

JONAH OR CONVERSION IN THE OFFING...

Jonás o conversión en alta mar

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Resumen:

En este breve artículo nos encontramos con uno de los profetas más sugestivos del rollo de los profetas menores, el libro de Jonás. El autor se propone hacer una lectura con base en el análisis narrativo y ayudarnos a situar la obra en el contexto histórico que le ha podido dar origen, y, por sobre todo, situarnos en el ambiente psicológico y religioso que le da sentido. El autor nos deleita con el estudio de pequeños detalles que animan la lectura de este símbolo del hombre y de Dios.

Palabras clave: Profetas - Antiguo Testamento – Jonás – Exégesis - Análisis narrativo.

Abstract:

One of most attractive of Minor Prophets Scroll is Jonah. The author of this article tries to make an interpretation of this Book in its historical context it was originated and places it in the psychological and religious milieu in which it finds his own meaning. He enjoys us with the analysis of little details of the text in which they are meaningful symbols for man and for God.

Key words: Prophets - Old Testament – Jona – Exegesis – Narrative analysis.

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“The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Mt 12:41: cf. Luk 11:32)¹. The prophet Jonah is remembered in this particular passage of the Gospel for his successful preaching in Nineveh. The purpose of Jesus’ saying is surely polemical. He affirms that his contemporaries will be condemned by foreigners, namely the Ninevites, because they believed and converted, whereas they did not believe in the preaching of Jesus who is greater than Jonah. In this passage, the gospels implicitly suggest that the good news was announced with success to the nations after most of the contemporary members of the Jewish people had refused to listen to the Messiah.

This brings us to the core of the Book of Jonah which, as we will see, contains many variations on the theme of “repentance” or “conversion”. The Book of Jonah belongs to the collection of the Twelve Minor Prophets but is very different from all the other prophetic books. It contains a short narrative about the prophet Jonah and the only “oracle” delivered contains, in the original language, no more than five words (Jon 3:4). Nowhere do we find anything like the oracles of an Isaiah or a Jeremiah, or like the visions of an Ezekiel or a Zechariah. Jonah is closer to short stories such as the Books of Ruth or Esther, or the deuterocanonical books of Judith and Tobit. We will consequently analyze it with the tools of narrative analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION (JONAH 1:1-2)

The very first sentence of the book contains in a nutshell the whole story: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me’” (Jon 1:1-2).

Jonah, son of Amittai, is mentioned in 2 Kgs 14:25, a prophet who preached under king Jeroboam II (785-745 B.C.E. circa)². This was the longest reign in the kingdom of Israel, a reign that coincided with a period of prosperity. But there no evidence at all to prove that this Jonah son of Amittai ever went to Nineveh. It is probable that the author of the Book of Jonah simply picked that name and made Jonah the hero of a narrative. We will see that the narrative itself suggests that we have to understand it as a fiction. It also seems that the writer wanted nonetheless to root its narrative in an extant biblical tradition. The story might be a work of imagination, the name however is not. Is it to make the story more likely and more believable? Or simply to disorient the reader? We do not know. Probably the author is faithful to one principle of ancient literature, i.e. “Nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed” (Anaxagoras). He had to find some solid point in the tradition to make his narrative acceptable.

¹ I use the *New Revised Standard Bible (NRSV)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – London – New York 1989, with some slight corrections or modifications at certain places for a more faithful rendering of the original text.

² The name Jonah, in Hebrew *yôṇâ*, means “dove”, but it does not seem that the story plays on that name.

Jonah or Conversion in the Offing...

The first sentence of the Book of Jonah is a well-known formula that introduces oracles³. This is a first indication for the reader: we are in the world of the prophets. Jonah receives a message to convey to the Ninevites. This message is short, but means, in the juridical language of the time that the judge of the universe took notice of the crimes committed by the city of Nineveh and is about to act accordingly. This means, in clear words, that the crimes will be punished.

