

Jonah, the First Palestinian Liberation Theologian

Because I began reading the Bible as a boy long before I went to seminary to study theology, I was already grounded in knowledge of the Bible. My father trained me to read through the entire Old Testament once every year and the New Testament twice, as he used to do. He said it was central to my faith.

The book of Genesis and parts of Exodus were fun. Leviticus and Deuteronomy were boring, but part of the book of Numbers contained stories I enjoyed. The stories in the books of Joshua and Judges were interesting, but when I got to the prophets I had to plow through page after page of material that I did not enjoy and could not understand. In the midst of what appeared to me to be a barren land, I arrived at the oasis of Jonah, which I found refreshing. The book of Jonah comprises four short chapters. It is a beautiful story that is simple enough for children. On the surface, it did not seem as profound as Isaiah or Jeremiah, but I felt it was a story I could understand, a light narrative placed in the midst of a string of prophetic books that were wordy and often dull. My young imagination ran wild as I thought of Jonah in the middle of the storm at sea and in the belly of a whale.

As I grew older, the most difficult part of the story was the big fish. Was the story historically true? I was brought up to believe that if it is written in the Bible, it must be true and literally so. God is able to do anything, after all. I remember discussing this story with my friends. If any doubted the historicity of the story I would jump to the defense of the Bible. I felt this was my duty as a Christian. I still remember once reading a story in the newspaper that intimated that a person could actually survive in the belly of a whale. I clipped it and showed it to my friends to prove the credibility of the Bible. Many similar stories have circulated throughout history, especially among maritime people, of whales and sea monsters swallowing people and throwing them out alive; some people have seen those stories as evidence for the historicity of Jonah.

JONAH AND THE BOOK

Before turning to the heart of the message of Jonah, three points are crucial:

1. First, the gospels include two references to Jonah. In Matthew 12:38-41, Jesus uses the experience of Jonah in the belly of the big fish as a sign of his death and resurrection: “For just as Jonah was 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.” Then in Luke 11:29-32, Jesus refers to Jonah as leading the people of Nineveh to repentance: “For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. . . . The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah.” Apparently, the text of Jonah must have been popular at that time. As very few prophets are mentioned by name in the New Testament, it is significant that Jonah, a minor prophet, is among them.

2. Approximately three miles north of the city of Nazareth in Galilee is a small village called Al-mashhad; traditionally known as Gath-hepher, it is the home village of Jonah. In this Muslim village, villagers point to the tomb of the prophet Jonah who is known to them as Yunes or Nabi (prophet) Yunes. The village mosque is built over the tomb of Jonah.

It is fascinating to speculate why Jonah is then overlooked in the Gospel of John as a prophet from Galilee. When the chief priests and the Pharisees sent their men to apprehend Jesus (John 7:45-52) and they returned without him, the leaders were upset and asked, “Why did you not arrest him?” When a discussion ensued about the pros and cons of arresting Jesus, Nicodemus, one of the elders, pointed to the importance of interrogating Jesus before pronouncing any sentence against him. The Pharisees and the chief priests then replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee” (John 7:52).

Although one ancient manuscript reads “*the* prophet will not come” from Galilee, greater textual evidence suggests that the passage should instead read “no prophet ever comes” from Galilee.¹ If this is the case and the text is referring to any prophet and not the messiah in particular, then one wonders if the Pharisees had forgotten that Jonah was also from Galilee. Or was Jonah so insignificant that even the chief priests and the Pharisees in Jerusalem had forgotten his origins?

3. Besides the book of Jonah, the only other mention in the Old Testament of the prophet Jonah is in 2 Kings.

In the fifteenth year of King Amaziah son of Joash of Judah, King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel began to reign in Samaria; he reigned forty-one years. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he caused Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebohamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. (14:23-25)

In other words, Jonah prophesied that Israel (the northern kingdom) would reconquer all of the territory that it had lost from the north down to the Dead Sea. When one combines this text with the book of Jonah, it is possible to surmise, as some scholars have, that the man Jonah must have been remembered as a patriotic prophet who represented a narrow Israelite jingoism.²

To drive his lesson home in an ingenious way, the writer of the book of Jonah chose a prophet with a nationalist streak as a main character and chose as a setting the nation of Assyria, which was remembered as the deadliest enemy of Israel. In 722 BCE it was Assyria that destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel where Jonah presumably lived. It is easy, therefore, to understand why a patriotic prophet like Jonah would refuse to go to any place in Assyria, let alone Nineveh, its capital, in order to preach a message of repentance that carried within it the possibility of God's mercy.

