

JONAH

All comments by Phillis Tribble unless otherwise noted

- 1) – The only prophetic book that is clearly fiction. Jonah lived during the reign of Jereboam II, about 780 BC, but the story was probably written c 300 BC. Jonah came from Gath-hepher (see 2 Kings 14:25), in Israel 3 miles NE of Nazareth, in what came to be called Galilee in Roman times. Like Ruth, the book was once thought to stand opposed to the nationalist views of Ezra (Ezra 8:1). But Phillis Tribble says that that thought “withered for lack of evidence.” So the purpose of the book is actually not known. (See the NIB for the many attempts to explicate it.)
JB’s interpretation: The storm is a metaphor for Jonah’s stormy mind as he contemplates the enormity of his disobedience to God’s command. The whale is a metaphor for the enormity itself swallowing Jonah in its maw. The spewing out is the pardon by God when Jonah recognizes his guilt, asks for reconciliation, accepts the consequences, and is forgiven by God. The gourd tree’s rapid growth and short life is a metaphor for God’s anger that builds quickly but dissipates just as quickly when appeased.
- 2) 1:2 – An anachronism. In 780 BC when this story is supposed to take place, Nineveh was only a small provincial town. In Jonah's time the chief city of Assyria was Calal. It was Sennacherib who established Nineveh as his royal residence, a century later.
- 3) 1:3 – Tarshish is the present day Cadiz, the end of the world at that time!
- 4) 1:4 – “Yahweh and Jonah have entered a power struggle.”
- 5) 1:5 -- The syntax here suggests that the sailors threw cargo into the sea to appease it as a deity, a sacrificial offering. /// The verb translated here as “lay fast asleep” actually connotes a trance that precedes death, not merely a deep sleep. This converts a physical flight to a psychological one.
- 6) 1:10-13 – Jonah’s command to throw him into the sea is a continuing attempt to disobey God, not an altruistic move. By drowning, he still gets what he wants: flight from Yahweh. “His seeking altruism masks egotism.”
- 7) 7:1-14 – Jonah gets his wish but God is not done with him.
- 8) 1:17 – The Hebrew word used is never “whale,” always “fish.”
- 9) 2:2 – “From the belly of Sheol” is in NIV: “from the depths of the grave,” and from the NAB: “midst of the nether world.” Tribble: “from the womb of Sheol,” Sheol being the abode of the dead with bars to prevent escape.
- 10) 2:3-9 – Scholarly debate, whether the psalm was added to the narrative, or the narrative originated with the psalm. Tribble concludes that it’s a draw and asks merely how the psalm functions in the story.
- 11) 2:7-8 – Jonah comes across as self-centered, with a distorted perception of reality. He claims that Yahweh sought to destroy him, that he has not shown pity in the midst of calamity. His arrogance peaks when he contrasts himself with idol worshipers (who is he referring to?). The closing line in v. 9 “elevates the dissonant tone,” “has a nauseating effect.”
- 12) 3:5 – No historical, Yahvist, or biblical evidence that this ever happened.
- 13) 4:1 & 4 – The word translated “angry” is in the Hebrew “burned.”
- 14) 4:2 – “slow to anger” is literally “long of nose,” an anthropomorphism connoting friendliness and graciousness.
- 15) 4:6 – Tribble translates “relieved him of any discomfort” as “delivered him from his evil.”

And “happy” as “delight.”

- 16) 4:7 – “the worm’s destructive act belongs to Yahweh’s larger purpose of saving Jonah from himself, of teaching him a new and different way of understanding.”
- 17) 4:9 – Jonah ends as he began, opposing Yahweh, but he does not have the final word.
- 18) 4:11 – This story parallels Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. Nineveh is the prodigal, God the parent, and Jonah the son who is resentful that God has been merciful.