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Beyond Messages: How Meaning Emerges from Our Reading of Jonah

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Distilling messages is such a staple practice of biblical interpretation that it may seem both undesirable and impossible to question its value. Messages are small, interpretive apophthegms that appear to arise from the biblical material, advising us how to live. The warning signal for messages in sermons is some version of the phrase: "Like Jonah, we, too...." Amazing relations are asserted: "We, too, have been swallowed by a whale and must call to God from within...." Those who teach Bible can attest that students from nursery to graduate school who write on biblical passages feel prompted to reach for "the message" as they expostulate. My hope here is to suggest that messages are frequently not the best way to proceed and that an alternative can be sketched.

But before abandoning the quest for Jonah messages (if briefly), let us sample a few possibilities for the short biblical book that is, at least in outline, familiar to many. It is often suggested that the story teaches that Jews need to learn about the universalism of God, or that a misanthropic prophet needs to practice the value of generosity. On occasion, scholars note that Gentiles (Christians) seem much quicker to respond to God's warnings—Jonah's single sentence of 3:4 suffices for Ninevites—than do Jews, who have a canon full of prophetic efforts, apparently

While it is possible to distill a message from the book of Jonah, it will be more rewarding to allow meaning to emerge as we allow ourselves to be invited into the story through our reading.

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largely unheeded. Messages arise quickly from those three views of the small prophetic book: God loves us all; mercy is more urgent than justice; Jews need to try harder.

But if we reread the book, looking for messages, we will quickly find additional possibilities: Don't take boat trips—or be suspicious of the other passengers early on (1:3–16). Don't ask for what you don't want—especially good things for your opponents, since they may get them (3:2–10). Don't enjoy anything too much, else God may take it away (4:5–8). You may not be too surprised to learn that our first three messages are prominent in the Jonah criticism but that these last three are not.[1] Are they really so different? And why am I suggesting that messages are not sufficient for us?

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MESSAGES

If we were reading an issue of *Word & World* dedicated to St. Paul's letters, messages might be more appropriate. Paul is quite explicit about how our behavior ought to arise from certain biblical realities, so I am not saying they are never apt. But in terms of the book of Jonah and many narratives similar to it, I think they are inadequate as a hermeneutical strategy—that is, as a process for interpretation. Let me offer seven reasons, ranging from the simple to the more significant. First, messages are reductive. They may not be wholly false, but they are so pared down as to be virtually useless. Second, they are simplistic, since, to be clear, they must eliminate nuance, avoid grey area. Related, third: they are decontextualized and generic, hence not very reliable for our particular situations. And fourth, biblical messages tend to be staid and safe; we have heard them so many times they've gone stale.

> ***"biblical messages tend to be staid and safe; we have heard them so many times they've gone stale"***

Moving out a bit: A fifth reason messages often collapse under us is that they tend to be pithy versions of what we already think and expect others should adopt as well. *Christians* urge Jews to embrace God's universalism and think Gentiles outshine Jews in obedience—*Jews* do not! In other words, we formulate the messages we already deem valid, whether we realize it or not. A sixth reason to be leery of messages is that they may represent a fundamental genre error. This point is more accessible to us, perhaps, from our familiarity with Jesus' parables. When we come across a narrative in Luke 10:25–37 about a man enduring a rough passage from Jerusalem to Jericho, we know better than to investigate who the man may actually have been, why exactly he was traveling, what sort of donkey his rescuer had, where he convalesced, and so forth. Such details may have a contribution to make to our understanding, but they are ancillary to the story in which they occur. Parables are fictive, not factual. Parabolic stories rest not on an event that happened but pose in story form something we need to consider imaginatively. My suggestion will be that the book of Jonah functions somewhat the same way: not to be seized on as an actual event but probed as a wisdom teaching, offering us an opportunity to learn something. To derive messages without understanding genre misleads us.

