

# Jonah — The Messenger Who Grumbled\*

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(Jonah's wickedness and the suffering of God —Jonah 4:1-11)

Jonah had turned about, Nineveh had turned about, God had turned about. We were given reason to rejoice over the first steps along the path of obedience, and we were given new hope for the world; but we were also roused to gratitude over the way God puts greater stress on mercy than on consistency.

How does Jonah react to the compassion shown by God to Nineveh? Once again Jonah's portrait is held up before us like a mirror. His shocking "No!" to God comprises the first section of our closing chapter (4:1-3). The decisive middle section, however, shows us how God continues to grapple with him in spite of this (4-9). The question with which he is dismissed (Should I not have pity on Nineveh, vs. 10-11) is also addressed to all readers of the book to mull over.

## Jonah's Angry Reaction

1. Verse one concisely sums up Jonah's reaction to God's retraction of his threat of destruction: "This however displeased Jonah greatly." How important for our story is this tiny sentence! What the narrator really wants to say to us with these words can be grasped even more fully when we translate it word for word: "Then it was very wicked to Jonah, a great wickedness," (wayyera' el yona ra'a g'dol'a), or somewhat more simply: "Then Jonah became furious." Jonah thus is characterized with the

same word (ra a) which had been used immediately prior in 3:8-10 in the remarks concerning Nineveh and God. In 3:8 the edict of the king of Nineveh had decreed: "Let everyone turn from his *wicked* way" (middarko hara'a). According to 3:10 God saw "how they turned from their *wicked* way" (middarkam hara'a). Heathen Nineveh had thus turned away from wickedness (hara'a). And now God's own delegate is seized by this wickedness (hara'a). We heard concerning God in 3:10 that "he was sorry about the evil" (hara'a), which he had said he would do to them." Here the word evil refers to the disaster leveled at Nineveh; interestingly enough, the narrator employs the same Hebrew word he had used previously to describe the wickedness of Nineveh and which he would use subsequently to describe Jonah's displeasure. Thus, in picking up the word ra'a from 3:8 and 10, verse 4:1 rather bluntly expresses how enigmatic and disgusting Jonah's reaction is. Nineveh had turned away from its evil way, God had retracted his evil threat of punishment, but, precisely because of God's retraction, Jonah plunges into evil wickedness.

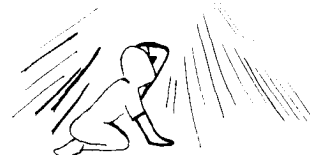
The contrast between Jonah and his employer, the Lord, is made even sharper as the plot develops. According to 3:9, Nineveh had hoped that God would "turn from his fierce anger" (meharon 'appo). In this hope Nineveh was not disappointed. But of Jonah we

learn from the sequel in 4:1 that "he became extremely angry" (wayyihar lo). We see Jonah react in the same way as when he took to flight (1:3) — once more in the strictest opposition to his God. Moreover, it's quite obvious that he has caused his God much more grief than have all the heathen combined. All previous events only provide the background for this dire emergency, which the book of Jonah insists on bringing to our attention. Our closing chapter is devoted exclusively to Jonah's opposition. We see it already in the repeated usage of the catch-words pulled from verse one. God goes on to do what he does in order to help Jonah out of what the Revised Standard Version calls "his discomfort" (v. 6) but what is really his *wickedness* (mera'ato). And in verses four and nine Jonah has to face the question: "Do you really have the right to be so angry?" (haheteb tiara lak). So with the remarks in 4:1 concerning the great wickedness and disgust of Jonah we have hit upon the central theme of the book. Jonah's reaction is incredible considering everything that he himself had experienced in his frustrated flight, especially incredible considering the turn-around of Nineveh, that great cosmopolitan center, from its wickedness. It's no wonder then that the narrator singles out the wickedness of Jonah in verse 1 as a "very great wickedness". (With the people of Nineveh in 1:2 the reference is only to "their wickedness" (ra'atam); Nineveh was called "great" only with respect to its dimensions; cf. 1:2a and

3:3b.) How much more easily God was able to conclude his business with the heathen sailors and with those notorious Assyrians than with this backsliding washout, the representative of God's people. Thus, in this essay, our discussion will concern the wickedness of God's people and of every one of his messengers.