Nineveh, of course, is not just a city among others. Nineveh is the worst city that could be imagined at that time. It was one of the capitals of the Assyrian empire that had put an end to the kingdom of the North in 722 B.C.E (2 Kgs 17). The Assyrians, led by Sennacherib, had besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. and brought back a huge tribute (2 Kgs 18; Isaiah 38). The Book of Nahum is nothing but a long oracle against Nineveh. To make sure that we understand what Nineveh meant for the original addressees of the Book of Jonah, let me quote a few verses from Nahum 3:1-6:

¹ Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty-- no end to the plunder!

² The crack of whip and rumble of wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot!

³ Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end-- they stumble over the bodies!

⁴ Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries, and peoples through her sorcery.

⁵ I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame.

⁶ I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle.

It is difficult not to perceive in these verses the deep aversion and hatred that the average members of Israel could feel towards the city of Nineveh. For this reason the message entrusted to Jonah must have rejoiced many readers of the book. Eventually the Lord of Israel is about to react against the violent and loathsome city. To quote again Nahum, the reader may have hoped to exclaim, at long last, "Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked [Ninevites] invade you; they are utterly cut off" (Nahum 1:15).

³ See already Gen 15:1, 4 (God speaks to Abraham); 1 Sam 15:10 (Samuel); 2 Sam 7:4 (Nathan); Jer 1:4, 11, 13; 2:1... The formula occurs only once in the Book of Isaiah (Isa 38:4, in a narrative). In Jeremiah it appears 23 times, in Ezekiel 50 times. We do not find it in former, pre-exilic prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah and the first Isaiah. The formula is typically exilic or post-exilic.

There is however a last detail that deserves our attention. Nineveh is called the "great" city (*gâdôl* in Hebrew). We hardly notice the fact, but this adjective is used for the first time in the narrative. It will be repeated twelve times, if I am not mistaken⁴. The fact is striking because Hebrew language rarely uses adjectives. In the Book of Jonah, all of a sudden, everything becomes "great," the city of Nineveh, the tempest, the fear, the fish, the anger, the joy... The meaning of this feature will appear progressively in the process of reading.

At this point, the reader expects two things to happen. First we expect Jonah to go to Nineveh. Second, we expect Nineveh to be destroyed. The reader may think that Jonah's task is not very easy. But usually a prophet has the support of God and does not hesitate to carry out difficult tasks. It is probable that the mission will be complicated and that he will have to grapple with several problems. But in most cases a prophet who is called listens to God and goes where he is sent to.

Before reading the rest of the first chapter, let us say a word on the construction of the book. As several authors noticed, there is a strict parallelism between the first and the third chapter, as there is one between the second and the fourth chapter. In the first and the third chapter Jonah is dealing with pagans, the mariners in chap. 1 and the Ninevites in chap. 3. In both cases, the chapter describes a conversion (cf. 1:14; 3:5.16). In chapters 2 and 4, Jonah is alone with God. In both cases he "prays" (2:1; 4:1). Other features will be noted in the course of our reading.

2. JONAH ON THE BOAT (JON 1:3-16)

After reading Jon 1:1-2, the audience expects a sentence more or less like "Jonah got up and went to Nineveh...". This is not the case, however, and this is the first important surprise of the narrative⁵. The text reads: "Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord".

Twice it is said that Jonah wants to flee "from the presence of the Lord", a very strange behavior for a prophet. Let us notice that the sentence does not say, "Jonah got up and fled" or that "he paid his fare and went to Tarshish". In both cases the sentence carefully says that Jonah got up "to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" and that he paid his fare "to go to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord". It is his intention. Whether he will succeed or not is another question.

⁴ Jonah 1:2, 4[2x], 10, 12, 16; 2:1, 2, 3; 4:1, 6, 11. This might be just a coincidence, but it can also be meaningful. The exact meaning is however difficult to determine. In the Book of Ruth, for instance, the verb to "return" is used twelve times in Ruth 1 and the verb "to glean" twelve times in Ruth 2. It may be just a way to underscore a key word in a story.

⁵ According to the specialists of narrative analysis, events in a story can be of two main kinds. Some are expected, but the reader does not know when and how they will occur and this is called "suspense". Or events are not expected or do not correspond to normal expectations and this is called "surprise". We surely have the second case in Jon 1:3.

Jonah or Conversion in the Offing...

