

Jonah's Tomato Surprise: A Literary Reading of God's Unchanging Mind

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Abstract: As debates about God's Openness continue, the book of Jonah is frequently cited as an example of Yahweh making plans that He later alters in response to human free choices. However, this reading of the text raises far more problematic questions than it answers. Instead, a literary approach to the narrative of Jonah reveals that the audience (but not the characters in the story itself) is uninformed about God's actual plan until it unfolds.

Keywords: Jonah, openness, immutability, literary reading

O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

- Jonah 4:2, ESV

As every church-going child knows, exactly three things happened in the Old Testament: God created everything, David killed Goliath, and Jonah was swallowed by a “whale.” While flannel-graph Sunday School lessons can hardly be expected to convey subtlety or nuance, it is a sorry commentary on our Biblical illiteracy if grown adults still imagine the Scriptures to be so coarse. Perhaps more than others, the story of the prophet Jonah is given short shrift in many Western contexts; far more than a simple morality tale about the dangers of disobeying God, the book of Jonah proclaims the vast love of the Creator for all of His Creation in several key ways. Most notably, it makes this declaration despite its eponymous main character's tendency towards being a pompous, angry racist.

Recent exegetical trends have begun to understand elements of Jonah in a new light as literary reading methods have been applied to the text. For example, in *The God Who Risks*, John Sanders sees Jonah 4:2 as a creedal statement that affirms “God's ability to remain faithful to his project while altering his plans to accommodate the changing circumstances brought about by the creatures.”¹ This Openness viewpoint is primarily characterized by God being “in some respects conditioned by his creatures” to the degree that “some [events] go contrary to what God

¹ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: a Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 72.

intends and may not turn out completely as God desires.”² To Sanders, Jonah exemplifies God responding to an unforeseen condition by literally altering the plans he lays out in 1:2 and doing the opposite in 3:10 from what he originally decreed; read simply as a story, Sanders sees the character of Yahweh changing his mind.

A Literary Reading

In one sense, Sanders’ methodology is not wholly wrong, for the story of Jonah is exactly that – a story – and should be understood as such. However, the irony of this debate lies precisely where literature and doctrine meet, for to see God literally changing his set plans in history causes the entirety of the story’s plot to unravel into inexplicable chaos. In short, Sanders draws the wrong conclusion about the literary structure: the story simply does not cohere if Yahweh changes his mind. We need not search comprehensive systematic works of theology or rely on philosophical theories to see God’s unchanging nature and will in the book of Jonah – we need only look at the story itself.

Fruitful literary analysis will often focus on how a text employs the tropes already present in the collective mind of the audience to tell its own story. By Sanders’s reading of this book, Yahweh’s action in 3:10 might be called a “twist ending,” but in light of Jonah’s comments in 4:2, it is better understood as a “Tomato Surprise.” This technique gets its name from a set of writer’s guidelines distributed by *Asimov* magazine in the 1980s and turns on the sudden revelation of a piece of information crucial to the proper understanding of the plot that had, up to the point of revelation, been hidden from the audience (but not the characters in the tale) – such as, for example, the discovery by the reader that the hero had, all along, been a tomato. Upon

² Ibid., 10-11.

learning the new information, the reader must then reinterpret the already-read events in a new light that allows for a more informed understanding of what was really going on the whole time.³

Indeed, at first blush, Jonah's disobedient flight away from Nineveh seems inexplicable; why would God's chosen prophet so blatantly disobey His commands? Only with the later revelation of God's love for Nineveh (and Jonah's hatred for it) can the initial chapter be understood. In fact, in the light of the information revealed in the second half of the story, Jonah's flight from Yahweh's instruction is hardly mysterious – in fact, it is necessary for the plot to make any sense.

The Flight Gap

This book opens with the odd twist of Yahweh's prophet fleeing His divine presence immediately after he is charged to go and preach to the Ninevites (1:3) – a twist that is not explained until most of the plot has already unfolded. Craig has identified this as one of the crucial literary gaps in the text that introduces “elements of indeterminacy [that] invite the reader to search for meaning” and “involves the reader's most active attention in the reading process.”⁴ It seems unusual and out of character for one of God's chosen mouthpieces to try and literally escape his duty, a fact only compounded by the utter absence of any explanation about Jonah's motivations in the first chapter of the story. As a reader, one is left with a burning question that haunts the pages of the book – why did Jonah flee? As Craig says, “the reader must attempt to stabilize the story as it unfolds.”⁵

³ Examples might include learning that a) two characters were really one character (as in Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club: A Novel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005)), b) one character was dead throughout the whole of the story (such as in *The Sixth Sense*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Hollywood Pictures, 1999.), or c) that the aliens were actually from Earth and the story is set on another planet (as in countless science fiction stories, including at least one episode of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*).

⁴ Kenneth Craig, “Jonah and the Reading Process,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 104-105.

⁵ *Ibid.*

No explanation is forthcoming until 4:2 when the prophet finally explains his own actions: he understood that Yahweh is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.” This strange lament immediately follows the contentious passage in 3:10 where God “relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” Jonah clearly felt no love for these Assyrian enemies of his people and was likely anticipating God’s judgment as vengeance for their violence, yet Jonah’s worst fear had come to pass: Yahweh forgave the Ninevites, despite all of their despicable deeds (for they were an exceedingly vicious culture, particularly ruthless in war). Some have also suggested that the simplicity of Nineveh’s repentance was also a stumbling block for Jonah, for “a more sophisticated understanding of moral law (or perhaps even of the Jewish Torah)” was not required for Nineveh’s salvation, merely a “superficial ritual.”⁶ Jonah craved retribution, but he knew that his God was merciful.