### We Act Like Jonah

How are we to understand the riddle of Jonah's behavior? How can we *recognize* ourselves once more in the mirror of this book? Jonah's prayer in verse 2f., strangely enough, reveals the reason for his wickedness and his disgust. This prayer provides us with a glimpse into Jonah's muddled up spiritual life and his self-righteous obstinacy. "That's exactly what I thought even while I was still at home, and that's why I at first wanted to escape to Tarshish." This self-justification after the event is bolstered with correct biblical knowledge: "Yes, I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God... and that you change your mind about the evil." With this *creda* declaration, Jonah tries to justify his<sup>P</sup> treachery. And immediately thereafter he rebelliously indulges in melancholy longing for death: "I'd be better of dead than alive" (4:3). How is that for a atrocious concoction of exact theological knowledge and stubborn self-conceit, of impudent rebellion and worn-out depression. Gerhard von Rad characterized this prayer perfect when he called it "a religic



psychological monstrosity" which "lays bare a downright ghastly spiritual panorama."

In the midst of this heap of theological vocabulary, what really is the essential point? In the Hebrew text, a statement in the first person is made five times in verse 2 alone: "Yes, that's exactly what I thought, as I was still in my home; and that's *whyl* at first wanted to escape; for I knew ..." The same concentration on himself occurs four times in the short verse 3: "Lord, take my soul from *me*; for *my* death is better than *my* life." No less than nine times Jonah's ego finds expression. Certainly not the least significant portion of his great wickedness is his preoccupation with his own plight; for except for a short intermission, this is how he was from the very beginning: he was concerned only with himself.

Do we recognize at this point a significant crisis of the church and of the Christian today? Do not both, to a degree often fatal, putter around with their own problems instead of being free for God's assignment in the world? Sure, God has used them in the world, even though they have generally been washouts. But now it looks as if world history is rolling right over them and leaving them mashed behind. Contrary to the threats of judgment, God is pursuing his purposes with the world even though it exhibits very little fitting knowledge of God. For what purpose does Christendom persist? It fluctuates between bouts of fanaticism and bouts of depression, because it is determined more by inferiority com-

plexes than by faith. It doesn't concern itself at all with God's will and ways in the world, but revolves round its own self in dogmatism and disputations about the Bible, in indignation and despair. Is not this spiritual panorama of the church all too closely related to that of Jonah?

we must realize, however, that in focusing on his egocentric spiritual condition, we're not yet being totally fair to Jonah's reaction. His theological sincerity can't be denied. His cry of prayer shows all too clearly that he lives in the traditions of faith handed down from his fathers. What he recites as his knowledge of God ("That you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love") was, at the time of our narrator, written tradition which had been passed down for generations. In his canon it could be found in Exodus 34:6; in the Psalter the congregation sang it according to Psalm 103:8; and his contemporary, the prophet Joel (2:13), even appends to it the closing remark found particularly frequent in the traditions of Jeremiah (18:8, 26:3, 13, 19): "He regrets the evil he had planned." It is precisely this idea that Jonah just could not handle: God had commanded him to deliver a threat of punishment to Nineveh, which was undeniably deserved, and then at the first hint of improvement God regrets his decision and retracts it. Is that supposed to be justice? Can a last minute about-face possibly annul a thousand atrocities? Does one have to assent to this consequence if he acknowledges God's mercy? But above

all, can such a reprieve happen to Nineveh (and not to Israel alone as in Joel 2:13)? Doesn't Israel's election disintegrate if God's grace, patience, and forbearance are applicable to *all* nations? Can we perhaps sense here Jonah's desperate struggle with this theological dilemma? Jonah is suffering under a two-pronged problem. First, God isn't remaining true to his own pronouncement of judgment which he wrung from his messenger; and second, in his compassion God is placing the wicked heathen world on the same level with his own chosen people.

