

Imagining God

We often hear the two Testaments of the Bible described as two different faces of God:

- the Old Testament is described as the Law part of the Bible, where a stern, vengeful God lays down the rules that we need to obey.
- Whereas the New Testament depicts a forgiving God, full of love and grace.

The book of Jonah defies that analysis. Most people are familiar with the story of Jonah and the whale, yet don't know what the story is really about. Is this Old Testament story about the stern, vengeful God getting even with his disobedient prophet?

No, it is exactly the opposite.

Jonah is a work of fiction. Everything in it is exaggerated far beyond reality. In ancient Hebrew fiction, exaggeration is done to make a point.

This story repeatedly uses the Hebrew word "gadol" which means "great", or "tremendous." We encounter a great wind, a great storm, a great terror, a great fear, a great fish. Jonah is ordered to go to Nineveh, that great city.

In this story, Nineveh was so huge that it took three days to walk across it. Nineveh was indeed a real city, the capital of the Assyrian empire. But with a population that may have reached a maximum of 120,000, it would hardly have required three days to cross it on foot.

When Jonah is commanded to prophecy to Nineveh, he responds by running away. Not any ordinary running away, of course; he sets sail for Tarshish a place that was considered the absolute end of the known world.

Then there is a long list of impossible things that happen in this story, and I'm not just referring to Jonah surviving in the belly of a fish.

Given the Jewish belief that God created and rules over the entire universe, do think there is a chance Jonah would literally try to run away and hide from God?

Given the Assyrians' devout worship of Ashur, who they believed made them the most powerful empire the world had ever seen, is there any chance they would even consider bending the knee to the god of puny little Israel?

None of this makes sense, and that's intentional. Because what the book of Jonah is doing is inviting readers to use their imagination. We are asked to go beyond our imagination, because God is beyond our imagination.

This Old Testament story asks people to put aside their idea of God as stern, demanding, and vengeful and consider the loving, forgiving, God of grace that we supposedly only meet later in the New Testament.

In this story, Jonah disobeys God. Not because the task assigned to him was too difficult, or that Jonah was just a lazy bum. Not because he's too busy. The fact that he could drop everything on a moment's notice to sail to the end of the earth shows he had no important commitments. Not because he was scared or intimidated. As we find later in the story, Jonah *wanted* to fail.

Jonah tried to duck out because he thought God was too soft. He didn't like this namby-pamby forgiveness business. He wanted the evil empire of Assyria to get what it deserve, and he was afraid God would not give it to them. Later in the story, Jonah explains what he was thinking when God called him.

"Do you know why I ran away from you and what you asked? I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

I knew you'd give them a free pass. That all you'll ask of them is to repent and stop doing what they're doing, and you'll let it all go. You'll forgive them and go on loving them.

And I don't want that, because these people are vicious brutes. I want to see them destroyed, as justice demands. And if you're not going to give them what they deserve, then I want nothing to do with your plan."

Do you see the flaw in Jonah's argument? It's the same flaw as in our demands for God to come in wrath and really nail those sinners and give them what they deserve:

None of us is without sin. When we wish for God to destroy those who are not perfect, we are wishing for God to wipe us off the face of the earth.

Jonah is too blind and arrogant to see that and even his arrogance is exaggerated. When the great storm hits the fleeing Jonah's ship, who prays for the ship's salvation? The pagan mariners. Who sits it out? Jonah, the self-professed man of God, who has the nerve to declare, "I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord."

Oh really? What do you mean by worship? You're deliberately disobeying God, and now, even in an emergency, you're the only one who isn't seeking God. You mean you show up occasionally to worship; it's a social thing--like a Christmas/Easter Christian? Doesn't worship mean to some extent you take seriously what God asks you to do?

As the great storm gets worse, Jonah admits that this deadly storm is his fault. "What are we supposed to do with you?" ask the mariners. Even though they don't share Jonah's religious views, they are speaking for God. What is to be done with this weasel who is so stupid he thinks he can defy God?

Jonah says they should toss him overboard and be rid of him. Then God will have his vengeance and there will be no reason for this Great Storm. The sailors believe he's right about that. Yet they still try to save him; they risk their own lives in a last-ditch attempt to row to shore.

Only when the great storm rages out of control, when they are left with no other choice, do they reluctantly toss Jonah in the sea. Even as they do so, they pray to Jonah's God, begging forgiveness if what they are doing is wrong.

What's wrong with this picture? Who has been more faithful and compassionate, concerned with doing what is right and serving God? Jonah, the Hebrew, or the heathen sailors? Clearly, the sailors.

As readers, we know that Jonah deserves the drowning he's about to get. Yet this supposed Old Testament God of law and vengeance goes to great trouble to miraculously save this undeserving sinner by sending a great fish to rescue him.

So has this miraculous experience taught Jonah his lesson? After his close call, will he now be the humble and obedient servant of the Lord that he should have been from the first?

