



# The Exaggerated God of Jonah

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**T**he book of Jonah has generated a wide variety of interpretations; at the same time, a basic scholarly agreement exists regarding the book's presentation of God. My purpose in this article is to suggest an alternative view of Jonah's God.

Scholars have not finally settled the identification of the genre of Jonah. Most understand that the book is not to be interpreted as an (auto)biographical or historical account, even though links can be established with historical realities (e.g., Nineveh; the Jonah of 2 Kings 14:25). But the next step in genre identification has proved more difficult. Among the suggestions that have been made are: parable, allegory, midrash, parody, satire, didactic story, ironic tale.<sup>1</sup> In any case, the book is imaginative literature. This occasions the question as to whether the *God* of Jonah is also a product of the imagination, at least in part, rather than a traditional or straightforward account.

## EXAGGERATION IN JONAH

Most scholars agree that Jonah often uses exaggerated language,<sup>2</sup> especially

<sup>1</sup>See James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993): "The book of Jonah may be described as a fictional story developed around a historical figure for didactic purposes" (24). See also Robert B. Salters, *Jonah & Lamentations* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994) 40–50; Daniel J. Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) 255–259.

<sup>2</sup>Many scholars understand that the book of Jonah is filled with irony; purposeful exaggeration is a way of speaking ironically. For a summary statement, see, e.g., Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965) 39–55. For details, see David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew*

*Given the many exaggerations in the book of Jonah, might not the actions of God be seen as deliberately exaggerated as well? If so, the God of Jonah is not the all-controlling deity that readers have often assumed.*

regarding the city of Nineveh, its size and population (3:3–8; 4:11).<sup>3</sup> The mammoth city, extraordinarily wicked (1:2), experiences a total conversion after one minimalist sermon; even the animals are dressed up in sackcloth and ashes and cry out to God. One thinks also of the unprecedented idea that a fish swallowed a human being and vomited him up unharmed after three days.<sup>4</sup> Also to be noted are Jonah's composition of a psalm while ensconced in the belly of a fish and the book's unprecedented concentration of water/Pit images (some twenty-two allusions!). Moreover, a prophet of God becomes very angry at God's positive response to Nineveh's repentance (3:10–4:2); indeed, Jonah had resisted God's call to preach to Nineveh, not wanting to give God opportunity to be true to the divine character (4:2). Ironically, Jonah twice expresses great joy over *his own* deliverance (2:1–10; 4:6)!

Yvonne Sherwood expresses well the book's use of exaggerated language:

the adjective “big” (*gadol*) is added lavishly to almost every noun (the fish is big, the city is big, the wind is big); “yeast” is added prodigiously (carnival fashion) to reality (*qiqayon* plants grow like truffids, a fish hears and responds to instructions); and verbs are stretched to excess (Yhwh does not send the storm but *hurls* it [1.4], the worm does not nibble at the plant but *smites* it [4.7])—the worm and the plant, like God and Jonah, are engaged in warfare and the reader can almost see the words “Pow,” “Biff,” and “Arghh” writ large over the text.<sup>5</sup>

Sherwood goes on to show that anything can happen “in the strangely counter-intuitive world that is the book of Jonah; a prophet can run away from God; the Assyrians, epitome of wickedness, can be inspired by a five-word oracle and repent in dust and ashes....The plot can go anywhere, do anything, and the accumulation of ‘who knowses’ and ‘perhapses’ (1.6; 3.9) acts as wry commentary on the infinite possibility, and ‘miraculous’ caprice, of its development.”<sup>6</sup>

I am suggesting that readers of Jonah should bring their understanding of the God of Jonah more into line with the book's exaggerated use of language and, more generally, its type of literature. If the fish and its capacities, for example, are recog-

*Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 93–159. See also the learned essays by Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003). For my own previous work, see *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 51–60.

<sup>3</sup>Scholars disagree about the size of Nineveh in ancient times. Most common is this assessment from Jonathan Magonet: “Everything about Nineveh is exaggerated, by the author's design” (Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* [Sheffield: Almond, 1983] 49. For a different view, see Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah* [New York: Doubleday, 1990]). The phrase, “the king of Nineveh” (3:6), is unusual; Nineveh is thereby treated more like a country than a city.

<sup>4</sup>Historians pay remarkably little attention to the fish and its capacity to accommodate human beings for three days in undigested form. But, ironically, they do tend to interpret in a straightforward way the God who appoints the fish to swallow and vomit up Jonah.