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[1] Commentaries provide a good deal of useful information on the biblical book and report the views of other scholars. Two excellent works on Jonah are James Limburg, *Jonah* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), and Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

Finally, seventh, and related to what has preceded: The parables, and narratives in which they are embedded, are set up so that the characters in the story learn something that is urgent for them. In Luke 10, the priest and Levite may learn something, but the lawyer to whom the story is told is challenged specifically. We, reading, may feel we have gotten "their message" without noticing that our learning may be slightly different—and more elusive for us. Similarly, there is a learning for Jonah and a distinct one for Jonah readers. We are not blocking what the character Jonah may seem to be resisting; we have our own blocks firmly in place as we pity him for being slow to remove his blinders. Back to Jesus' parable: Academics know a story where a teacher, who planned to work that day with her religious studies class on the Good Samaritan parable, set up outside the classroom building a scenario to confront her students as they were rushing toward class. A person was positioned to look attacked, beaten up; a rifled backpack lay at some remove from the body, and books and papers were scattered nearby. The cell phone was smashed. Few, if any, of that instructor's students who had studied the parable in preparation stopped to assist their fellow in distress. They knew what the "message" of the Good Samaritan was for the priest and Levite, surely for the lawyer. But they did not imagine effectively that it had much to do with them as they rushed to class with Bibles and notes! So, the character Jonah has something to learn in the story, and it seems to come when God spins him a wee puzzle at the end of the book (4:10–11). But our angle on the narrative puzzle will not be exactly the same as his—though likely related—and we will not best approach it by formulating the message we think he needed to hear.

MEANING INSTEAD OF MESSAGES

If you agree with me that messages tend to be reductive, simplistic, decontextualized, trite and threadbare, self-projected and congratulatory, missing their genre cues, and shrunk too small for the reader, then what alternative do we have?

One of my teachers in this matter is art historian Wendy Beckett, whom you may have encountered as she deals with art, whether in print, on television, or on tape. She gives us, for present purposes, two valuable bits of information.[2] First, she says that when we are "reading" or viewing great art, what it does for us—actually with us—is to offer us insight into what we had not consciously known. That is, great art stretches us beyond where we started, shows us a world that we can aspire to enter with our imaginations. This experience may be more familiar to us in our human relationships: time—even a bit—spent in the company of a "great" person can help us see our way to places we had not imagined or felt able to reach on our own, and not simply because they gave us a detailed plan to follow! And second, Beckett suggests that we find our starting place as honestly and accurately as we can, rather than decide ahead of time what we should feel or think. We fix our attention as simply and directly as we can on the art, conscious of what we desire most earnestly and profoundly in terms of our human journey—presumably related to greater love of God and neighbor. We allow the depth and wisdom of the art to address our need. Details may help us get perspective, as we ask questions that push us to see more attentively what lies before us. We will not need to find messages or apply them. The learning arises for us in the intersection of our humanity and the art. Meaning emerges as we, alert and attentive, allow ourselves to be addressed profoundly.

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[2] Wendy Beckett and Bill D. Moyers, *Sister Wendy in Conversation with Bill Moyers*, ed. Karen Johnson (Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation, 1997) 42–48.

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So, insofar as the book of Jonah is great art, it will show us something perspectival about our experience and our desire, not something prefabricated and predictable. Jonah is closer to a parable than to an event that happened; it reads better in the wisdom genre than as history. It is a narrative of experience offered within the story to a character and then from the whole story to readers. Its genre provides narrative experiences constructed and offered so as to jolt us out of old certainties and into fresh appraisals of problems. There is some point, a narrated moment, that can grab and reposition us so we are looking from a different angle, getting a fresh perspective that will challenge our older views—whether to overturn or strengthen them, but in any case leaving them changed. Let's see how it may work.

REVIEW OF THE STORY

A man is given by God (how?[3]) a job in the foreign city of Nineveh (when?[4]) (Jonah 1:1–2). He resists it at first (1:3–16), but then, after a painful experience during which he and God are reconnected (1:17–2:10), Jonah is turned around and repositioned to do what he was assigned. He does his job—preaches to the city of

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[3] The brief questions in parentheses are included simply to signal that there are many aspects to the narrative that deserve our attention as we interpret.

[4] The question of the book's production is actually key to interpretation. Nineveh was once very powerful but then was destroyed. Which Nineveh did Jonah address? For discussion see Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003) 34–39.

Nineveh—and succeeds quite well: all turn from their former ways (for what reasons? for how long?) (3:2–10). But, (inexplicably?) the prophet feels thwarted and disgruntled about his "success" or over something (what actually is it?) (4:1–3). He reorganizes his space outside the city for viewing what will happen, but his accommodations are destroyed and he is angrier than before—and speaks up (4:5–9). Into that scene God steps to dialogue with Jonah (4:10–11), who, perhaps, gains fresh perspective. But he may *not* do so, since he does not reply to the question God poses to him! That silence, I think, is our cue to enter not simply his story but our own. Jonah's experience is our catalyst: How can God reroute rich experience, for him and for us? If the need is for insight to grab us from within and without, how will it be possible?

