The God of Love in the Old Testament

Jonah


Of the many interpretations of the Book of Jonah, the theme of God as a God of compassion unlocks the all. Jonah’s debate with God is ultimately about this compassion that appears to fly in the face of justice, that forgives instead punishing people.

The Old Testament God is the God of Jesus Christ, the God whom Jesus addressed intimately as “Abba.” All his earthly life Jesus prayed to this God, who “causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked as well” (Matt 5:45). This God has a consistent character and did not change between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The definition of this God is Love. The God of Jonah is the God of love.

Invariably students coming to my course, Introduction to the Old Testament, have to be disabused of the idea that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and strict justice. They are surprised to learn during the course that the God of the Old Testament is a God of loving covenants, a God of forgiveness and compassion for human weakness. What is called “wrath” is only the obverse side

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of a jealous and burning love, a love that never abandons one, even in sin. Heschel put his finger on the pulse when he writes:

God's concern is the prerequisite and source of His anger. It is because He cares for [human beings] that His anger may be kindled against [human beings]. Anger and mercy are not opposites but correlatives. (63)

Heschel further writes:

The wrath of God is a lamentation. All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned, He is personally affected by what [human beings] do to [each other]. He is a God of pathos. This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference. (64)

The purpose of this article is to show that the God of the story of Jonah is a God who pursues people with compassion and love.

Some Interpretations of the Book of Jonah

This book of four chapters has received diverse readings throughout the centuries and especially in our time. For many, and this seems to be the dominant Jewish tradition, it is a treatise on the great value of repentance. Jonah is the text for the afternoon service on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year for Jews.

Many modern exegetes read this book as a protest against particularism, especially the particularism of Ezra and Nehemiah. In this interpretation, Jonah symbolizes the Israel of the time, who saw itself as “holy seed” to be preserved from all meaningful contact with the outside world.

Another current of exegesis sees the book rather as satire against prophets and prophecy—Jonah is proven a false prophet and does not even match the piety of the non-believers in the story!

Simon and Fretheim are among scholars who believe that the story is about a theological conflict between Jonah and his God. Simon outlines the issue as follows: “mercy undermines the force of justice by detracting from the certainty of punishment” (35). It thus contributes to moral confusion in the world. Fretheim had Jonah arguing that “if God is not going to relate [Godself] to people in ways that are consistent with their conduct, then God is capricious and life is absurd” (17). No wonder the prophet had only death wishes when Nineveh was spared: “so now *YHWH*, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as go on living” (Jonah 4:3).

This little book in fact contains all these shades of meaning, but it seems to me that the key that unlocks them all is that of God as a God of compassion.
The Word of YHWH Came to Jonah, Saying . . .

Jonah is never explicitly called a prophet in this story. However, the prophetic message formula (“the word of YHWH came to x”) is used to send him on his mission: “The word of YHWH came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying: Arise! Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against her; for their evil has come up before me.” Jonah arose promptly, but instead of going east he set his face steadfastly toward the west, to flee from the presence of YHWH. But he was escaping from God only to run into God! YHWH hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a great storm came upon the sea that the ship thought it would break up. The “pagan” sailors made frantic efforts to save their lives and the ship; they prayed persistently to their gods, only for the captain to discover Jonah fast asleep in the hold of the ship! Exhausted, they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. To their question what to do with him, he said, “take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will calm down for you” (Jonah 1:12). No sooner was Jonah cast into the sea than the sea became calm. YHWH appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish.

Then Jonah Prayed to YHWH His God from the Belly of the Fish

In the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed, “out of my distress I cried out to YHWH, and he answered me” (Jonah 2:3). We expected a prayer of deliverance, Jonah uttered one of thanksgiving! Scholars continue to debate whether this is the second of two prayers, or whether the entire psalm-like prayer was lifted from somewhere else because of images of drowning in the midst of the deep, ignoring other images that betray a different setting. Anyway, God responds by commanding the fish to deposit Jonah on the shore, back to where he began. There the word of God came a second time: “Up, go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to it as I shall tell you” (Jonah 3:1).

This time Jonah went and proclaimed, “only forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). The people of Nineveh, from the king down to commonest person, and even the animals, did penance in sackcloth and ashes. Seeing their efforts God relented and did not bring on the disaster. Jonah was indignant. He prayed, “YHWH, isn’t this what I said would happen when I was still in my own country? . . . so now, YHWH, please take my life, for I might as well be dead as to go on living.” It turns out that Jonah was protesting aspects of YHWH’s own self-disclosure at Exodus 34:6. Exodus 34:6 presented YHWH as merciful and gracious, but by no means clearing the guilty. Jonah would agree with this. What he recoiled at was God as “ready to relent from punishing” (the contrasting confessions are marked in bold).
YHWH replied, “Are you right to be angry?” Jonah wanted to see the end of it. He made himself a shelter and sat to the east of the city. YHWH caused a plant to grow overnight to give him shade from the heat. Then suddenly YHWH had a worm attack the plant, and it died. Jonah was very angry and begged to die. YHWH seized upon Jonah’s pity for the plant to remonstrate with him, show him reason for pardoning the city. The summary is “they are mine, I feel for them.”

I shall now draw out the characters in this artful story.