The writer shows how Jonah, an ardent nationalist who harbored deep contempt for the Assyrians, wished for their total destruction. As an Israelite nationalist, Jonah's deepest feelings against the Assyrians could be described by the words of the prophet Nahum; Nahum's entire book celebrates the fall and destruction of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire around the end of the seventh century BCE. Nahum viewed the destruction of Nineveh as God's judgment against Israel's most oppressive enemy.³ Instead of eagerly hoping for the repentance of the Ninevites, Jonah wished to celebrate its destruction. Jonah would have echoed the words of Nahum:

Doomed is the lying and murderous city,
Full of wealth to be looted and plundered!
Listen! The crack of the whip,
the rattle of wheels,
the gallop of horses,
the jolting of chariots!
Horsemen charge,
swords flash, spears gleam!
Corpses are piled high,
dead bodies without number—
Men stumble over them!
Nineveh the whore is being punished.
Attractive and full of deadly charms,
She enchanted nations and enslaved them.
The LORD Almighty says,
“I will punish you, Nineveh!
I will strip you naked and let the nations see you,
See you in all your shame.
I will treat you with contempt
and cover you with filth.
People will stare at you in horror.

All who see you will shrink back.
 They will say, 'Nineveh lies in ruins!
 Who has any sympathy for her?
 Who will want to comfort her?'” (Nahum 3:1-7,
 Today's English Version)

THE STORY

The story begins with God asking Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh in order to preach against the evil ways of its people and to call them to repentance. Instead of going east toward Nineveh (in present-day Iraq), Jonah went west to Jaffa, the main seaport of Palestine, where he boarded a ship sailing to Spain. At sea a great storm raged, threatening everyone on board. The sailors tried to lighten the load by throwing things overboard, and everyone prayed to the gods but to no avail. Finally, the sailors cast lots to determine whose fault it was, and the lot fell on Jonah. He confessed that he had disobeyed his God and that the only way to survive the storm was to throw him into the sea. After deliberating, they did just that and the sea became calm.

God prepared a big fish to swallow Jonah. For three days, Jonah remained in the belly of the fish while praying for mercy and affirming his faith in God. At the end of that time, the fish spit Jonah up on the beach. God asked him once more to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. This time Jonah made the journey to Nineveh and proclaimed that unless the people repented in forty days God would destroy their city. The story reports that all people of Nineveh repented, from the king to the lowliest. They put on sackcloth, fasted, prayed, and turned away from their evil ways. God accepted their repentance, had mercy on them, and did not destroy the city.

When Jonah saw this, he was very angry and asked God to end his life. He said, "I knew that you are a patient and merciful God and you will change your mind and not punish those who repent, that is why I fled from your face and did not want to go to Nineveh." Angrily Jonah went to the outskirts of the city and sat there waiting to see what would happen.

God made a castor bean plant or a gourd to grow quickly to shade Jonah from the hot sun. Jonah was pleased with the shadow of the plant. Then the next day God sent a worm that ate the roots of the plant and it immediately withered away and died. When the hot sun struck Jonah's head he became very angry and again wished he were dead. Then God asked Jonah, "What right do you have to be angry about the plant?" Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry—angry enough to die." God replied, "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't make it grow—yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city? After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!" And then the story ends abruptly, leaving the reader and hearer to draw out its meaning.

The traditional interpretation of the book usually centers on Jonah's God-assigned mission to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh and the way in which Jonah disobeyed God and fled from God's face. But, as the psalmist says, it is impossible to hide from God:

“Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.” (Ps. 139:7-10)

God had to teach Jonah the great lesson of obedience. After Jonah's experience in the belly of the whale, he obeyed God, journeyed to Nineveh, and successfully completed his mission. When the people of Nineveh repented, the Lord was merciful and spared the city from destruction. God is indeed merciful and loving toward all. God has “no pleasure in the death of anyone,” and “if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all [God's] statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die” (Ezek. 18:32, 21). The book of Jonah has served as a powerful resource for foreign missions, which is one way church tradition has regarded this story.