### God Pursues Jonah

2. It is this Jonah that God wrestles with. Actually, Jonah gives God far more trouble than did all the heathen together. The book has already shown this amply. But God is not yet ready to let Jonah out of the wrestling ring. Let us now shed light on this by looking at the artistic structure of this short story, this didactic narrative. The exposition in 1:1-3 struck up the theme: God's commission to Jonah, and Jonah's spurious behavior ("away from Yahweh", 3). However, the ship-scene 1:4-16 shows that God catches up with Jonah through a storm; it becomes evident to the sailors that Jonah cannot escape from his mission to the heathen world. At the close of the chapter we have the first major fork in our plot, since in 1:15a the joint story of Jonah and the ship's crew comes to an end ("they took Jonah and threw him into

the sea"); after this fork the story of the sailors comes to a happy ending, the sea ceases its tossing and the sailors finally commit themselves to the fear of God (1:16). But God's dealings with Jonah pick up once more in 2:1. The fish is ordered to bring Jonah back, and the commission to go to Nineveh is once more imparted. After his sermon (3:4) to the Ninevites, we find the second fork in the novelle (the story branches for a second time). From 3:5 to 10 Nineveh is on the stage alone with God. Here again God, together with the heathen, quickly comes to his conclusion (3:10), while in the meantime Jonah has taken a seat outside the city, full of skepticism (4:5). So, also after this second branch the Lord quickly comes to a happy ending with the heathen; but as for Jonah, the wrestling match really picks up in the closing chapter, and right to the very end we never discover whether God was actually successful in Jonah's case. For the didactic narrative ends with an open question from God. The reader never learns of any answer given by Jonah. That is extremely significant, for the narrator couldn't show more clearly that the reader is supposed to see himself reflected in Jonah, and that the reader himself has to give the answer, which God had awaited from Jonah in vain.

So we can see from this artful structure of the book that its thread of continuity is to be found in God's grappling with Jonah, with his Israel, with his spiritually complicated Christians, with their theological carpings and



vexations, and with his church. The large central section of the closing chapter (verses 4-9) shows us the patience with which God woos his messenger.

Isn't western Christendom faced with a similar crisis? Many Christians basically regret talk about God's compassion when it is spoken of as valid for all mankind. Because they, like Jonah, realize that it is grounded in the biblical message, they too, like him, are inclined to opt out completely. It is looked upon as an unbearable leveling process, when the repentance of Christians is compared in any way with certain signs of improvement in the eastern world. Can a simple turn-about undo long chains of unspeakable atrocities? Must we not soberly consider a rapid return to old methods? Must not the law be emphasized much more clearly than the Gospel? We form our arguments from serious theology. And it gradually becomes a torturing temptation for some that God can sit back for years and decades and watch the perpetration of brutal violence and never lift a finger. At this point we get disgusted with the theological discussion and desire before God only one thing: withdrawal, sleep, death. "Therefore now, O Lord, take my life from me, for I'd be better off dead than (I would be) alive!" (4:3).

This — says our biblical witness, the narrator of the book of Jonah — this is what the "great wickedness" of Jonah looks like. It cannot and will not say "yes" to God's great, world-encompassing compassion; sulky, sullen, petty, and on top of it all, in

theological self-righteousness it wants only to get out of the service of this God.

He begins by asking a simple question: "Do you really have the right to be so angry?" (4:4). He wishes to stimulate Jonah's, and with that the reader's, calm consideration. He doesn't pummel him with bits of advice nor with threats. Precisely in times of inner turmoil, dissatisfaction and discouragement we should calmly face such a still, small voice. The appropriate answer would be the plea: "Teach me daily to know thee better!" "We learn to know God, nearer, better, more enthusiastically and more revealingly, as we continue to live", and at the same time, "as we continue to pray. The road of prayer is the road of life. The path of prayer leads to a deeper recognition" (K.H. Miskotte, *Der Weg des Gebets (The Road of Prayer)*) Jonah had not yet found his road.

