



A Word Fulfilled

Jesus gave us the choice between a son who said he would not work in the vineyard but did and one who said he would but did not (Matt 21:28–31). Similarly, the Old Testament seems to offer a choice between a prophet who preached against Nineveh confidently, because he knew that God was “a jealous and avenging God” who “rages against his enemies” (Nah 1:1–2), and one who performed the same mission only reluctantly, because he knew that God was “a gracious God and merciful” who would let the enemies off the hook (Jonah 4:2). We might be tempted to query, with Jesus, “Which of the two did the will of his father?”

Since both Nahum and Jonah are canonical, our question would no doubt be out of place, but we could probably write a whole history of the church based on the struggles between those who preferred Nahum’s God and those who preferred Jonah’s. Intriguingly, both prophets knew that God was “slow to anger” (Nah 1:3; Jonah 4:2), but after that they seem to espouse a different creed:

“The LORD is slow to anger but great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.” (Nah 1:3)

“I knew that you were...slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4:2)

Nahum proclaims the God that Jonah wanted! And which God do we prefer? Again, a false dichotomy, I suppose. God’s wrath, says Nahum, is precisely why “the LORD is good” (1:7), for it is that fierce anger against the oppressor that makes God “a stronghold in the day of trouble”—and few who have known mortal danger at the hands of those genuinely wicked would disagree. Still, Jonah’s unhappy recognition that God’s grace is sufficient to overturn even the wickedness of the wickedest cannot be denied—though we, too, might not always like to hear it.

Later in the biblical tradition, Tobit clearly preferred Nahum. Tobit warns his family to get out of Nineveh because he believes “the word of God that Nahum spoke about Nineveh,” so Nineveh is clearly doomed (Tob 14:4). That passage is made even more interesting for an issue of *Word & World* dedicated to the study of Jonah because many Septuagint manuscripts read “Jonah” here rather than “Nahum.” But does “Jonah” make sense? If the prophetic word of judgment is to be fulfilled, isn’t the reference to Nahum’s uncompromising message better?

But the real concern of the book of Tobit is different: not so much the nature of God, but the nature of the prophetic word. Why should the family flee Nineveh?

Because “everything that was spoken by the prophets of Israel, whom God sent, will occur. None of all their words will fail, but all will come true at their appointed times” (Tob 14:4). And, as promised, “before [Tobias] died he rejoiced over Nineveh, and he blessed the Lord God forever and ever” (14:15). So, yes, Tobias blesses and rejoices over Nahum’s vengeful God, but perhaps also over the fulfillment, at last, of Jonah’s “failed” prophecy.¹ By the third or second century B.C.E., when Tobit was written, that loose end of Jonah’s “unfulfilled” prophecy loomed disturbingly large. For Tobit and others, fulfillment needed to be literal and exact—an attitude moving, no doubt, toward the notion of fixed times that characterizes apocalyptic (see also Tob 14:5).

Tobit’s flirtation or fixation with Jonah may be seen also at the middle of the book when Tobias is threatened by a “large fish” that jumps out of the water and tries “to swallow the young man’s foot” (Tob 6:3). In Jonah, the person enters the water and is swallowed by the fish. In Tobit the fish jumps out and is captured by the person (6:4). In both cases, the innards of the fish become a means of deliverance (6:5). Is all this accidental?²

So, how is a prophetic word fulfilled? Literalistically and deterministically (as announced by Tobit—and the many who follow in his train)? Or surprisingly and openly (as envisioned already by Jeremiah [Jer 18:1–11] and narrated in Jonah)? Finally, Christians will have to opt for Jonah and Jeremiah; otherwise we can never get to Paul’s assertion that all God’s promises find their Yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20 RSV), since that is not at all self-evident from a literal reading of Old Testament prophecy.

Historically, Tobit was right: Nineveh was destroyed (612 B.C.E.); but theologically, Jonah’s book and message stand: God’s mercy extends even to “that great city.” The issue will not be to choose a God: one of justice or one of mercy; there is only one God, who is both merciful and just. Still, an insistence that God must be bound to a literal fulfillment of divine prophecy will never understand God’s prior commitment to God’s own self-definition in which judgment, though real, is always subservient to mercy (Exod 34:6–7). That is the commitment that will send Jonah to Nineveh and Jesus to the world, in both cases not to condemn but to save (John 3:17). Finally, because God is God, God is not bound to execute God’s fierce anger, not on Ephraim (Hos 11:9), not on Nineveh, not on us. Over which, we, too, can rejoice and bless the Lord—*like* Tobit, if not *with* Tobit.

F.J.G.

¹For a discussion of this issue, see Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003) 23.

²See my comments on Tobit as “a kind of midrash on the book of Jonah” in Frederick J. Gaiser, “Songs in the Story” (Dr. theol. dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 1984) 310–312. Amy-Jill Levine also sees Tobit as a parody of Jonah in her “Tobit: Teaching Jews How to Live in the Diaspora,” *Biblical Review* 8 (1992) 46.