Modern biblical scholarship interprets the book of Jonah as an allegory, similar to the parables of Jesus in the New Testament. Its deeper meaning emphasizes God's care and concern for Jews, but equally for non-Jews—in other words, the inclusive nature of God. I interpreted the story of Jonah in this light in my first book.⁴ Since then, after much more reflection, I understand the text in a more radical and revolutionary way. My experience has been like that of the blind man who cried out after being healed by Jesus—“I was blind but now I can see”—or, even more poignantly, the blind man whom Jesus healed in Bethsaida, a village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus put saliva on his eyes, laid his hands on him, and then asked, “Can you see anything?” The blind man answered, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” When Jesus again put his hands on his eyes his full sight was restored and he was able to see everything clearly. I felt this same excitement and delight in sensing the power of the story of Jonah in the context of Old Testament theology and its relevance to the Palestine/Israel conflict today.

The story of Jonah can be a significant resource for peacemaking and for arriving at a solution to today's Middle East conflict. It also addresses basic theological problems that still face us today. For me, the writer of Jonah appears to be the first Palestinian liberation theologian, someone who has written the greatest book in the Old Testament. While Jonah truly reflects the

genius and climax of Old Testament theology, its theology also approaches most closely that of the New Testament.

To the credit of the Hebrew religion the book was retained and included in the canon. With its deep critique of the narrow nationalism of the day, how did this book survive? Did Jews really understand the revolutionary nature of its message? Or was it a story that was so attractive that the tradition could not dispose of it?

Scholars tell us that the story was most likely not written in the eighth century BCE when the historical Jonah, the prophet of Gath-hepher, presumably lived. Due to its literary style and the extensive use of Aramaic words, many scholars suggest that the book was most likely written much later, probably toward the end of the fourth century BCE.⁵ If that is the case, then it is probably one of the last, if not the last, books of the Old Testament to be written. If that is so, then it would not be unreasonable to think that it best articulates, in parable form, the theology that stands as the zenith of Old Testament theology.

Years ago I read G. Ernest Wright's book, *The Old Testament against Its Environment*.⁶ Wright concludes that the Old Testament came to an end without a definite solution to the question of salvation (110-12). While that still holds, I believe that Jonah provides a theological climax that points where authentic theology should be going.

THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF JONAH

The gifted writer of Jonah begins with his life context, as a liberation theologian might do. He assesses the religious situation of his day (the signs of the times), and concludes that it has become desperate. If the author were writing between 400 and 200 BCE, he was in a position to assess the dramatic historical changes that affected his country,⁷ starting with the devastation of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians (722 BCE) and followed by the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (586 BCE). In both cases, most of the people who formed the elite were taken into exile. In fact, Jeremiah described those who were taken to exile as a basket of good figs and those who remained in the land as a basket of bad figs (Jer. 24).

Later, when the Persians came to power, the Jews could return to Palestine. Although some did so sporadically, many stayed. Those who returned found that Palestine had undergone significant demographic changes during their years of exile. There was a greater ethnic and racial mix of people living in the country. The work to rebuild the walls and restore the temple in Jerusalem did not proceed as smoothly as they had hoped as they encountered resistance. They tried to protect their community by turning inward. Nehemiah and Ezra emphasized the purity of Jewish blood, which led to conflicts with some people in the land, especially the Samaritans. Some leaders and prophets of the time

began to use narrow, exclusive language. Instead of exercising greater tolerance, they became more legalistic and narrow-minded. On one hand, some voices did advocate universalism and a greater acceptance of diversity. On the other hand, competing voices expressed bigotry and a narrow nationalism. Prophecies of the judgment and subjugation of the nations competed with prophecies of a peaceful and voluntary pilgrimage of the nations to the mountain of Zion to learn God's word.

In essence, the writer of Jonah seems aware that some positive theological developments gained during the exile, including important expressions of universalism expressed by Second Isaiah and others, were being replaced by a narrow xenophobia within the community. Instead of a more universalistic view of openness to others, the propensity was for bigotry and racism.