No. Listen to his prayer from the belly of the fish: *“I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to thee. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee.”*

Where’s the repentance? Where is the *I am so sorry; please forgive me?* We don’t hear that. Instead, he pats himself on the back, saying, “Unlike those faithless sailors back on the ship, I, Lord, remembered you and offer praise and thanksgiving.”

Well isn’t he something! We have seen that, morally, ethically, and spiritually, the sailors strove to do what was right while Jonah did not. Yet he continues to claim he is the good guy and all those others are bad guys. That does not bode well for what is going to happen in chapter three, when God gives Jonah a do-over. Gives him the same mission as before:

Go to that great city Nineveh and deliver message from the Lord. Warn them of the need to change their ways.

So does a chastened Jonah now put his heart and soul into carrying out God’s mission? Well, he *does* go to Nineveh, where he cries out, “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” That’s it. That’s all the prophecy we get from Jonah.

He’s just mailing it in. Doing the absolute least he can while still obeying the letter of the law.

What is the result of this uninspired performance? The people listened to Jonah and believed, and they repented. As soon as he heard what Jonah said, the king declared a national time of fasting. He ordered everyone in the city to put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their sincerity.

Jews reading this must have laughed out loud. The great prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea toiled hard for many years trying to get the Israelites to repent to the God they believed in. They tried everything—their appeals were beautiful, stunning, poetic, rhetorical masterpieces. And yet they were mocked, persecuted, beaten, and ignored.

Here, after just one grudging, half-hearted effort from this grubby little, no account Jonah, the greatest, most evil empire on earth, at the height of their power, suddenly begs for mercy from a god they don’t believe in.

Wow! Far from being a jinx, Jonah has got to be one of the luckiest people of all time. He thumbed his nose at God and not only lived to tell about it, but was completely forgiven by God. He barely goes through the motions of prophecy and yet has more success in one day than all the other prophets over the centuries put together.

Then comes the verse that would stick in the Hebrews' craw. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the disaster that he had said he would bring upon them." God forgives the Assyrians.

Having been the most ridiculously successful prophet in history, how does Jonah react to his good fortune? He was furious!

"I knew it!" he yells at God. "I knew you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. I was afraid that if I presented your message to the Assyrians, they just might repent, and that is that last thing I wanted to see happen."

Jonah here speaks for all of Israel, everyone reading this story.

When the Jewish people think of Assyria, they remember their loved ones who have been slaughtered by these monsters. They remember the cruel tyranny under which they have been forced to live. They remember the constant humiliation and the absolute terror they have suffered every day from this colossus from the east.

For decades they have been pleading with God to help them destroy these enemies. It seems this will never happen. Assyria is too big, too powerful.

Now, at last, God is aroused. God is threatening to destroy Assyria. After all the grief they have gone through, life could at last be good again. The Assyrians are going to get theirs. Nineveh is going to burn, and every Jew would love a front row seat when that happens.

But just when this long-awaited event is about to take place, the Assyrians get a free pass. They say they are sorry. As if *sorry* is going to fix decades of misery and oppression. God lets them off the hook. God makes nice with their worst enemies.

Jonah knew enough about God's nature to fear this would happen. He knew that God is loving and forgiving, not avenging, and simply could not stomach being a part of it. This scenario was so distasteful to him that he was willing to risk death by disobeying

God rather than be a party to it. Now that this reconciliation between God and Nineveh has happened, he is so angry he could die.

Mr. Passive-Aggressive Jonah goes out to mope on a hill outside the city, still hoping that God will see the despicable Assyrians for what they are, and rain down fire and brimstone.

Ok, Jonah, time for another object lesson.

God creates a bush to grow up over Jonah to give him shade in the noon heat. Next morning, God sends a worm to kill the bush, and it withers. More of the tall tale element of Hebrew fiction. Huge shade bush grows in one day. God recruits a worm to kill it the next.

Jonah is furious at God again. With his shade gone, Jonah is again so miserable that he wants to die.

The moral of the story is then explained. *Jonah, you are concerned about the death of a bush. A plant that just appeared through no effort of your own. With which you have no relationship; in fact it was only around for a day.*

Meanwhile, there are 120,000 people in Nineveh. Human beings that I created in my image, out of love. I have sacrificed for them, given them what they need for a good life, and they are not thriving. They are living in darkness

You're upset about the death of a plant dying because it inconveniences you, and yet you think it should be no big deal for me to massacre an entire city.

I bring life, Jonah, not death. Yes, it would be easy for me to fix all the world's problems by wiping out those who deserve it. But this is my creation. I love it! I'm not giving up on it.

Now we see the point of all that exaggeration. Grace is not just a New Testament innovation. Do you want to know how great the grace of God is? Then you need to open your minds.

The book of Jonah forces us to imagine our worst nightmare. Imagine the worst enemy in the history of the world, who has done unspeakable evil, whom we hate with every fiber of our being, who deserves a taste of their own medicine.

If God asked you to speak to them with the purpose of reconciling and forgiving them, how would you respond? And if they repented, could you welcome them as friends?

It may seem utterly impossible, but that is what God does, and that is who God is. We're left to ask ourselves: what does this story mean for us who, like Jonah, claim to worship God?