

THE WAYWARD PROPHET

An Unwitting Player in God's Dramatic Action

One must understand the dramatic actions of Israel's prophets to understand why Jesus called Jonah's adventure a sign.

THE PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES, Israel's ruling elite, had a problem on their hands. A so-called prophet from that trailer-park village Nazareth was stirring up the people with titular healings and miracles. These things always proved disruptive enough, but rumor was that he was in cahoots with John the Baptizer, another pseudo-prophet. John had lost his life after confronting Herod with his infidelity and pronouncing judgment on God's own people, Israel. These two political rivals agreed that this two-bit insurrection had to be stopped.

They decided that the easiest and quickest way to accomplish this would be to test Jesus. They'd demand a sign from him, a sign attesting to his authority from God himself. They'd do it publicly, and when he couldn't produce one, the people would see him for the fraud that he was.

They found him in the midst of a small crowd. He had just cast a "demon" out of a man who was said to have been mute. The man spoke, and the modest audience stood amazed. But some expressed their doubts. "He expels demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons." A woman cried out, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" The assembly began to swell; the Pharisees and Sadducees seized the moment.

"Teacher, we'd like to see a sign from you."

Jesus stopped and turned, and glared at them. The air became nervous. A few shifted their weight; some looked away, lowering their eyes. And Jesus lit in.

"A sign!?! When it's evening, you say, 'Oh, it'll be nice tomorrow because, see, the sky is red.' And then in the morning, 'Oh, it'll be stormy today because the sky is red and menacing.'"

Incredulous, he stepped toward them.

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you can't interpret the signs of the times?"

The onlookers swarmed as Jesus dressed them down.

"A sign? You want a sign? An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign! A sign? No sign will be given you at all except for the sign of the prophet Jonah! Just as he 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. There is your sign!"

Sign of the prophet Jonah? What is Jesus talking about? The Pharisees and Sadducees had sought to quell the rise of an upstart preacher who threatened to undermine their efforts to unify Israel. What they got instead was keen insight into how God would overcome their truculent sin to bring his gospel to all the world. The story of Jonah—a wayward prophet swallowed by a sea monster of a fish—today is the stuff of Sunday-school fodder for preschoolers. In truth, it is the haunting foreshadow of Paul's revelation;

And being found in the fashion as a man, he humiliated himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

All too often the brute meaning of the Bible is lost on us because we approach the holy scriptures as if they are a catalog of self-help talismans. The Word isn't a field guide for self-actualization; it is the Spirit-breathed narrative of God reconciling the world back to himself through the means of his Christ. Jonah's superficially comical plight is a sign, a harbinger of the larger redemptive narrative, how God would conquer Israel's shutting up of the Gospel in order to bring salvation to the world. Jesus himself calls Jonah a prophet and a sign; we ought then to read him as such.

The world has touted her prophets, but none have ever amounted to anything more than pundits throwing darts in the air. Israel, on the other hand, had "holy men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

Long ago God spoke to our fathers in many and various ways by the prophets.

The interesting thing about Israel's prophets is that they didn't just speak in oracles. Sometimes God had them act out their messages in what scholars call "dramatic actions." Ezekiel, for instance, didn't pronounce judgment against Israel and Judah using a microphone. He did it by lying down. He lay in his bed on his left side for three hundred and ninety days for Israel and forty days on his right for Judah, each day representing a year of judgment. Hosea, another prophet, also demonstrated God's judgment in dramatic action. God instructed him to take a wife "of whoredom" to show how Israel had committed spiritual adultery by forsaking the Lord. God even had him name his kids, "Jezreel," "Not my people," and "I am not yours"

as prophetic signs of judgment. Finally, probably the most graphic example of prophetic action was the Lord having Isaiah walk around Israel naked to illustrate the fate of her allies in her fight against the Assyrians. Isaiah didn't do this for a day or two; he chastised Israel with his nakedness for three solid years.