God here stimulates Jonah's thoughts not with more words, but with action. He works silently on Jonah, the man from God's people, as he elsewhere works on the heathen. The narrator makes that clear enough with his use of language. He doesn't speak here of "the Lord" (Yahweh), of the God of Israel, as he did in 1:1f; 2:1 and 3:1; but rather he says "God (elohim) in 4:7-9, and even "the God" (ha 'elohim) in v. 7, exactly like the men of Nineveh in 3:9 (cf. v. 10). (In the transition from the style of speech in v. 4 to that of v. 7 he uses the combined form in v. 6: "God, the Lord" — Yahweh Elohim.) It's as if there were a role reversal between Israel and the

heathen world, just as at the end of the parable of the prodigal son, where it is the elder brother who turns out to be the prodigal.

But though Jonah has fallen deeply, for his sake God spares no pains. He strains every nerve to aid Jonah in finding a better understanding. First he causes a castor-oil plant to grow up over night (4:6), then he appoints a worm which just as rapidly consigns the plant to a withering death (4:7). Finally he sends the scorching east-wind (4:8). The lesson which God has taught the runaway Jonah with the storm, sailors, and monstrous fish, had all too rapidly been forgotten. Now he would have to learn through natural events again that he himself lives only from God's compassion.

In verse six the narrator states the *purpose* behind these silent measures taken by God; he wants to "wrest Jonah out of his wickedness" (mera'ato, cf. 4:1). Jonah had been sitting in his makeshift booth a ways east of Nineveh, suspiciously awaiting what was to come (4:5). It appears in verse 7 as if the intention of God as regards Jonah is reached with the additional and quite unexpected shade of this shrub: "So Jonah was filled with joy" — (wayyimah . . . 'simha g<sup>c</sup>dola); linguistically we see clearly here the exact antithesis to verse 1 where it read: "It was very wicked to Jonah, a great wickedness" (wayyera' 'el yona ra a gedhla). Now the account speaks of "Great joy!" This is the goal at which God aims as he seeks to push Jonah out

of his "great wickedness". But then when the worm, sun and east wind take effect, Jonah slides back into his depression and his longing for death. Only at the end of his silent dealings does God speak once more. He intervenes with only the soft repetition of his previous question: "Do you really have the right to be so angry for the sake of this shrub? (4:9). Here we perceive what these measures were really intended to achieve. A touch of additional shade for his head (4:6) — this bit of private fortune for the skeptic in his hut — had quickly pried him out of his spiritual gloom and his theological insolence, and had spurred him to "great joy". But when the soothing comfort for his sun-parched head disappears, then just as fast the anger bristles up once again; now it is directed against the withering of the bush, against the withdrawal of the small relief there was left in life. Because of his own deep distress, Jonah ought to be able to understand God's own deep distress.

### That Final Question

3. *God's great closing question* (4:10f) connects everything together that we should glean from the book of Jonah. First, let us read it again. The Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should I not pity 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 much cattle?"

Verse 10 sets the stage for this question: You grieve for the bush, to which you devoted no trouble, and which you didn't cultivate." Already we can hear in the background: "I grieve for Nineveh," because it is my creation and my adopted child. You, O man, suffer painful sorrow when you lose something which you were given as a pure gift. I suffer sorrow for that which I have created. It must be clearly stressed: the citizens of inhumane world powers and the heathen sailors on the sea are no less God's creatures and no less children of his care than are Israel and Christendom, than are holiday sunshine and the castor-oil bush and its shade.

This is the *first main lesson* to be gained from the book of Jonah: people who stand quite far removed from us politically, socially, or religiously, are no less part of our God's creation, and are no less encompassed by his loving care than are we ourselves. That we are all novices at recognizing this becomes immediately obvious when we think of people whose life-style, whose attitude to power and whose beliefs counter our own. However, this biblical witness tells us that God grieves when they set themselves up for their own annihilation. He sent his messenger for only one purpose: that they might discover their way out of self-destruction and attain life. God solicits the full agreement of his messenger to his right to let them live-from his abundant compassion. Jonah's concern for the short-lived

bush ought to give him reason to sympathize with God's concern for the whole life of mankind. We Christians, whose Lord suffered the death of a criminal out of his love, ought to be able to understand the witness of the Old Testament even better. The book of Jonah tells us: God prefers to sacrifice his messenger's threat of destruction (3:4) rather than to let his creatures be destroyed.