He goes down to Joppa, it means westwards, towards the sea, to go to Tarshish which is often identified with Spain and represents, in the Bible, something like “the end of the world”. It is surely the wrong direction because Nineveh, as everyone knows, lies in the east... Jonah makes sure he goes as far as possible from Nineveh, and from the Lord. The text may suggest in this way that there is an implicit link between “the presence of the Lord” – literally “the face of the Lord” – and “Nineveh”.

Last question: why does Jonah flee from the Lord? Nothing is said at this stage. The reader may wonder why the prophet acts in such a curious and unexpected way. Every reader at this point formulates a hypothesis. Perhaps Jonah is frightened because he might be put to death in Nineveh. Or the journey is too long, the task too difficult, the message too harsh... Anyway, the narrative opens a gap that the reader tries to fill in. Later on the reader will be able to check whether his or her hypothesis holds water or not. We have thus a narrative that involves the reader from the start in the process of interpretation.

Did Jonah reach Tarshish? No. Why? Because we have a second surprise in v. 5, “But the Lord hurled a *great* wind upon the sea, and such a *great* storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up”. This is a surprise, but the reader may have thought that God could not let his prophet go in peace as far as Tarshish without intervening. Anyway, we see a *great* wind provoking a *great* storm. The ship threatens to break and to sink.

At this point, the characters in the narrative react in two different ways. The sailors' reaction is normal and does not surprise anyone: “Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them” (Jon 1:5a). Their reaction is both religious and human. First they pray, and here we discover that they are pagans since they pray “each to his god”. Then they try to save the ship throwing the cargo into the sea. They simply try to save their lives. Jonah, however, has a very different reaction that astonishes the reader once again, “Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep” (1:5b). The sentence creates a sharp contrast between the frantic activity of the mariners and the immobility of Jonah. We can also notice that Jonah went down to Joppa (1:2) and now goes down into the hold of the ship. Jonah goes down, every time more down. A psychologist would say that he must undergo a deep depression.

Why does Jonah sleep? Again the readers have to guess and make some suppositions. The narrator does not say a word about his possible reasons. Does he just want to have peace? Does he want to forget about his mission and all the rest? Is he just tired? Is he depressed? As everyone knows, deep sleep is often connected with exhaustion and depression. And it is also an image of death. Just look at Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4-9).

But poor Jonah cannot sleep for long. This time “the captain came and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps [this] god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish’” (1:6).

Hebrew style use simple features to convey messages to the reader, for instance the repetition of some words or some sentences. In this sentence, at least two elements are of some importance. First, the captain uses the same language as God when he says, "Get up...". The captain, just as God, tries to put Jonah on the move. But has the captain more success than God?

What is the captain's motivation? This is the second element that functions as a clue in the narrative. For the first time, a character expresses the wish "not to perish". This will come back in 3:9, in the king of Nineveh's mouth, in a very similar formula. The same verb "to perish" will reappear again in Jon 1:14 and 4:10. The captain, to come back to our topic, does not want his crew to perish. And Jonah? The image of Jonah, lying in the hold of the ship and sleeping during the storm, is not exactly the image of somebody struggling for survival, neither his nor the crew's.

The scene cuts short without giving Jonah's answer. We will never know whether he prayed or not. What mattered for the narrator was to show the captain's eagerness in contrast with what? Jonah's carelessness or, more simply, perhaps, his indifference? We see Jonah and try to guess which his motivations are. And, this is almost unavoidable, we pass judgment on him.

The next short scene begins without transition. Actually the whole story of Jonah is made of a series of short tableaux. In this scene (1:7-9) Jonah is awake and has to face a kind of trial. The sailors start an inquiry in order to discover the cause of their plight:

⁷ The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us". So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah⁸. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"⁹. "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land".