<sup>5</sup>Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 241. She reviews the range of Jonah interpretations over the centuries, as does Barbara Green, *Jonah's Journeys* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 241.

nized as high exaggeration, an intensification of incongruities, why not think of the God of the fish in the same terms?<sup>7</sup>

Certainly not all of the God language of Jonah is exaggerated. Several statements stand firmly in the tradition: God is the Creator of the world, even if confessed by a runaway believer (1:9).<sup>8</sup> God is gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love, even if uttered by an angry and recalcitrant Jonah (4:2). God is a deliverer who rescues the needy (2:2–9). God does relent from judging, not least in view of God’s compassion for human and animal alike (4:2, 10–11). God does care about all creatures and, at least indirectly, commends their care to the reader. God’s actions in nature do bear some similarity to those cited in texts such as Exod 14—the wind and the waves. Yet, such divine actions seem to be of a different order than those in Jonah. Nature in Jonah is more like Elijah’s ravens (1 Kings 17:6), Balaam’s ass (Num 22), and Eden’s snake (Gen 3:1–15), all generally interpreted in legendary terms.

Do these more traditional witnesses to God in the book of Jonah make necessary a straightforward interpretation of God as a micromanager of plants, fish, worms, and sultry east winds? This traditional testimony to God in Jonah seems to be combined with the piling up of exaggerated elements. Scholars, however, have generally understood that the God language of the book is to be interpreted in more straightforward ways. Among many examples that could be cited, the following are representative.

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For Thomas M. Bolin, the text speaks of “the boundless power, freedom and authority of Yahweh...[the] absolute power of Yahweh over all creation coupled with a complete license concerning any act or behavior, beyond human categories of justice or logic.”<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Sherwood claims that the God of Jonah is “an irresistible force and a master of strategic planning.” The fourfold repetition of God as an “appointer” “emphasizes Yhwh’s strategic and effortless manipulation.”<sup>10</sup> “Cumulatively, the descriptions [of God] reinforce the image of an omnipotent, omni-

<sup>7</sup>God’s acting in nature is depicted in ways that are almost casual, with no stress on divine power or amazement on the part of the characters.

<sup>8</sup>Jonah’s confession of faith may not be so traditional; for Sherwood, it is “a comically apt choice from *select-a-creed*” (*Afterlives*, 249). Let’s see now, how can I flatter God enough to turn this situation around?! At the least, Jonah 1:9 does not speak of divine sovereignty, but of God as Creator. Notably, Jonah confesses this and still resists, as if to suggest that he should have no difficulty fleeing from such a God.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 147. Without apparent recognition of the issue at stake, he also affirms that the book ends with a debate between God and Jonah, where there is “no clear-cut victor” (149).

<sup>10</sup>Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 252, 253, note 163.

controlling divine monarch.”<sup>11</sup> Janet Howe Gaines speaks of “[t]he completeness of divine control over natural events.”<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Craig claims that the “characterization of the Lord is accomplished by...a picture of God the Creator, in complete control of plant, animal, and human life in this story.”<sup>13</sup> James Bruckner summarizes, “In the last two centuries, interpreters have tended to see Jonah 1 as a treatise on the sovereignty of God....That God is almighty is a timeless truth of Jonah.”<sup>14</sup> Raymond F. Person Jr. is a partial exception to this interpretive trend; he speaks of Jonah’s God as “omnipotent, controlling humans and nature.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Person importantly qualifies this claim in one case: “the Lord is not unlimited for, as is expressed in Jonah’s protest (4:2), he is limited by his divine nature of mercy and compassion.”<sup>16</sup> Though Person does not consider the relationship between divine omnipotence and a “limited” God, his point pushes in the right direction, as I hope to show.

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It is interesting that many biblical interpreters just assume that Jonah was not literally swallowed by a fish and did not actually live in the stomach of a fish for three days. But, as noted, they will often turn around and interpret God’s actions in a more literal way. Look how powerful this God is; even the fish and the worms obey him! It is strange, if not inconsistent, to consider many exaggerated materials as evidence of the unhistorical character of the book, but not of the God of the book.

What theological implications might follow if some of the language about God in Jonah is recognized as purposively exaggerated, perhaps even outrageous, to make a point? As such, the exaggerations help shape the message of the book. This ironic cast, this intensification of incongruities, suggests that the author moves beyond direct statements about God to an imaginative effort with theological ramifications. Jonathan Magonet moves toward this point when he states that the “miracles” in Jonah have been referred to as “literary miracles, designed as much to amuse and enchant his readers, as to illustrate their ultimate absurdity in

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 253 (cf. 283).