UNPACKING ASSUMPTIONS

First, we have to try to flush out the story's grounding assumptions, that is, how I—reading it—am basically to proceed. If space permitted, these points could sustain development and documentation.[5] In a short article they are simply stipulated. First, I take the character Jonah seriously and respectfully rather than disdaining him or reducing him to a parody. Jonah had respectable reasons to flee a difficult assignment and is hardly the only prophet to defer a task. His fish experience was traumatic and his prayer from within heartfelt and sincere. His experience preaching in Nineveh, a place well known over some centuries as a dread foe to Israel, was challenging and difficult. He did it in such a way that the whole city heeded his word and turned from whatever evil they had done. Jonah is angry about something—which does not mean his fish-prayer was insincere. Fresh difficulties follow even our most profound moments. The question is, why is Jonah angry?[6] How can we understand anger at what appears to be success? This is the portion of the story I choose to probe in my reading, first for Jonah and then for myself—and I hope usefully for you!

To look again more carefully: Jonah utters a single sentence in 3:4: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The narrator shows us the Ninevite response (3:5–9), which I assume "story Jonah" saw as well. The narrator then tells us—though no one tells Jonah in this version—that God sees as well and turns back from his previous plan (3:10). Jonah's outburst comes, then, at what he has seen and what he may suspect (4:1–2). He tells us, sincerely but not necessarily truthfully, that he suspected God's mercy all along! That is, he tells us that it has been in his mind, just as we often may construct "backstories" when we are in the midst of some problem. But in any case, he names his issue, which seems to be God's propensity to be lenient with the wicked. After his announcement, Jonah leaves the city itself and sets up to watch for something, since at least some portion of a forty-day window remains. The Jonah I am reading is thus caught by a situation where something that in theory should please him actually has the opposite effect. And he is angry at God insofar as God may have a hand in it, and "my Jonah" is also angry at himself for his contribution to Ninevite survival.

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[5] See Barbara Green, *Jonah's Journeys* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), and "The Old Testament in Christian Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur G. Holder (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 37–54.

[6] For a fine study of Jonah and God, see T. Anthony Perry, *The Honeymoon Is Over: Jonah's Argument with God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006).

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It is with Jonah's anger that God deals. Though God was earlier quite concerned about the evil Ninevites, the deity now spends considerable time on the prophet himself, perhaps no less important than the whole city of sinners. And how does God deal with Jonah? God offers him an analogy—whether a riddle or parable—for Jonah to puzzle over. It is familiar enough to us: "Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about 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 many animals?'" (4:10–11). What does God say that was so fresh and galvanizing, as prophet and deity converse? In asking the book's final question, God makes available to Jonah and to us something of God's inner workings. We become privileged to be admitted to that intimacy, which happens only once in the story. God's self-disclosure, or its narrative representation here, is stunning, silencing—not in the sense of wiping Jonah out ignominiously and triumphantly, but in providing perspective that is existentially fresh. God begins with an observation that Jonah can accept, since it correlates with the prophet's experience: concern for something of recent acquaintance. Jonah has felt something for a plant that owed him nothing; that is, he had done nothing for it that it might have a claim on his feelings or his will, that he should spare it. In fact, we know that God is the one who appointed the plant; God's labor, such as it was, is pertinent. The plant works for God, not for Jonah; it owes the Creator, not another creature. God's point, I suggest, is that there is no obligation on either side between Jonah and the plant: owing is not the basis for what is happening.

But this is an analogy of persons as well as of situations: Think about me, God says. What concern, what sparing should I feel—and do I feel—when in fact there *is* some effort expended on both sides? Nineveh is a big place, God says; and there are a lot of people who struggle to tell their right hand from their left, animals as well. God here stresses the moral and spiritual ignorance, or lack of direction, of the human and animal citizenry, though we and Jonah know they just did quite well (chap. 3). The deity's point, I suggest, is that God *has* invested in Ninevites and they in God, at least latterly. The analogy turns both on quantity (one small and brief plant compared to a large and populous city) and on quality (nothing owed between Jonah and the plant compared with what God and the Ninevites have built into their bond to date). God seems to say: There is something here, at least recently. I sent a prophet to assist them and they responded, even with no specific promise made by God. God seems to ask: If you can recognize how *you* felt, can you understand how *I* might and actually do feel? God does not criticize Jonah for his feeling but suggests even greater care when more is involved, quantitatively and qualitatively. Nor does God deflate Jonah by saying that it is thanks to God that the plant was known to the prophet at all; that insight is for us. So, to sum up, God says to Jonah, think about how you feel on the basis of a tiny relationship, and how I feel on the basis of something more.