Jonah who tried "to flee from the presence of the Lord" (1:3) is once again caught. After the captain, the sailors come and disturb Jonah's "peace". They cast lots, as it was usual at that time⁶. The closest parallel is found in Josh 7:16-18. The normal belief is that every phenomenon, especially a catastrophe, must have a cause, and that the cause is normally the presence of a guilty person⁷. The guilty person, as the reader may have thought, can be nobody but Jonah. He is then cross-examined by the sailors about his identity and business. But his only answer is a kind of confession of faith: "I am a Hebrew. The Lord, the God of heaven I fear, who made the sea and the dry land" (literal translation). It is impossible not to notice a clear note of chauvinism in this statement. Jonah means to say, "I am a Hebrew and you are pagans. I fear the Lord, the only true God, the one who created heaven, earth and sea. You worship false

⁶ See Lev 16:8; Josh 7:16-18; 1 Sam 10:20; 1 Ch 24:31; 25:8; 26:13-14; Neh 11:1.

⁷ See, for instance, aside from Josh 7:16-18, 1 Sam 14:36-45.

gods". There a certain irony in this confession of faith, though. Jonah says that he "fears" the Lord. This may mean, as some translations put it, "I worship the Lord". The same Hebrew verb also means, however, "I am afraid of the Lord". Jonah surely intends the verb in the first meaning, but the reader may prefer the second⁸.

Jonah, of course, mentions the Lord, but not the mission that the Lord entrusted him. And, this is also ironical, he confesses that his God is the Lord of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Why does Jonah try to flee on the sea then? Cannot his God find him even far away on the sea? This, however, is again a question that only the readers ask themselves. Jonah is surely not aware of this implication of his (boastful?) act of faith. And Jonah may confess his Lord, he does not address him any kind of prayer. He speaks of the Lord, not to the Lord.

In v. 10 we find a short flash-back, "Then the men were afraid with a great fear and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so". The construction of this part of the narrative might startle the reader. When does Jonah tell the sailors that he was fleeing away from the Lord? We do not know. The fact is that the reader perceives first the "great fear" of the sailors and only afterwards realizes what the reason for this fear is. The narrator creates in this way an obvious contrast between Jonah's "fear of the Lord" in v. 9 and the sailors' "great fear" in v. 10. Which fear is more authentic? It is up to the reader to decide, here as in many other cases.

After the short trial, a decision must be taken. Jonah remains silent, of course. The sailors take the initiative and ask the culprit to tell them what to do, a rather unusual practice. This strategy however enables the narrator to uncover another side of Jonah's character and create a further contrast (1:11-12):

¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you".

Jonah chooses his penalty and eventually acknowledges his guilt. But his choice is revelatory since, once again, Jonah wants to go down, and this time to the bottom of the sea. This is nothing else but what is called "death-wish". Jonah does not want to live.

Do the sailors throw Jonah into the sea as they threw the cargo (1:5)? No, not immediately: "Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them" (1:13). The sailors try by all means to save Jonah. The reader almost grows impatient to see Jonah flung

⁸ This is a typical case of "verbal irony" since the same words have a different meaning for the character(s) in the story and for the reader.

into the sea. But Jonah is still on the ship. And before his wish is fulfilled, the sailors still take time to pray: "Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us *perish* on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you'" (1:14).

The sailors repeat the famous verb "perish" –"let us not *perish*"– whereas Jonah wants to disappear into the sea. Second, they pray to the Lord, the God of Jonah, and implicitly recognize that he is the God who holds their destiny in his hands. This might be considered as mere opportunism. In the narrative it seems to serve a different purpose, I think, namely to sharpen the contrast between their attitude and Jonah's.

After this prayer, the sailors are forced to do what Jonah had proposed to them. The expected effect is immediate: "So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging". We would like to know Jonah's fate, but the narrator chooses to describe first the sailors' reaction after the storm is over and they feel safe: "Then the men feared the Lord with a *great* fear, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows".

The narrator underlines once again the mariners' piety: they have been scandalized by Jonah's disobedience (v. 10), they hesitate before throwing Jonah overboard (v. 13), they ask God's forgiveness (v. 14), and they offer him sacrifices and make vows to him (v. 16). After Jonah's confession, they forget their pagan gods and mention only the Lord, the God of Jonah (Yhwh; cf. 1:10, 14, 16). The question for the reader is again, who really "fears" the Lord?⁹.

3. JONAH IN THE BELLY OF THE FISH (2:1-11)

This chapter contains a short notice about Jonah's fate (2:1, 11) and a Psalm that Jonah recites in the belly of the fish (2:2-11).