<sup>12</sup>Janet Howe Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah’s Dilemma* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 54.

<sup>13</sup>Kenneth M. Craig Jr., *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 146.

<sup>14</sup>James K. Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 53–54.

<sup>15</sup>Raymond F. Person Jr., *In Conversation with Jonah: Conversation Analysis, Literary Criticism, and the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 62.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 88.

the world in which they lived.”<sup>17</sup> This may be the case, but might a more theological point be available for readers?

#### DIVINE “WEAKNESS” AND AFFECTABILITY IN JONAH

Alongside the deliberately exaggerated themes regarding God in Jonah are claims about God that present a somewhat different point of view. Each of the claims cited below is revealing of a God whose relationship with Jonah, Israel, and other characters challenges the exaggerated themes.

##### *1. Jonah’s resistance to God’s call*

Jonah testifies that God is the Creator (1:9), but he still understands that he can resist God’s call, and he acts in view of such an understanding. Indeed, his trip to Tarshish, located far from Nineveh and in the opposite direction, suggests an element of defiance on his part. Jonah even seems to use the confession to trumpet his resistance before others: God is my Creator and look what I can do! God responds to Jonah by working in and through a natural order that is not resistant to the will of the Creator, which serves to intensify the fact that human beings can be resistant to God’s call. Though resisted, God persists, finding ways to interrupt Jonah’s recalcitrance. God does succeed in getting Jonah to go to Nineveh, but does not succeed in shaping his graceless message (3:4) or the belligerent anger with which he reacts to Nineveh’s repentance and God’s response to it (3:10–4:2) or even to God’s graciousness toward him (4:6–11). These are not images of a God who is in control.

##### *2. God is affected by prayers*

The prayers of the sailors (and their actions with respect to Jonah) result in their deliverance (1:14–15). Jonah’s prayer comes to God and is efficacious (2:7). The repentant prayers of the people of Nineveh result in a changed future: “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind” (3:10). God is affected by people’s prayers, whether they are voiced by the people of God or those who stand outside that community.

##### *3. God and creatures act in concert*

Jonah’s prayer expresses the belief that *God* has cast him into the sea, though he himself took that initiative with the help of the sailors (1:12–15; 2:3). So Jonah’s own decision, the actions of other creaturely agents, and God’s own action are related in a complex way; at the least, this complexity indicates that God is not the sole actor in what has happened. This perspective on God is lifted up by the way in which God works through other creatures (the fish, bush, worm, wind). These exaggerated elements serve the point that God chooses not to act alone in the world, but works in and through agents, both human and nonhuman, none of whom are perfect instruments in accomplishing God’s purposes.

<sup>17</sup>Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 106.

#### 4. *The words of a prophet of God are not fulfilled*

Jonah's preaching is unconditional; the Ninevites are headed for destruction (3:4).<sup>18</sup> When that word of God does not come to pass, Jonah is very angry (4:1) and continues to hope for Nineveh's destruction (4:5). An Israelite prophet has failed, at least from Jonah's perspective (but see God's perspective in Jer 18:5–10). Is Jonah then a false prophet (cf. Deut 18:22)? Has there ever been in Israel such an incompetent and recalcitrant prophet?<sup>19</sup> God is able to work in and through his inept efforts, but one cannot help but wonder what would have been possible with his full cooperation.

#### 5. *God's willingness to change the divine mind (3:10; 4:2; cf. 3:9)*

God's way into the future is genuinely affected by what human beings do and say: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind" (3:10).<sup>20</sup> God's future is at least somewhat open. The future is shaped by what happens in that divine-human interaction in view of God's honoring of relationships. The king of Nineveh claims that God's gracious response is not *necessitated* by the human response (3:9, "Who knows?"), yet God's promise in Jer 18:5–10 suggests that God has bound the divine self to so respond, at least in communal situations.<sup>21</sup> As is the case with other divine promises, God's options are thereby genuinely limited.

God's decision in 3:10 to spare Nineveh angers Jonah, and he cites the familiar confession in 4:2 as the reason he did not go to Nineveh. In other words, Jonah specifically relates the divine character in 4:2 to the divine decision in 3:10 to honor Nineveh's repentance. But that element of the divine character that is especially noted is "repenting" (נָחַם; it is added to Exod 34:6). And so Jonah in 4:2 links divine repentance and divine mercy. They are *both* characteristic of God, and both come into play in this situation. The compassion noted in 4:10–11, working back through the claims about God in 4:2, is viewed as the grounds for the divine decision in 3:10.<sup>22</sup>

It is commonly noted that Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C.E.; this state of affairs is probably in place at the time of writing (compare Nah 1:2–3 with Jonah

<sup>18</sup>Some scholars have suggested that the word "overthrown" is ambiguous and could also refer to an inner turning on the part of the Ninevites. Jonah clearly has their destruction in mind. The Ninevites' inner turning could be an ironic reference: Jonah preached one kind of overturning and got another.