### How Deep is our Commitment?

Let us pause and consider our own picture reflected in the mirror. How do we behold ourselves? We see blatant rebellion against the course of world history, and secret resentment over God's inactivity and forbearance towards the wicked world around us. Vehement attempts to expound principles, and furious arguments over the Scripture end in the despondent resolve to wash our hands of it all. How open-hearted and noble such resigned rebellion sounds! Then if a tiny bit of unexpected personal good fortune falls our way, our spirits automatically pick up. Do we gather from this that the beloved "ego" was really the center of our universe? Are our own private interests so important that God's marvelous message and the entire world together, for which we once appeared to be so excited, now become totally meaningless? Do Christians and the Church put themselves first in the same way? Is it possible by means of a small intimate pleasure to seduce us just as

fast from "holy wrath" to blissful ease? In any case something deeply humiliating emerges in Jonah's "great joy" under the castor-oil bush.

We need not turn away from this reality out of shame or indifference. Jonah should certainly learn along his own psychic path. A touch of shade in the blazing heat or — in our case — a few days of pleasant vacation — and all our worries about God and the world, about theology and politics, about reform of the church and renewal of mankind, are as good as wiped away. A shiny new car and the purring of its motor or a raise in pay, and our disgruntlement changes to ecstasy. But when the worm attacks the plant, when the rainy days set in, when the motor has the impudence to go on strike, when the prices keep rising, then once more the despondency breaks through. In mourning for our rapidly withering castor-oil bush we should grasp something of God's compassion for the world. Theological perception and self-perception must always proceed hand in hand, because God works on us through our own events and experiences as he worked on Jonah. Our dogmatics is poor, because we don't take seriously enough God's control-question concerning our private lives: "Do you really have the right to be so angry because of this bush — because of the weather, the motor damage, the prices?" Through a few incidents in life we, with Jonah, are prepared for God's ultimate question.

We can ill afford here to stifle our astonishment. Nineveh is compared

with God's creation. But isn't Nineveh a self-asserting master-piece of Assyrian world conquerors, the example par excellence of power wielded by the kings and overlords who built this residence? Yet, nonetheless, for God it stands as an exact parallel to the bush which he caused to grow. That is biblical creation theology! Even that which is molded by man's hand, such as the metropolis, the motor, wage hikes, comes from God no less than do plants and sunshine; and they are therefore just as precious in his eyes. True, this is intimated only incidentally. Nevertheless, our pattern of culture and civilization too should never be considered as being excluded from God's loving care and compassion.

#### **God's Love for the Masses**

If this last mentioned consideration was only indicated in passing, then the *second main argument* is brought forth all the more clearly. What moves God to sympathy with Nineveh apart from the fact that it is his own creation? It is called "the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know how to distinguish between their right hand and their left, and also much cattle." We may find it a bit surprising that the large number as such is a reason for God's compassion. Perhaps Christians who have become all too spiritually myopic really need such a view-improving realization. That the *masses* are part of God's creation should change our relationship to the large crowd. It was stressed already in 3:3 that



Nineveh "was a large city even for God, a three day's journey in breadth." I must admit that the reference to 120,000 people in the stirring final question of the book of Jonah has awakened in me a new appreciation for mass meetings.

That is *the second main lesson* of the book of Jonah: because God's heart is stirred by the gigantic crowds in his creation, he would like to gain the full understanding and agreement of his Jonah, his Israel, and his church. That the masses "do not know their right hand from their left", that they are far from able to make judgments on their own, only amplifies God's compassion and should also move Jonah to be absolutely anything but indifferent in them, or to their mass-media.

