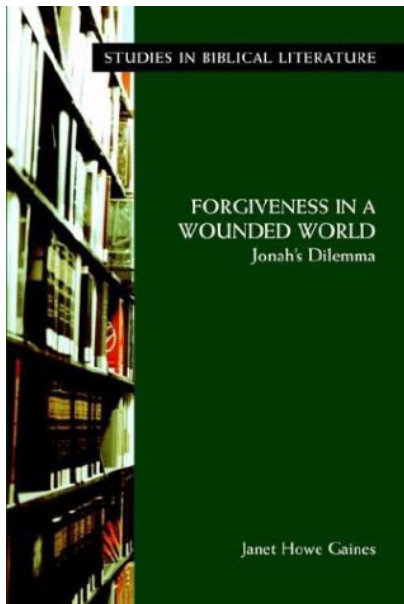


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Gaines, Janet Howe

Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma

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One of the great theological tasks of the modern and postmodern worlds has been the effort to maintain the Bible's relevance in a world that is radically different from that of the biblical authors. It is not implausible to say that this motivation is the impetus for the majority of biblical scholarship. Among the issues tackled by exegetes is how to reconcile the biblical understanding of God with modern theological notions of tolerance, inherent human dignity, and autonomy. Yet this task has not been easy, and exegetes and theologians alike have encountered difficulties in the stubbornly resistant ancient texts of the Bible that portray God as a divine patron of a particular people, who responds to disobedient clients with punishment and redress of grievances.¹ This has led some to abandon altogether the hope of finding theological significance in the modern world from the Bible's ancient religious understandings, while others have used postmodernist

1. The phrase, "difficult texts of the Bible" is often used for these awkward features of the biblical portrait of God; cf., e.g., W. Kaiser, P. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and M. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999). The larger issue at stake here is what has come to be known as the problem of Biblical Theology; for a comprehensive description and incisive analysis of this, see J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

hermeneutical strategies to read the text against the grain in order to find ongoing meaning.²

It is in this scholarly milieu that modern readings of the book of Jonah are found. It has become axiomatic that Jonah is teaching a universalist understanding of the God of Israel, who is revealed to be concerned for the fate of all humanity.³ Jonah the prophet, then, represents those in the author's Israelite audience who would begrudge God's love to outsiders. Janet Howe Gaines's reading of Jonah uses literary-critical, theological, and psychological analysis to demonstrate that Jonah challenges the reader to acknowledge and, ultimately to imitate, the radical forgiveness of God. As Gaines puts it: "the Israelite narrator forcefully reiterates throughout the book of Jonah the essential lesson that no one should begrudge or try to control God's love, mercy, and forgiveness to all the peoples of the earth" (124). Thus, the dilemma referred to in the book's title is that which Jonah (and by extension readers of the biblical text) face at the end of Jonah: Will he too forgive the Ninevites, as God has done? Similarly, are we called to this kind of forgiveness. The question of forgiveness that Jonah raises, then, is connected as much with human forgiveness as it is with the forgiveness of God.

Gaines offers a sequential reading of the biblical text in dialogue with a range of biblical scholars, literary critics, and theologians. She sticks closely to the scholarly consensus that Jonah is most likely a postexilic tract about the universal scope of divine forgiveness. Because she often relies on a psychological reading of the text to help bridge the gap between the ancient author's world and that of the modern reader, Gaines provides some interesting new perspectives to Jonah. For example, in the midst of a discussion of the standard reading of the sailors as decent bystanders caught in the middle of a feud between a god and his prophet, Gaines quotes Elie Wiesel,⁴ who sees the sailors as willing accomplices with God in the abandonment of Jonah in the sea (52–53). Elsewhere she states that Jonah's sojourn in the fish represents his retreat into his own psyche, where his conscience will challenge him to repent and obey God (55). Or she interprets Jonah's experiences in the book through the five stages of initiation as applied to

2. This discussion is most explicit in the field of feminist criticism; cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Struggle is a Name for Hope: A Critical Feminist Interpretation for Liberation," *Pacifica* 10 (1997): 224–48. An example of the call to abandon the Bible as hopelessly patriarchal is D. Hampson, *After Christianity* (London: SCM, 1996); on the other hand, J. Claassens draws on the reading theory of Mikhail Bakhtin to read specific biblical passages as depicting God by means of feminine imagery (*The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2004]). For the same debate about the Bible in regards to modern theological views on warfare, see the discussion in T. Bolin, "Warfare," in *The Biblical World* (ed. J. Barton; 2 vols.; London: Routledge, 2002), 2.33–52.