<sup>19</sup>For a more positive assessment of the prophet Jonah, see Green, *Jonah's Journeys*.

<sup>20</sup>For a full study of the language involved, see Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10 (1988) 47–70; see also Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 112–115.

<sup>21</sup>See Terence E. Fretheim, "Repentance in the Former Prophets," in *Repentance in Christian Theology*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006) 25–45.

<sup>22</sup>To say that God "repents" with respect to judgment is not equivalent to saying that God forgives the Ninevites (cf. Exod 32–34 and the Moses-prompted divine moves from initially relenting to finally forgiving, Exod 34:6–7). Cf. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World*. A distinction must be made between forgiveness of sin and a reversal of the consequences of sin. The issue of *human* forgiveness might be clearer; God's questions to Jonah about his anger over the divine relenting of judgment on the Ninevites may well reveal Jonah's inability to forgive them for their atrocities against Israel.

4:2). This disastrous development for Nineveh has its parallels in other instances of divine repentance where, over time, it is followed by an act of destruction (Amos 7:1–9).<sup>23</sup> Times change and an occasion of divine repentance does not lock a specific future forever in place. God will take new situations into account in moving into the future.<sup>24</sup>

It is striking to note that in Exod 32 God repents regarding Israel quite apart from any repentance on their part, with only Moses' prayer in view (Exod 32:14). So, it is possible that God would have changed the divine mind even apart from Nineveh's repentance, on the grounds of divine compassion alone (4:11). God's final question in 4:11 includes no suggestion that Nineveh's repentance conditions God's repentance (so also 4:2). God's compassion prompts God's response to the Ninevite's repentance. God will spare them because of *who God is* and *who they are*.

#### 6. God is "slow to anger"

God's concern for justice is tempered by the divine slowness to anger (4:2). The exercise of divine justice in Jonah is shown not to be absolute or fixed in the way in which it functions in the created order. Indeed, many people escape from the consequences of their behaviors (see Jer 12:1), not by virtue of a divine decision, but by a "looseness" in the creational causal weave that God allows to be what it was created to be (hence, "slow to anger"). Jonah himself experiences such a "looseness" in his journeys, and the king of Nineveh understood there to be no fixed link between deed and consequence (3:9). Both unrepentant Jonah and repentant Ninevites experience God's slowness of anger and a creational order that does not function with precision, not least in view of the complexities of the situation (4:11). God's mercy and graciousness, strongly affirmed by Jonah (4:2), temper the exercise of strict justice.

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That God is "slow to anger" is a part of the tradition with which Jonah disagrees. Not unlike Job's friends, Jonah's justice is strict and precise, almost mechanical. You reap what you sow, period! Jonah knows that God is merciful and gracious (4:2), but believes that those divine characteristics can obscure God's role as executor of justice on the deserving wicked. Jonah will now be more just than God is! At the same time, he does not perceive that, in such a retributive system as he espouses, he himself should have been the recipient of the wrath of God.

<sup>23</sup>Compare also Exod 32:14 with 32:35, though the latter is much less severe than God's original word (32:10).

<sup>24</sup>Divine repentance on behalf of non-Israelite peoples is not unique to Jonah; indeed, Jer 18:5–10 universalizes this possibility.

7. *God is emotionally compassionate (4:10–11)*

The ending question of the book (4:10–11) introduces readers to a deep divine concern. God’s final question indicates that God is moved by Nineveh’s weak or morally confused ones (from children to adults) and its animals (in view of potential disaster). What is happening in Nineveh has an effect upon God. The verb **סוּחַ**, “concern for” (NRSV), refers to suffering action, action executed with tears in the eyes.<sup>25</sup> God’s concern entails emotional responsiveness.<sup>26</sup> It is suffering action. Here God vulnerably appears to take the evil of Nineveh upon the divine self. God bears the weight of its violence, the pain of a thousand plundered cities, including Israel’s. God’s tears flow instead of theirs.