**Jonah**

This prophet seemed to believe that he could flee from the presence of YHWH! In this effort he made a threefold descent into self-imprisonment: to the shore, down to the ship, and into the hold of the ship. There he became assimilated to the cargo, one of the burdens the ship had to carry. As the pagan sailors prayed to their gods during the storm, Jonah was fast asleep. Queried by the sailors he professed that he worshiped YHWH, who made the sea and dry land. The usual

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<th>Jonah 4:2</th>
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<td>• gracious God and merciful</td>
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<td>• Abounding in steadfast love (<em>hesed</em>)</td>
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<td><strong>Ready to relent from punishing</strong></td>
<td>• Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin</td>
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<td><strong>Yet by no means clearing the guilty</strong>, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children . . . to the third and fourth generation</td>
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| • That was a small tendril plant                                        | • Nineveh is a great city                                                 |
| • A lone plant                                                          | • More than 120,000 innocent people, and animals besides                  |
| • You did not grow it                                                   | • I tended these people and animals, made them grow                       |
| • You did not labor for it in any way                                   | • I labored for them, nurtured them                                       |
| • It appeared and perished overnight                                   | • Their nurture took me many years, even generations                      |
confession is “who made the heavens and the earth.” If Jonah recognized God’s dominion over land and sea, what was he up to, fleeing from God over land and sea? The only solution he could suggest to the sailors was that they throw him into the sea, and the sea would quiet down for them. Why not repent and offer to go to his mission? In his “prayer” he castigated those who worshiped vain idols, thus forsaking their _hesed_ (loyalty, Jonah 2:9), when he was no better. He ended the prayer with “deliverance comes from YHWH” (Jonah 2:10). Deliverance for unrepentant Jonah is good, deliverance for the repentant Ninevites is evil? And we learn finally (Jonah 4:2) that his refusal to go in the first place was because he feared the compassion of YHWH would be quick to relent and forgive.

**The “Pagan” Sailors**

These sailors know to pray to their gods when under storm. The captain even teaches Jonah to pray to his god! They are reluctant to take human life, even the life of one who professes guilt before God. They threw Jonah into the water only after due supplication to YHWH not to find them guilty of shedding innocent blood. They even made vows of sacrifices to YHWH! Jonah does not come off well in comparison with these “who worship idols.”

**The People of Nineveh**

Hearing the proclamation of Jonah, these people “believed God.” That is, they accepted Jonah’s word as word of God, accepted their guilt and did penance. “Who knows?” (Jonah 3:9) is a cry that put God in the right should God punish, but which still hoped that God would relent. They knew and accepted the nature of God better than Jonah. The king left his throne to sit in ashes and commanded all, including animals, to dress in sackcloth and neither to eat nor to drink.

**The Lord**

YHWH is in relentless pursuit of Jonah, harnessing wind, fish, plant, worm, heat, and scorching wind. God’s dominion of nature and all its forces is plain to see. Yet, such mighty power can stoop to human need. At the least sign of conversion in the people and animals of Nineveh, this mighty God relented about punishing. Jonah was not happy. God cornered him, reasoned with him, asked him only questions to appeal to his better sense: “Are you right to be angry about the plant?” For, if you feel so much for the plant, you should feel even more for the innocent thousands of Nineveh. You should know how the demise of a loved one or loved ones feels. The compassion of this God is not only for human beings; it includes even animals. The compassion is not prefaces on their value and goodness. God
appears to say, “Guilty and evil though they are, they are mine, and I have invested in them; looking beyond their crime I can see that they ‘cannot tell their right hand from their left.’”

**Compassion that Flies in the Face of Justice?**

Jonah’s debate with God is ultimately about this compassion that appears to fly in the face of justice, that forgives instead punishing people adequately for their evil. In his very rejection, Jonah gives us a good image of the nature of this God.

YHWH is **hannun**, gracious, confers favor. This means that God’s relation with people bypasses the question of merit and what people deserve. The innards of God are denoted as **raḥem**. Now, **raḥem** is the woman’s womb, and the Hebrew adjective strains to describe the tender emotions of a mother toward her baby and the anguish she feels when her baby is in any danger. God is “slow to anger,” the Hebrew word meaning literally “long in breath,” longsuffering. Short and heavy breaths are the mark of an angry person; long and drawn-out breaths mark a conciliating figure. God is not quick to take offence, is not looking for excuses in order to punish, but is rather peaceable. God is rich in **hesed**. There is no precise English equivalent for this word. The versions have “faithful love,” “loyal love,” “kindness,” “mercy.” The sense is one of loyal and tenacious faithfulness to the demands of a deep and personal relationship. The word also comports an element of grace, not measure for measure. It denotes YHWH as a friend always there for one. That YHWH relents about inflicting evil is actually a reversal of the creed in Exodus 34:6! This passage had God “by no means clearing the guilty.” That is, gracious and merciful, yes, but punishment must always follow for one’s evil, to the third and fourth generation. The knowledge of the nature of God has grown since Exodus. In Jonah’s profession of faith, the punitive side of God has disappeared: all is love. What is usually called the wrath of God is no part of the nature of God, only a contingent response of God to evil. And such response always aims at the redemption of the evildoer. “The wrath of God is a lamentation,” says Heschel. So YHWH has the last word:

and should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals? (Jonah 4:11)
References