But we can see, in addition to the basic comparison between the matter of non-entitlement and of relationship, there is a crucial third level to the analogy. That is, the analogy compares the concern of God and Jonah and the degree of relationship between each of them and a plant or a city. But it also implies a comparison between Jonah and the Ninevites in terms of care and relationship. Jonah is an object as well as a subject of caring. God hints to Jonah that with all the deity and prophet have expended with each other, the sparing is all the more germane. Jonah has survived—been spared—from a great deal: a disobedient journey, a storm, a fish, a risky ministry, a big disappointment of some kind, the sun and a worm, wind, anger. God says to Jonah: Note how it works: for you and a bit of shrubbery, for these near-strangers and me, and now for you and me! So as we watch the deity mentor the prophet, we learn about their bond. Everything turns on relationship but not on entitlement and deservingness.

Jonah's moment of *frisson*—though in a moment I will claim it as my own—is to sense how similar he is to the group he is angry about. At such a moment, assuming that the insight is not gratifying, Jonah can repress or reject it. But if he does not do that, great change is possible. Since we do not know how Jonah in fact responded, let me shift now to my own reading.

MEANING-MAKING WITH A NARRATIVE

Above I tried to make explicit—clear to myself so I can own them and to my reader so you can negotiate them usefully—my assumptions about the story. Mine have in fact emerged over several years of close study of the book of Jonah and the scholarly/spiritual tradition that attends it. But that literature is vast, and any reader must select some and leave behind other material. The point is to do so as one alert and informed. My choice has been to see that relatedness is the main concern of the book, specifically anger rising from a fear that good for "the other" will thwart or diminish me in some fundamental way. That is a concern I recognize as existentially urgent in my own life. I do not think it "imposed" on the Jonah story or "read in." I chose it from a menu of possibilities the story proffers because it is a perennial concern for me, a struggle in my life.

The challenge here is for me to own, and then to develop, Jonah's anger over something that might happen but has not yet occurred for him, in this story that breaks off before the Ninevites can do anything harmful to Israel. But Jonah readers, ancient and modern, likely do know that the Ninevites were a perennial threat until they were replaced by other "others." So I can see my concern both for those who have harmed me and those who may do so. And since this is not simply a personal reading, I can stretch my "I" to be a more social self. The fear that the others will harm us deeply, the memory that they have done so, is very real, very urgent in our time—in fact, in just about any era.

My reading and insight emerge as God redescribes both Jonah and his others for me in the small parabolic riddle with which the story ends. I am invited to reconsider my opponents, at their worst and at their best. Having allowed or encouraged the biblical story to set up an issue with which I struggle, I watch how the story works at the problem. Jonah is not quite "me," though close enough! My struggle with Jonah's riddle—which took me considerable time and energy and is, so far as I know, distinctively mine—shows me an insight not the same as his (and we don't know from the story what the character Jonah learned) but clearly related to his issues. Central is God's tolerance and care for both "sides," for the Ninevites and for Jonah (and, by extension, for Jonah's people). Jonah was benefactor to the Ninevites as, in fact, they were to him. As God talks, the "opponents" resemble each other in certain key aspects.

Do I like the moment when I resemble the people I resent? Hardly! But it offers a moment to reject or to accept. If I refuse, an opportunity passes me by. If I agree, the likely change is compunction: the sense of self-knowledge and sorrow for my sins and weaknesses that arises from "othering." And from such insight and grace comes the energy to continue to struggle.

Can I turn this insight and meaning into a message? I could, surely, as could you. Likely candidates are: "Be merciful" or "Anticipate your own flaws in the criticism you make of others." Those urgings are not wrong. But they are scarcely adequate to the interpretive process described here. The process of interpreting is key to the insight gained. ⊕

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