8. *God engages in a conversation with Jonah about his anger and seeks to move him out of his resentment over what has happened to Nineveh (4:8–11)*

In this interaction, Jonah is not blown away by divine rhetoric or divine power. God’s actions prior to the conversation (4:6–8) contain some of the exaggerated elements in the story. These actions take a “soft” approach to Jonah’s dilemma and serve to engage Jonah in a conversation regarding his response to God’s mercy and repentance. God thereby hopes to turn Jonah around and engages him in theological conversation to that end.

9. *God does not have the last word*

The book of Jonah ends with a question, with the differences between God and Jonah unresolved. God seeks to convince Jonah of certain understandings regarding God; Jonah continues to resist God’s efforts to convince him. No divine success regarding Jonah’s perspective is reported. Such divine difficulties do not seem to fit the image of God presented in the exaggerated elements of the book. God is not said to be in control of the response, either of Jonah or of the reader. The future remains genuinely open-ended at the conclusion of this book.

Jonah’s problem with God is a theological problem. His disobedience to God’s call was theologically motivated. It is not that Jonah disagrees with Israel’s basic confession about God (4:2), as we have noted, but he wishes to restrict the range of its applicability. His motivation turned out to be bad theology. God goes to the root of the problem by engaging him in words and actions that are designed to get his theological perspective turned around. If and when Jonah is convinced to make a theological turn, his resistance and despair will take care of themselves. Along the way, the exaggerated actions of God with respect to nature are not life-threatening, but a cleverly designed means of leading Jonah through a conversation designed to move Jonah theologically.

These features relating to the God of the book of Jonah are revealing of a God who is deeply affected by the world, who enters into relationships that honor the

<sup>25</sup>The link between moved to spare and tears is expressed negatively in Deut 19:13, 21; Isa 13:18; Ezek 5:11; 7:4, 9, where allowing tears to flow would wrongly deter the judgment.

<sup>26</sup>The verb **סוּחַ** is variously translated (NRSV, “concerned about”). For details see Terence E. Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90/2 (1978) 236–237.

creatures and takes their interaction seriously. The effect of such an understanding is that God has limited God's actions in the world in such a way as to honor God's promises and so that this relationship can flourish, with creatures allowed by God to be what they were created to be.

#### PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

I suggest that the purposeful and multiple exaggerations of God's power and freedom in the book of Jonah constitute a *foil* over against which God's character can be more clearly discerned and God's relationship to God's people—often problematic—can be more sharply delineated. Indeed, might the book of Jonah be saying in and through these exaggerations that, in spite of what readers may think (or hope for!), their God is *not* such a manipulative, all-controlling deity?<sup>27</sup>

Might the purpose of Jonah's exaggerations be to challenge the perspective of those readers who wish, perhaps desperately, that their God was like this, for purposes of rescuing them from disaster or foreign domination or debilitating disease? God should just pop in and fix it! The book is laying claim to the idea that, for all the seeming "miraculous" power of God, Israel's God is not a magician who manipulates creatures, small or large, whenever it serves the divine purposes, however minor or major. God does not actually engage in these exaggerated activities, not least because such divine activity would sharply undercut creaturely responsibility.

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This is not to suggest that Israel's God does not have the power to do these things, only that it would be contrary to the divine character to do them. For God to act in this way in the world of nature would be to violate God's own creation, which includes God's giving creatures the "freedom" to be what they were created to be. The gift of such freedom to the creatures means that God is committed to a relationship with human and animal alike, including God's own people, which entails divine restraints and constraints in the exercise of power—for the sake of genuineness in the relationship, the keeping of promises, and the honoring of the creature. Even though such a divine relationship with the world entails risks and engages human beings who can make life difficult indeed for God and for other creatures.

From another angle, the exaggerated language in Jonah relates entirely to God's relationship to the natural order and to non-Israelites—from fish to worms, from sailors to Ninevites. The nonhuman creatures and non-Israelite peoples are imaged as remarkably nonresistant to God's actions in and through them. Indeed,

<sup>27</sup>Such an understanding of an all-controlling God is also common in contemporary religious communities.

Jonah often benefits from their nonresistant responses. This exaggerated rhetoric serves to intensify the differences with respect to God's relationship to Jonah. From the beginning to the end of the book Jonah is in a resistance mode, from rejecting God's call to his anger at God's gracious response to the Ninevites. In view of these difficulties God has with Jonah, God interrupts their relationship, but not in such a way as to force compliance. And so the book ends with the divine question to Jonah ringing in the air and Jonah's response, indeed every reader's response, waiting in the wings. How will he (and you) respond? ⊕

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