jonah the disobedient (1.3) and vindictive Jew (4.5).' Christians should love and serve everyone rather than being intolerant, legalistic and self-righteous (like Jonah).

Moralising Christians are both self-deceiving and defective in their understanding of God's mercy. Moreover, Christians who think they have replaced the Jews as the people of God have often been murderous towards them (as Jonah was towards the Ninevites). See William Nicholls, *Christian Antisemitism, A History of Hate* (1993).

How do stories work?

Read Jonah not as history or as fable but as a Jewish story. This allows us to remain neutral on the question of historicity. But compare its open-endedness with the story Nathan tells David (2 Sam 12) or the parables of Jesus. Like the prodigal son, Jonah is a shaggy dog story.

A story usually works by moving us from tension to resolution. As we read we ask ourselves, “how is this tension going to be resolved?” For example:

- What will happen to a prophet who so blatantly disobeys God?
- What will happen to the wicked city of Nineveh?

But note that important questions remain unresolved.

- Is Jonah right to be angry about the death of the plant? **(4.9-10)**
- Should God have pity on Nineveh? **(4.11)**

Let Israel Understand

Christians should read typology backwards into ancient Israel as well as forwards into the church. The original Jewish audience would have understood two important ideas:

1. 'Nineveh' is the capital of the Assyrian empire which destroyed Israel in the eighth century (See Amos and Hosea). Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC. To preserve Nineveh condemns Israel.
2. The plant that God causes to grow to give Jonah shade (**4.6-8**) represents the line of Davidic kings, brought to an end in 587 BC when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Jews were taken into exile.

Now, identifying with Jonah, let us ask ourself the questions in 4.9-11.

What does it cost to be God's people?

Read as a comedy, Jonah does everything wrong and yet through him God does right. God uses Jonah's disobedience to make his people (Jonah is the only Jew in the book, he represents Israel) a blessing for all nations (See the covenant with Abraham, Gen 12.1-3):

- i. The sailors are given knowledge of Yahweh (**1.14-16**).
- ii. Jonah comes to know the salvation of Yahweh (**2.6,9**).
- iii. Jonah's half-hearted proclamation to Nineveh is believed! (**3.4,5**).

So why despite **4.2** is Jonah still hoping for the worst (**4.5**)? Because there is no Messiah and Israel is no more. *'All's Well that Ends Well'*, but at terrible cost to God's people. And that includes us...

The sign of Jonah

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' ³⁹But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

Matthew 12.38-40

(See also Matthew 16.1-4)

What is the sign of Jonah?

1. A reference to the resurrection? After three days, Jesus will appear alive.
2. A reference to Jesus's mission? The Gentiles will be saved (Romans 11.11-15) but they will destroy his own people Israel in the Jewish Revolt (66-70 AD).

'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.' (Luke 19.42-44)

Jesus and suffering

Whereas Jonah sacrifices his own life to save those he has imperilled (1.12) Jesus is killed unjustly. Jesus's disciples are told they will suffer unjustly (Beatitudes, Mt 5.10-12).

Jesus refused a number of options open to the oppressed: withdrawal (Essenes, Pharisees), assimilation (Sadducees, Hellenised Jews) and resistance (Zealots). He even rejected hatred because it means 'death'. As St Augustine put it 'resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die'. Violence begets violence. The only solution is conversion of the violent/unjust NOT their destruction.

Like Jesus, Martin Luther King's commitment to suffer repeated violence kept putting 'the Jonah question' to his oppressors.

Reflection

1. How is Christian self-righteousness/moralism 'unhelpful'?
2. What do we individually or collectively need to repent of? What might that repentance look like?
3. What might God be able to do through our disobedience?
4. Despite everything he does, Jonah remains God's beloved and chosen one. What are the implications of this?
5. Have Christians forgotten that suffering is normative for God's people?
6. Do we ask God to bless our enemies despite knowing they may destroy us?