I was surprised to find that the word which appears most frequently in the book of Jonah is the word "great" (gadol). That it appears fourteen times (in 48 verses) in the Hebrew text is a sign of the delight our narrator takes in the unusual. (In the secondarily inserted Psalm — 2:3-10 — the word gadol is not used once, so that gadol appears 14 times in what was originally only 40 verses!) For the sake of the "great city" (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11) God steps in with great measures, with the "great storm" (1:4a, b, 12) and the "great fish" (2:1), and, in all these actions, we see, his great trouble with Jonah. With the heathen he experienced "great fear" (1:10, 16) and beholds that the "great" (3:5, 7) along with the least turn from their wickedness; but with Jonah, however, God's own "abundant mercy" (4:2) is reciprocated with "great", irate

wickedness (4:1). Only with absolute egotism does "great joy" bloom momentarily in Jonah (4:6), but God waits in vain for similar great sympathetic rejoicing in response to his own tenderhearted patience with the wider world.

Which gives us more cause for astonishment: that God is so very concerned for the masses of his creatures, including the animals, or that he lavishes his never-ending trouble and patience upon this solitary, jealous and stubbornly reluctant Jonah?

I find that the emphasis in our didactic narrative lies on the last mentioned element. From beginning to end the story is about Jonah: from the commission in the first verse to the question at the very close. When it comes to the other characters, God arrives quickly at this goal, and they can disappear from the stage. However, as the curtain closes, Jonah's answer is yet to be given. How much God has to demean himself in so opening his heart to this pig-headed Jonah, in doing so *much* for him, in so grappling with him! This is the kind of trouble he has with Israel and the church because of his love for the entire world. It should give the Christian reader little comfort when he is dismissed by the narrator with God's question concerning what benefits his creature. All this with just *a question.* Only with the question: "Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?"!

### Are We Willing to Agree?

It is right here, in this open question at the close of our book, that I see the

*third main lesson* of our Old Testament witness: God desires our agreement, given completely freely, to his worldwide compassion, to his life-saving work in the world. As vigorously as God had worked on Jonah, Jonah was never forced into anything. In this, God credited Jonah with a certain amount of dignity; to the end he sought to win him over with only the word. The same command to go to Nineveh could be responded to by Jonah with flight as well as with obedience. Even when God operated with storm and fish, with the shade of the castor-oil bush, worm and red-hot wind, he did so only to awake a free *insight* into his compassion for the endangered world. At the close God is still waiting, waiting for this insight. That he had not yet discarded his faulty instrument, is due to his unending patience which persists in honoring the obstinant Jonah with freedom. But at the same time, this patience means that we are not released from facing the question concerning our own agreement of God's compassion for his underdeveloped creation; we are not excused until we have given an answer with word and action.

What Jesus prophesied is already happening; the people of Nineveh will arise in judgment against those who have been called by Jesus. Albert Camus, one of the great atheistic humanists of our century, writes in his book, *The Fall*: "They have hoisted (their savior) up onto a judge's bench in the most secret nook in their hearts, and now they lash out; above all they judge,

they judge in his name. He once said tenderly to the adulteress: 'Neither do I condemn you!' That does not bother them; they condemn, they acquit no one . . . He wanted men to love him, nothing more. Sure there are people who love him, even among the Christians. But their number is small. What is more, he had humorously forseen this! Peter — you certainly know the coward Peter — denied him: 'I do not know this man . . . I do not know what you are saying . . .' and so on. He really overdid it! and the Lord made a play on words: (Super hanc petram) Upon this rock I build my church'. One could not possibly drive home the irony any better; do you not agree?"

Yes, with Peter, with Israel and with the church, with downright obstinate Jonah-types among us, God forces on the cause of Jesus, the deliverance of our threatened world. But is it irony as Camus suggests? In studying the book of Jonah we have learned something different. It is the apex of persevering patience and hope for those whom he has established as his co-workers, out of love for the world. With the world God arrives at his goal, the goal of compassion — a mercy that conquers death. It is to this hope that we have been brought by the story of the sailors, and above all by the story of Nineveh, But whether or not our Lord also arrives at this goal with Jonah, with us Christians in the world, that is the question which still remains open. We too must respond.