In this chapter the narrative introduces a further extraordinary element, a *great* fish that swallows Jonah. He remains there for three days and three nights. Of course this is not meant to be taken literally and the narrator clearly wants the readers to understand that the narrative is fictional. We are in the world of fantasy.

As for poor Jonah, there is no peace. He surely wanted to put an end to all his troubles, but God, the Lord, decided it otherwise. Anyway he has three days to reflect¹⁰. "Three days" is an expression used now and then in the Bible to speak of a time after which you abandon any hope to find a lost person¹¹. After three days, however, the fish literally "vomits" Jonah on the shore.

⁹ See the use of the verb "to fear" in 1:9, 10, 14, and especially the mention of the sailors' "great fear" in 1:10, 14. The adjective "great" is used for the sailors' fear, but is it used for Jonah's fear?

¹⁰ This motif was taken by the New Testament to underscore the parallelism between Jonah and Jesus, in particular with respect of the three days between Jesus' death and resurrection. See Mat 11:40; Luk 12:30.

¹¹ See 1 Sam 9:20; 1 Kgs 2:17.

Jonah or Conversion in the Offing...

The Psalm that we find in Jon 2:3-10 raises several questions. It is most probably a later addition that tries to make Jonah a little more pious and tolerable. In this Psalm, for instance, there is no mention of the fish. Jonah seems to be at the bottom of the sea (2:6-7) or in the belly of Sheol (2:3) and not in the belly of a fish. There is no mention of his mission either. Finally, the thanksgiving should take place after v. 11 and not before. As for the style, the song is a patch-work of sentences and verses coming from the Psalms. The marginal notes in modern versions of the Bible mention most of these parallels.

How to explain the presence of a psalm in the Book of Jonah? Popular narratives – and most biblical narratives are popular narratives – rarely develop the mental processes of their characters. The interest for psychology is moreover a modern invention. When a biblical narrative wants to describe strong feelings or emotions, it normally resorts to lyrical language. Songs and psalms are often present to express moments of intense joy, sorrow, or despair. The Book of Job would be the best example of this. In this book, there is little action and much passion, as Luis-Alonso Schökel used to say. There are many other examples. Let me mention at least some of them: the “song” of the first man after the creation of the first woman (Gen 2:23); the vengeful song of Lamech (Gen 4:23-24); the victory song of Deborah (Judg 5); the joyful song of Hanna after Samuel's birth (1 Sam 2:1-10); the victory song of the women after Goliath's death (1 Sam 18:7); the dirge for Saul and Jonathan by David (2 Sam 1:17-27); the dirge for Abner by the same David (2 Sam 4:33-34)...

Jonah's prayer expresses his inner feelings, as other songs do. But it can be read in several different keys. I propose to read it in an ironical way. Let me pinpoint some of the most conspicuous cases where the reader may read the text with tongue in cheek.

“I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice” (2:3) – but who prayed in 1:5, 14?

“You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me” (2:4) – Who asked to be thrown into the sea in 1:12?

“Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’” (2:5) – Who fled from the presence of the Lord (1:3, 10)?

“The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head. At the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God” (2:6-7) – Why is Jonah in the sea?

“As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple” (2:8) – Who remembered the Lord? And who prayed?

“Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty” (2:9) – Who has really been loyal to the Lord? The Hebrew Jonah or the pagan sailors?

“But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” – Who has just offered sacrifices to the Lord and made vows (1:16)?

Jonah does not seem aware of all these contradictions, anyway, and this adds to the dramatic irony of the story. In 2:11 Jonah, as we saw, was vomited or spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. For the rabbis Jonah was such a disgusting person that even the fish could not stand him and had to spew it out after three days.

4. JONAH IN NINEVEH (3:1-10)

We do not know exactly where Jonah lands in 2:11. This does not matter, most probably. In 3:1-2 he receives a second order, similar to the first one in 1:2: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’” We find again Nineveh the *great* city. But the message is different. We may think that God is more cautious this time and wants his prophet first to go to Nineveh. Once arrived, God will tell him what to say... But we will never know whether the message delivered by Jonah in 3:4 is the exact message that he was asked to deliver.