The Tomato

However, if Jonah is commenting in 4:2 on his actions in 1:3, then he surely must have known from the very beginning of the story that Yahweh never intended for Nineveh to be destroyed. It seems odd to understand that Jonah would have heard Yahweh say, “I am going to destroy Nineveh,” and conclude, “obviously, Yahweh is not going to destroy Nineveh.” However, if this is true, then it means that Yahweh’s decision to spare Nineveh was not, in fact, an alteration of his own will, but the clear and logical climax of the plot to that point given the players involved; it was *always* God’s plan. This fact was known to the characters all along, but was kept hidden from the reader to heighten the tension and tell a good story; Yahweh’s plan to save Nineveh –

⁶ John Walton, *Jonah, Bible Study Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 57-58.

the impetus for Jonah's flight in the third verse of the story – is a Tomato Surprise. As Ehud Ben Zvi put it, “the plot of the book of Jonah collapses without the salvation of Nineveh.”⁷

Naturally, we might ask why 3:10 could indicate otherwise, but two points should be made in the interest of clarification. Firstly, it is telling that the verse is not spoken by God nor contains a quotation – this is an explication from the impersonal narrator that serves simply to further the plot of the story. Nineveh's impending doom was introduced in 1:2 and repeated in 3:4, so this plot-thread must be tied off before the narrative can proceed. Since the character of God is not speaking, it seems rather likely that the human narrator—who was already worked to hide certain elements of the plot for narrative effect—would speak phenomenologically of the reader's experience of the story so far, hammering home the forcefulness of God's actions towards Nineveh. Secondly, reading 3:10 as simply time-bound human perspective on God's activity accords well with numerous other passages in the Old Testament, including within Jonah itself: consider God “hurling” a great wind across the sea in 1:4, which is surely not meant to conjure an image of a divine windy baseball being literally thrown.

The Command Gap

The looming question is: what exactly did Yahweh tell Jonah to do? It seems that much of Sanders' reading of the book is predicated on the recognition of the explicit divine command in toto within the second verse of the story, but there is good reason to see the presence of another literary gap here.⁸ To be blunt: we simply do not have the entirety of Jonah's charge, for the text was not concerned with transmitting it.

First of all, we must understand that the book of Jonah certainly could have recorded a more explicit conversation between Yahweh and Jonah at the time of Jonah's charge if the

⁷ Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 14.

⁸ Craig, “Reading Process,” 109.

author had so desired. Given the structure of chapter four (especially vv. 2-4 and 8-11), we have every reason to affirm the possibility of genuine divine-human conversation within this literary style. With this in mind, it is notable that no exchange of this type appears at either of the points at which God commands Jonah (1:2 and 3:2).

Instead, a pattern arises in the first three chapters of the book where one character verbally approaches the other, but gets no verbal response. In 1:2 and 3:2, Yahweh speaks to Jonah, and in 2:2-9 Jonah speaks to God, but it is not until the last chapter that they ever respond to each other (indeed, immediately after Jonah's prayer in chapter two, Yahweh speaks to the great fish – not to Jonah). This serves to underscore the dual importance of both Yahweh and Jonah as the primary characters of the story; it would be disruptive to the literary technique to have the full record of either of Yahweh's commands to Jonah along with his responses.

And we can be certain that Jonah did have a conversation with God at the time of his charge for two reasons, firstly for it was a normal response for a prophet to protest his calling by God: Moses (Ex. 4:1,10), Jeremiah (1:6b), and Isaiah (6:5) are several prominent examples.⁹ Even more importantly, though, is the fact that Jonah references this longer, unrecorded conversation in 4:2a, saying "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country?" Up to that point, the reader had no evidence that Jonah had said anything when he was yet in his country, but the prophet himself indicates that he did respond to God prior to his flight in 1:3, just as one would have expected him to do. Consequently, it seems irresponsible to assume that we possess a complete account of Yahweh's command to Jonah and we should hesitate to draw extensive conclusions from a section of text that never intended to give such answers.

Unwavering Mercy

⁹ In a way, Jonah does protest his calling, but reacts in the significantly harsher manner of physical flight that is explicitly disobedient; it is not merely a complaint, but a sin.

So, rather than seeing Yahweh contradicting himself within the pages of Jonah, a literary reading reveals that God's genuine plans for Nineveh were simply hidden from the reader's attention until nearly the end of the story. Through this approach, the book of Jonah grows beyond the limits of sterile historical recording to become a rich and vibrant story that captures the reader's attention and proclaims a clear message: God is unwaveringly merciful. Though Openness debates will certainly continue, the book of Jonah should not be cited as an example of God literally "changing His mind," for if this is true, then the book's plot unravels into inexplicability. Instead, we must simply treat the book as the story that it is, reading it in full so that its surprising ending can inform its beginning. In this way, the story of Jonah remains exactly that, and in literature, unlike in life, the end of a story truly can justify the means the characters took to get there.