Jonah likewise was a dramatic action figure. His isn't the story of a disobedient believer who is coerced to succumb to God's sovereign purpose in the end. No, his is the story of how his own people, Israel, refused to be the light of the world, the channel through which God would bless all of the families of the earth as he had promised Abraham. Jonah is the story, the sign if you will, of how Israel had shut up the promises of God unto herself and of how God used her recalcitrance to fulfill his original promises. It is at once the most horrifying and electrifying portrait of redemption in all of the Bible.

The first scene of the dramatic action of Jonah starts at the very beginning of the book with his call to preach to the Ninevites.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Ammitai, saying, "Go at once to Ninevah, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me. But Jonah set out 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.

The last chapters in Jonah give us a flashback into Jonah's

thinking when he heard the word of the Lord.

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. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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 punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Then 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.

If we looked upon Ezekiel’s or Hosea’s or Isaiah’s dramatic actions or signs without regard to the intended message or the roles they played in their mini dramas, we’d think both the prophets and the Bible were absurd. Take Isaiah’s sauntering around Jerusalem stark naked for three years. If we didn’t think he was delivering a God-breathed message, we would consider him deranged, some fringe lunatic. And if we somehow clued in that he was delivering a message, but failed to consider his play-acting role as Egypt or Ethiopia, we’d be apt to formulate some zany doctrine about God’s character: “God might just make you run around naked for three years like he did Isaiah just to see if you’d obey him.”

Contemporary preaching has done that with Jonah. It has failed to discern his role in a God-initiated dramatic action. When Ezekiel lay on his side, he took on the role of YHWH meting out judgment. Hosea, marrying Gomer, also assumed the role of YHWH, while Gomer stood in the shoes of Israel, his bride. Jonah similarly fulfilled the role of Israel. The difference with him was that he did so unwittingly. It is when we read the book with this in mind that the message of the dramatic action becomes clear.

Jonah receives the word of God to preach, to be the light to the Ninevites, a people well outside the covenant. He knows instantly what the result will be: the Ninevites will heed the Word, repent of their sins, and avoid judgment altogether. Instead of rejoicing at their salvation, he scrams to Joppa to hitch a boat to Tarshish. He does so not only to prevent the Ninevites from enjoying the same salvation that Israel enjoys, but also to “get away from the presence of the Lord.” Back in Jonah’s day it wasn’t unusual to think that gods reigned only over certain territories. One could escape a divine mandate by fleeing the jurisdiction. That is what Jonah had in mind when he booked a ship to the edge of the world.

As is evident, Jonah's reaction to the mandate doesn't make a bit of sense if he is viewed as an ordinary believer. But, when you read the story as a divinely initiated dramatic action and clothe him in the role of Israel, it makes damning sense.

When God appeared to Abraham on the plains of Ur, he swore by himself that through Abraham "all the families of the earth would be blessed." Abraham and his descendants were thereafter known throughout the world as God's elect, his chosen people. As Paul writes in his letter to the Christians in Rome, they were entrusted with the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the Law, the service of God, and the promises. And they were charged to be God's light to the world.

But Israel became covetous with her election. Instead of being the light of the world, she sought to shut up the promises all to herself. Who puts a candle under a bushel? Israel did. And in doing this, she ensnared God's original promises, threatening to make them void. He had promised Abraham that all of the families of the earth would be blessed through him, not just his own.

God couldn't allow his original promise to fail. This is the message of the dramatic action in Jonah. God speaks to his people to bring his light to the Gentiles, strangers to the covenant who also happen to be Israel's arch enemy. Instead of fulfilling her calling, she absconds, doing everything she can to get out from under the mandate and hoard the promises for herself. If she were successful, God's word would fail. That is why he sent the storm and the fish. Better yet, he'd actually use her recalcitrance to accomplish the very thing she sought to upend. This is what makes the story of Jonah so gripping. ■

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN JOPPA (JAFFE) AND JERUSALEM IS ABOUT 30 KILOMETERS, 65 KILOMETERS BY CAR.

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