This time, Jonah does not try to flee. He has learned the lesson: “So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord” (3:3). The reader meets here the sentence that he or she expected to find in 1:3. The formula of execution – “according to the word of the Lord” – can surely be read with an ironical undertone: “*Ultimately, volente nolente, willingly or not*, Jonah acts according to the word of the Lord”.

In v. 3b, the narrator adds a short note of comment on the city of Nineveh and its fabulous dimensions: “Now Nineveh was a *great* city before God, a three days’ walk across”. The expression “a *great* city before God” can be understood as a superlative, “an exceedingly large city”. But it can also be interpreted as a way of saying that Nineveh was precious in God’s eyes. A three days’ walk would mean, more or less, ninety kilometers – more or less sixty miles! This surely evokes a fabulous size¹². As the reader must have noticed, almost everything is *great* in Jonah’s story. And sometimes exceedingly great.

Jonah’s message to the Ninevites contains only five words in the original Hebrew text: “Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’” (2:4).

¹² There is a curious detail about Nineveh. The cuneiform sign for the city Nineveh is the sign for “fish”. Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish and Nineveh – “fish” – is a city that requires three days to be crossed.

Jonah or Conversion in the Offing...

“Forty days” as “three days” are symbolic numbers. In the Bible forty days or forth years correspond to a time of transformation. In one version of the flood, the latter lasted for forty days and forty nights (Gen 7:4, 12, 17). Israel remained forty years in the desert and after forty years a new generation was ready to enter the promised land (Num 14:34)¹³.

Jonah – to come back to our topic – walks only one day and says five words. One cannot say that he exaggerates or that he is overzealous and fanatical. Everyone expects the Ninevites’ reaction. Nineveh, the worst city in the whole world, receives a message of condemnation. What is the result? And the consequence for Jonah?

The result is an incredible surprise, once more: “And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth” (3:5). Never in Israel had a prophet had such a land-slide success. The readers will say that this is impossible or at least unbelievable. In Israel prophets usually meet with resistance, opposition, persecution, at the best indifference. And they have to preach for years. Here, in Nineveh, the whole city converts after one day of preaching. And what city! The worst that could be imagined. Nineveh is, in the Old Testament, what Babylon is in the Book of Revelation. Obviously the narrator creates a sharp contrast between Jonah’s minimal effort and the disproportionate effect of his preaching. And he intentionally creates a sharp contrast between the successful preaching of Jonah in Nineveh and the fruitless preaching of most of the prophets in Israel.

Next verse is somewhat difficult to understand since one could think that there is a useless repetition of v. 5 in the measures proclaimed by the king of Nineveh (3:6-9):

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish”.

How to explain the reason why, for instance, the king proclaims a fast in v. 7 when all the Ninevites already decided to fast in v. 5? The explanation is simple. V. 5 is a kind a “proleptic summary” of the whole narrative section. This summary describes in a few words the immediate effect of Jonah’s preaching¹⁴. Afterwards, the narrator comes back

¹³ See also Exod 24:18; 34:28; Num 13:25; 1 Kgs 19:8; Mat 4:2...

¹⁴ The summary in v. 5 is comprehensive. For instance, the expression “everyone, great and small”, “from the greatest to the least”, is a so-called “merism”, a figure of style that describes a totality using two opposite terms. “Heaven and earth”, for instance means the universe (Gen 1:1). For the merism “great and small”, see, for instance, 2 Ch 31:15; 34:30; Est 1:5, 20; Jer 16:6. In Jon 3:5, the expression means everyone, the king, the court, and the whole population of the city.

to the event and gives the reader all the necessary details about it. In a few words, the narrator tells us that the Ninevites immediately converted and started fasting. Then he says: "And this is how things happened: the news reached the king..."

Concretely, the king of Nineveh came to know about Jonah's preaching and instantly reacted. He himself starts performing rites of penance. Then, after giving the example, he proclaims a public fast. There is clear note of hyperbole in the king's order, as in several parts of the Book of Jonah. By now the reader must be wont to this aspect. Can we imagine a whole city stopping all its activities and fast, without either eating or drinking, for about forty days and forty nights? Can we imagine thousands of people and thousands of animals covered with sackcloth, crying to a God they hardly know? And all that in Nineveh? In this narrative, this is what happens.