In order to address this critical situation, Jonah's author chose as his main character the prophet Jonah, a believer in ethnic nationalism. The choice of a narrative, a story, seems a literary convenience for the author; it was a vehicle for addressing the people of his day with a revolutionary theology that critiqued their narrowness and called them to a genuine and authentic faith in God. The writer focused on three areas: a theology of God, a theology of the people of God, and a theology of land.

A Theology of God

In the book of Jonah, God is the one God, the creator of the world and the Lord of history: "the God of heaven, who made land and sea" (1:9). God is sovereign over and above all. God is not limited to one country or to any one place but everywhere; no one can hide from God. When God asked Jonah to go eastward to Mesopotamia, Jonah headed westward instead, thinking he could flee. But no matter where he might go, there was no place in the universe where Jonah could escape the presence of God. Jonah discovered that God was in the depths of the sea. Indeed, the sea and all that is in it as well as all of nature obey God, its creator and ruler. For Jonah, God is a "gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (4:2). God is a liberator and a savior of oppressed and sinful people, and a God of justice who demands just living from all people.

Some time ago, a Jewish woman settler was interviewed on Israeli television. She was asked, "Doesn't it bother you to be living on somebody else's land?" She answered simply in a straightforward manner, "If it doesn't bother God, why should it bother me?" The basic flaw in such an attitude is its limited conception of God. The settler's answer reduced God to a prejudiced and unfair god who is the prisoner of a particular group. However, when God takes the initiative to act in the world, God calls all people who do wrong and commit evil to repentance and seeks their salvation and liberation. God shows no partiality to any culture or nation or race or ethnic group. God's love encompasses all of humanity, not just the people of Jonah. God listens to anyone who turns to him in earnest prayer. In the story of Jonah, even

the heathen sailors turned to God in prayer (1:16). The story of Jonah is a description of God that critiques any narrow or nationalist understanding.

A Theology of the People of God

The essence of the story of Jonah is that God's people are not restricted to Israel. Those who speak of God's chosen people and limit the chosen to Israel have an inadequate theology of the people of God. It is not sufficient to believe that God cares about and shows compassion for other "decent" people: God's love, care, and compassion extend even to the Assyrians, the deadliest enemies of Israel. It is important to recall that the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel took place in 722 BCE at the hands of the Assyrians. From their power base in Nineveh, the capital, the Assyrians destroyed Israel and then captured the elite and scattered them throughout their empire. Samaria was completely devastated. The story of Jonah announces provocatively that even the ugly, savage, and brutal beasts called the Assyrians fall within the care and embrace of a God who shows concern for their well-being.

The author of Jonah tackled one of the most difficult issues that faced the community. In many ways his message intended to liberate God from the narrow theology of the day and liberate his people, the Israelites, from a tribal mentality that produced arrogance, haughtiness, and presumptuousness. They needed to wake up to the fact that God is the God of all and that they constitute but one small part of the people of God. God cannot be boxed in by such a closed and narrow theology.

A Theology of the Land

The theology of the land presented in the book of Jonah is as revolutionary as the book's theology of God and God's people. God's activity and presence are not limited to one land. God could not be confined or contained within the boundaries of the little land of Israel. Indeed, the exile stretched many people's concepts of the land. The psalmist notes that the exiles cried out, "How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:4). The prophet Jeremiah's response was that they should build homes in Babylon, get married, have children, and pray to God. He even commanded the exiles to pray for the leaders of Babylon so that all could live in peace (Jer. 29). God could no longer be perceived as a tribal god contained within a small geographic location. The psalmist celebrated God, the creator of the entire world: "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (24:1). No matter where one lives, one is still in the presence of God. Some postexilic prophets did express such a universal view, and even before the exile the prophet Amos expressed God's concern for other lands and other people.

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the LORD.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from
Kir? (Amos 9:7)

In the contemporary conflict over the land, people must understand that a comprehensive biblical theology of land is inclusive rather than exclusive. The message of the two testaments together moves clearly toward a greater inclusiveness. Those who still hold to an exclusive view must be prodded forward. When appeals are made to international law or U.N. resolutions on behalf of the human and political rights of the Palestinians and the answer is that “We are interested in divine rights and not human rights,” the reference is to an exclusive interpretation of the Bible that gives the Jewish people a higher and prior claim. Such a theology does not lend itself to peace and must be rejected on both exegetical and theological grounds.

WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF JONAH TO THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT?

The theological message of the book of Jonah is so profound that many people miss its impact due to the simplicity of the narrative. It seems so mundane and humorous at times that many might miss its radical implications. Its impact is similar to Jesus’ use of parables: as Jesus reminded his disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that ‘they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven’ ” (Mark 4:11-12). The cynical ending of this quotation from Isaiah describes the apathy and the hardness of heart of people who have no interest in the challenge to repent and turn to God.

The story of Jonah is read each year on the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in Jewish synagogues throughout the world. Apparently, Jews perceive it as the only story in the Hebrew Bible in which God extends forgiveness to an entire community. Do Jews today understand the revolutionary nature of the story or its implications for modern-day Israel and its relationship with Palestinians? How do they understand and respond to its message today? Furthermore, how do Christian Zionists, most of whom are fundamentalists who surely know the story of Jonah, interpret and understand the story of Jonah? How can they read the text and still maintain a narrow theology of God, of the people of God and of the land?

The message of Jonah has great relevance for those of us who live in Israel-Palestine as it addresses the core religious and theological issues underlying the conflict. Many religious Jews continue to see themselves in a special rela-

tionship with God: they are God's chosen people, God belongs to them alone, and the entire land of Palestine is their eternal patrimony from God. They are unwilling to even entertain the idea of sharing the land with the Palestinians. In essence, what the author of the book of Jonah was battling against at the end of the fourth century BCE still constitutes the main theological problems we Palestinians face in the conflict today. In the name of an antiquated tribal theology that still insists on a special Jewish god, on the privileges of a special people of God, and on a unique Jewish right to the whole land of Palestine, the Palestinians are oppressed and dehumanized, and their claim to the land on which many families have lived for centuries is negated.

Christian Zionists who have placed the Jewish people at the center of God's plan for history have been complicit. Instead of seeing Christ at the center of God's purpose for history, they see Israel. Although secular Zionism brought about the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, a gradual shift began to take place after the 1967 war as the more conservative religious Jews grew in power. Ten years after the war they won the national election and assumed political leadership in Israel through the right-wing Likud party. This shift was the beginning of a new and special relationship between the government of Israel and fundamentalist Christians in the United States.

Today a strong alliance in the United States brings together Christian and Jewish Zionists with right-wing political conservatives in Washington. Together they dictate American foreign policy in the Middle East and lobby for the military, political, and financial supremacy of Israel. Some Christian fundamentalists ultimately have an anti-Jewish theological agenda in that they believe that at the end of history two-thirds of the Jews will be massacred and the remainder will be converted to the Christian faith. Obviously, Jews do not like this scenario, but they tolerate it in the face of a higher objective: they need the wholehearted support of these millions of fundamentalist Christians committed to the welfare of the state of Israel and the Jewish people, come what may.

Jewish religious extremists and Christian Zionists both advocate the expulsion and transfer of Palestinians from Palestine into Jordan. This form of ethnic cleansing through annihilation or expulsion of the indigenous people of the land is actually suggested in the Hebrew scriptures, as in the book of Numbers when God gives Moses instructions to pass along to the Israelites: "When you cross over the Jordan into the Land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all of their high places. You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess" (33:51-53).⁸ As is amply clear, the theological underpinnings of such a position are exactly what the author of Jonah condemned centuries before. The message of Jonah is as relevant today as it was then.

For Christians, the theological message of Jonah can serve as a bridge that links the Old Testament with the New. The New Testament actually intensifies the basic message of Jonah. At every turn Jesus tried to shatter

any exclusive and narrow concepts of God, the people of God, and the land. God is a God who loves and cares for all, a God who has sanctified the whole world through creation, incarnation, and redemption. It is wrong to restrict God's love. The beliefs of Christian and Jewish Zionists betray the nature, character, and knowledge of God.

The book of Jonah refutes and condemns all narrow, restrictive, or exclusive theologies. Although written over two thousand years ago, it is as relevant in its message today as it was then. Jonah's actual message is exciting and liberating and provides a fitting climax for Old Testament theology. Could it have possibly been written by a woman liberation theologian who cut across every religious taboo?⁹ For us Palestinian Christians, it is our spiritual and theological life line. Thank God for Jonah!