3. See the overview of exegesis on Jonah in E. Ben-Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTSup 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

4. *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

psychological healing (separation, purification, symbolic death, new knowledge, and rebirth [135]).

It is the book's final chapter, however, which ultimately is the most interesting in Gaines's analysis. There, she brings Jonah and its teaching on divine forgiveness into dialogue with two of the twentieth century's most heinous acts of human barbarism—the Holocaust and the South African apartheid system—as told by Simon Wiesenthal and Nelson Mandela. For Gaines, these two figures represent the ambiguity, and hence the crux, of Jonah's dilemma:

If at the end of the Bible story (4:10–11), Jonah's answer to God's unanswered question is “no,” the prophet resembles Wiesenthal and rabbinic tradition. If Jonah's response is “yes,” he is comparable to Mandela. Both twentieth-century men are principled individuals of international renown; both have valid and reasonable stances. So whom should a Jonah of today follow? If the two options were not of similar ethical strength and validity, there would be no dilemma in this wounded world. (137)

Wiesenthal's story recounts that, while still an inmate in a concentration camp, a dying SS officer asked him forgiveness for the atrocities he had committed against Jews. Wiesenthal's response to the request was to silently turn and walk away.⁵ Next she draws upon the experience of Nelson Mandela with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in postapartheid South Africa, which has stressed the need for repentance, direct confession if possible, and forgiveness. Gaines deftly shows how these two seemingly mutual exclusive options are in fact more alike than meets the eye. In the refusal of forgiveness for the SS officer by Wiesenthal, Gaines points out that in Jewish theology and tradition, one can only forgive a person who has been a *direct* cause of harm—a situation that did not obtain between Wiesenthal and the SS man. She further makes the distinction between the perfect forgiveness of God and the limited ability of human beings to forgive their malefactors. Turning now to the South African experience, Gaines notes that, while the experience of confession, forgiveness and reparation go a long way toward the healing process, it is nevertheless true that *nothing* can possibly make up for what some people have suffered and lost at the hands of others.

The end result of Gaines's juxtaposition of Jonah and the problem of evil in the modern world is that she manages to bring something new to the seemingly endless bibliography on this tiny biblical book. In particular, her critique of Christian supersessionist readings

5. Wiesenthal's account of this event, and the responses of several Jewish and Christian thinkers to it, are published in H. J. Cargas and B. V. Fetterman, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (rev. ed.; New York: Schocken, 1997).

of Jonah is cogently argued and appropriately forceful (see especially 93–94, 130–31). The novelty of Gaines’s reading, however, does not serve to mask the shortcomings of the standard scholarly interpretation of Jonah that she adopts, and I am loath to point out these shortcomings, since I am sympathetic to Gaines’s project. The following critiques, therefore, are more of the problems in the exegetical positions adopted by Gaines.⁶

First mention must go to Gaines’s understanding of the author’s choice of Nineveh as a means to have ancient readers face up to their hatred of the Assyrians: “[P]ostexilic Jews are challenged to overcome their antipathy toward the Assyrians and to see the whole world through the loving eyes of the Creator” (101). At first glance this seems like a feasible and sensible observation, until one ponders the implications of it and is confronted with the plausibility that *postexilic* Jerusalem Jews, ca. 500–450 B.C.E. would have *remembered* that the Assyrians destroyed Samaria (explicitly despised by postexilic Jerusalem Jews in Ezra-Nehemiah) in 721 B.C.E. and laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. Moreover, even though these readers would have “probably known” of the destruction of Nineveh itself by the Babylonians in 612 B.C.E. (90) they would *still* have hated the now nonexistent Assyrians for their crimes against their ancestors two centuries previously.⁷