The king mentions in the end the intention of his decision: "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (3:9). The reader must recognize here a motif present in the captain's speech to Jonah in 1:6¹⁵. The Ninevites do not want to perish just as the captain and the sailors did not either.

This, evidently, was not said by Jonah. He only announced Nineveh's final annihilation. There was no hint at a possible salvation in what he said in 3:4. The whole theology of repentance and salvation comes from the king of Nineveh's mind. Who is right? Jonah who announces Nineveh's end or the king of Nineveh who hopes to escape the terrible fate and does everything to avoid it? The reader is called to ponder the possible answers to this question¹⁶.

There is final trait in the king's discourse that deserves attention. He says: "God may relent and change his mind" (*NRSV*). A more literal translation would be: "God may come back and repent; he may come back from his fierce anger...". This vocabulary is well-known in the Bible. This is the vocabulary used to describe a conversion. The narrator suggests that God may change his mind, that God may "convert" and "repent"... The sailors did, the Ninevites did, and after all God himself may convert as well.

How did God react? The narrator gives us the answer right away in v. 10. He does not describe the execution of the king's orders since everything was already clear after v. 5. God's reaction is not exactly a surprise, since conversion should be normally followed by forgiveness. But this might be accompanied by some disappointment from the side of the readers who are familiar with Nahum's prophecy. The text reads, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it". So, eventually, God "converted" as well.

¹⁵ See also the sailors' prayer in 1:14.

¹⁶ There is in the Bible an example of a king who did *not* convert after a prophet, Jeremiah, had called him to do so. It is Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, in Jer 36. Since the Book of Jonah is late, it is possible that the informed reader may have seen in the king of Nineveh's behavior in Jon 3 the opposite of Jehoiakim's behavior in Jer 36.

The narrative could break up here with a kind of “happy ending”. But some questions remain unanswered, for instance we do not know yet the reason why Jonah decided to flee to Tarshish. The answer to this question is given presently in 4:1-4:

¹ But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry². He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing³. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live”⁴. And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

This is the last reaction in a long chain: Jonah is sent to preach, he preaches, the Ninevites convert, God forgives, Jonah shows his displeasure. We started with Jonah and we come back to him in the end.

Jonah is angry, with a *great* anger (4:1). And he knew it from the start. The reason why he fled to Tarshish is clear now and the reader is invited to check whether he or she had made the right guess. Most probably they had not guessed the right answer and have to “change their minds” about Jonah’s real intentions. Jonah cannot agree with a forgiving God. This upsets all his plans. He loses face in front of the Ninevites who obtain God’s forgiveness whereas he announced their downfall. Jonah wants the world to be ruled by logic, not by mercy and forgiveness. He announced Nineveh’s ruin and he wants to see Nineveh’s ruin. Nineveh’s wickedness (1:2) deserves punishment and punishment should be carried out. Strict logic, strict justice, after all. And no changes, please. But Jonah experiences that things may change – unfortunately, he may add. And that even God can change his mind. The world is not governed by strict justice, but by something Jonah calls patience, mercy, steadfast love, and forgiveness. This is the cause of his depression and of his famous death-wish (4:3). The sailors and the king of Nineveh with the Ninevites did not want to perish (1:6, 14; 3:9). Jonah wants to die (4:3). Another contrast that leaves the reader pondering as to whether the real image of God is Jonah’s or the heathen sailors’ and Ninevites’.

The sentence used by Jonah to define God’s behavior is found elsewhere in the Old Testament¹⁷. The closest parallel, however, is to be found in Joel 2:13: “rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing”. In Joel 2 just as in Jonah 3 we have a call to repentance (Joel 1:2-17). And therefore the sentence finishes with the same mention of God “who relents from punishing”. For the Book of Jonah, God can forgive not only the repenting Israelites, but also the repenting pagans.

¹⁷ See for instance Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Joel 2:13; Ps 103:8-10. But there are many other free quotations of this formula. The marginal notes in modern versions of the Bible and commentaries usually give a list of them.

To Jonah's outburst of anger, God answers with a simple question: "And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'" (4:4). Jonah does not answer the question. What would the reader say? As we will see, this is not the last time the text leaves some questions open.

5. GOD, JONAH, AND THE READER (JON 4:5-11)

The last part of Jonah's story creates a certain problem. We read in 4:5 that "Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city".

This particular feature of the narrative led several authors to think that the text underwent a redactional work. Jon 4:5 should follow Jon 3:4. Jonah preaches one day and then withdraws to a hill and waits there to see what will be the fate of the city. This is the logical and chronological sequence as it can be reconstructed by the reader. But the narrative does not present events in this order. The reason for it is that the narrator likes to create special effects.

In our case, the narrative exposes the final effect of God's forgiveness on Jonah. Then, the narrative comes back and explains with more details what really happened. Obviously what the reader already knows is not repeated.

In this case, the narrator goes back – this is what I called "tiling technique" – and gives a second version of Jonah's reaction with some supplementary particulars. This version contains the conclusion of the story. Jon 3:1 – 4:4 and 4:5-11 have to be read as parallel accounts of the same event, but from different perspectives. In the first case the narrator describes the facts from a more objective point of view and observes especially the Ninevites' reaction. In the second case, Jonah is the center of attention.

Let us come back to our scene then. Jonah, after preaching one day (3:4) leaves the city and goes to the top of a hill to enjoy a nice view of the fireworks that will surely accompany Nineveh's doom. Eventually, after forty days nothing happens and he realizes that God has forgiven the city. Therefore his anger (4:1-4). And here comes the scene of the castor-oil plant (4:6-9):

⁶ The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush⁷. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live"⁹. But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die".

In v. 6 the narrator uses the unusual designation Lord God. After that he will use the appellation "God," and no longer "Lord". The reason for this choice are unknown

and exegetes have not really solved this problem. Usually the word "God" is used only by pagans or for pagans (1:6; 3:4b, 5, 9). Is now all of a sudden Jonah treated as a pagan? This is far from evident, however.

More interesting is the meaning of the scene. God enables Jonah to make an experience of joy and mercy. In v. 6 we read that "Jonah rejoiced with a great joy" – at long last Jonah is happy! This is the very first time in the narrative. And he is happy because of a plant... When the castor-oil plant dies, when Jonah has to stand a strong east wind¹⁸ and the sun beats his (boiling) head, Jonah wants to die again, as in 4:3. God's question in 4:9a repeats the question in 4:4, just as Jonah's anger in 4:9b is parallel to his anger in 4:1. All these indications clearly show that we are again at the same point, but for a different reason. The first time Jonah wanted to die because Nineveh had not been destroyed. This time, because a plant has just died. The parallelism must be clear, perhaps not for Jonah, but for the reader.

Now we are ready for the last blow:

¹⁰ Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the plant, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

The question is clear. This time the narrator uses again the appellation "the Lord". Perhaps because he wants the Lord, the God of Israel, to be the one to utter this last question. The parallelism is clear too. Jonah has mercy on a plant, God has mercy on human beings (and animals, i.e. living beings). Is God right? What could be Jonah's answer? Or what should be Jonah's answer? And who is supposed to answer the question if the narrative does not contain any? Other question: who is Jonah, after all? If somebody answers the first question, he or she is able to answer the second too.

CONCLUSION

Let me say a last word to round off these few reflections. We may have passed several times judgment on Jonah. We might have felt antipathy, or pity, and we may have smiled several times. What is our opinion about Jonah at the end of the story? Another question: and how does God deal with Jonah? Why is he so patient, slow to anger...? Then how *should* we deal with Jonah according to the story itself? Eventually, who has to convert? We saw that we may have been wrong when we guessed the reason why Jonah fled to Tarshish. We had to revise and correct our opinion in 4:1-4. We may have to revise our opinion in the end of the story too.

¹⁸ The famous *hamsin* in the Middle-East, or the *scirocco* in Italy. In Arabic *hamsin* means "fifty" because this wind usually blows for fifty hours.

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