6. This is not to say that there are not other problems with the book that do not touch on this issue. Mention must be made of the following claims: (1) That Jonah’s psalm in 2:3–10 “does not reference Jonah’s current precarious position inside the fish” (68) and has no element of despair. In actuality, Jonah references his distress three times in the psalm, using three different verbs for vocal utterance: (קָרָאתִי מַצְרָה) ... לִי אֶל־יְהוָה [v. 3a] מִבְּטֶן שָׂאוּל שָׁנַעְתִּי [v. 3b] ... וְיָגִי אֶמְרָתִי [v. 5]. Additionally, many commentators have read the psalm as ironic or even comical precisely *because* the references to the deep, waves, breakers, and even seaweed fit Jonah’s predicament a little too much (cf. A. Brenner, “Jonah’s Poem Out of and Within Its Context,” in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* [ed. P. Davies and D. Clines; JSOTSup 144; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 183–92). (2) That, “[t]he Book of Jonah may have been one of the first stories of seafaring woes” (63) a statement that ignores not only the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000 B.C.E.) papyrus that contains *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, but also the most obvious maritime adventure story in western culture, Homer’s *Odyssey*, episodes of which are referenced in ceramic artwork from the seventh century B.C.E. (3) That Jerome disputed the Christian reading of Jonah that saw in the book the prefigurement of the rejection of Israel and the election of the church (129). This is hard to fathom, given that the *opening line* of Jerome’s commentary on Jonah reads: “For the condemnation of Israel, Jonah is sent to the nations,” and that elsewhere in the commentary Jerome contrasts the faithful sailors to the faithless Jews, and sees in the saved Nineveh a type of the Church, while the plant destroyed by God is a type of rejected Judaism (see Y.-M. Duval, ed., *Jerome: Commentaire sur Jonas* [SC 323; Paris: Cerf, 1985] for Latin text and French translation). (4) While I am not one to be particularly fastidious about typographical errors in a book, necessity requires me to mention the misspelling of the Tetragrammaton on page 121 as יהוה, and the reference on page 16 to the Muslim writer Mirkhond as a “Mohammedan,” a term deemed offensive by most Muslims.

7. To make matters worse, Gains adds the erroneous historical observation that Nineveh “for a couple of millennia ... maintained its bloody stranglehold on the region” (84). The city was not made the capital of Assyria until the last century before its destruction, and before then it was best known for its temple to Ishtar. See, conveniently, A. K. Grayson, “Nineveh,” *ABD* 4:1118–19.

To this opinion, unfortunately now practically enshrined in scholarship on Jonah, several pointed questions must be directed: Why then does the author not use the eponym *Asshur* when speaking about the Assyrians, as does the remainder of the Hebrew Bible? In the wake of the return from exile, would it not have been more fitting to send Jonah to Babylon with a message of divine forgiveness? Why would not the postexilic Jerusalem audience of Jonah not have rejoiced to see Nineveh spared, given that the Assyrians had destroyed the hated city of Samaria? How can Jonah be teaching forgiveness, when the city itself has only a temporary reprieve?

Clearly, exegetes have read too much of Nahum into Jonah. In this regard, Gaines (83) uses the analogy of comparing the Assyrians and the attitude of ancient Jews toward them with Auschwitz and the response of modern Jews to the Holocaust and its Nazi perpetrators.⁸ I must admit some discomfort at such a comparison, made as it is between an evil with many of its victims still alive and a *hypothetical* original audience for a biblical book that exegetes have imagined to be as rabidly vengeful toward the city of Nineveh.

Related to this is the cognitive dissonance involved in trying to stress mercy and forgiveness as the overriding quality of God in the Hebrew Bible, despite the numerous stories that show God meting out punishment to the wicked. This forces Gaines to go to some lengths to maintain her theological position. For example, she cites as evidence of God's propensity for forgiveness the fact that he chose Moses, a murderer, to be the agent of deliverance for the Israelites in Egypt (154). However, she does not mention that also in the exodus story God intervenes to harden Pharaoh's heart for the sake of continued, gratuitous, divine wrath. And is not "the firstborn son of the prisoner in the dungeon" (Exod 12:29) slain by God an innocent bystander in the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptian elites?⁹

The absolute infeasibility of this viewpoint is nowhere better expressed than Gaines's observation that "God's wrath is perfect love's response to a wrongdoer's need for castigation" (157). While Gaines does, as many others have before her, use the parent-child analogy to explain why God's forgiveness does not obviate the need for

8. For other uses of this analogy, see C. Lewis, "Jonah—A Parable for Our Time," *Jud* 21 (1972): 159–63; and A. Lacocque and P.-E. Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981). I have discussed this further in T. M. Bolin, "'Should I Not Also Pity Nineveh?'—Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 67 (1995): 109–20.

9. So keen is Gaines to have the biblical text fit her theological assumptions that she describes the book of Job's intense struggle with theodicy as "a slight departure" from the remainder of the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of God (155).

punishment, the fact that most of the punishment in the biblical stories requires the lives of the malefactors renders the filial analogy completely invalid, if not absurd.

Recalling the issue of the Bible's relevance to modern life, Gaines's book provides a powerful witness that one can find questions such as the nature of forgiveness powerfully and creatively expressed in ancient texts. Yet *Jonah's Dilemma* equally shows how trying to find a satisfying answer to such questions in the Bible reveals in high relief the vast gulf that separates we who read these texts from those who wrote them.