

# The Literary Art Of Jonah

by Moshe Pelli

The Book of Jonah is one of the most fascinating books in the Hebrew Bible. No wonder that it attracted the attention of many scholars and commentators throughout the ages. From the post-biblical period to this day, Jews and Christians, professors and nonprofessors of faith alike, were intrigued by this enigmatic story. Thousands of books and essay, studies and dissertations, and numerous sermons and articles, have been written about this small book.

One is especially overwhelmed by the multiplicity of possible interpretations: theological, moral, psychological, to name a few disciplines. The number of approaches to the understanding of the text vary as well, from the literal reading to the allegorical, from the symbolic to the mystical.

As we study the treatment of the Book of Jonah in modern times, we note two major schools of interpretation. The first is the "traditional" school which accepts the story of Jonah as factual history. The other is the literary school, which, generally speaking, stresses the imaginative and creative aspects of the book. This latter school of thought does not take the Book of Jonah literally. Scholars in this group have treated the Book of Jonah as a parable, or an allegory; some have considered it a poetical myth, dream, vision, legend, didactic work and the like. The study of this book is not without its anecdotal windfall; one recent article purports to scrutinize Jonah as a 'schlemiel' . . . 'Schlimazel' may be a better term. . . .

What is so beautiful about this little book is that, with all the thousands of works on Jonah, the hermeneutic possibilities have not been fully explored.

My interest lies primarily in the literary, creative and imaginative aspects of the book as an artistic expression of human experience. This human experience, typically, involves an encounter with the Almighty. Dealing with the book of Jonah as a work of literary art does not - and should not - diminish its value to theology or to faith. On the contrary, through a literary analysis, the lasting message to humanity is heard loud and clear. Its timeless art comes across the generations and millennia and touches the modern man, who - not unlike Jonah - finds himself at times running away from God in search of himself. My reading of Jonah presupposes an artistic author, or editor, as composer of the Book of Jonah in its final form. The literary devices used and the artistic structure of the story attest to the correctness of this presupposition.

A preview of the book will help us understand its structure. The book consists of four chapters. Chapter one relates the mission given to Jonah by God and Jonah's attempt to escape to Tarshish. The main scene takes place on the boat during a storm. Jonah acknowledges his responsibility for causing the storm and offers himself as

a sort of sacrifice to the raging God so as to save the innocent sailors. As he is being thrown off the boat, the sea calms down, and the sailors offer sacrifices, thanking God and acknowledging his presence.

In chapter two, Jonah is saved by God, and is swallowed by a big fish. Still inside the fish, Jonah offers thanks to God for his rescue, and indeed is now being saved again as the fish throws him onto the land.

Chapter three returns to the initial mission. Without actually accepting the prophetic undertaking, Jonah does go to Nineveh and prophesies its destruction. The people of Nineveh repent and God reverses his early decision, now saving the city and its inhabitants.

In chapter four, for the first time, Jonah explains the reason for evading the mission initially, and now desires death. He goes out of the city. Through two symbolic illustrations, that of the gourd and the worm, God presents his position concerning the sinful people of Nineveh who repented following Jonah's prophecies. God is the last to speak, for His is the final word in the matter. Jonah's answer is left for oblivion and is totally omitted from the text. Neither do we know what happened to the people of Nineveh.

A close reading of the text reveals several significant repetitions and patterns which should draw our attention to the centrality of chapter one within the story. The first chapter is artistically structured so as to allude, in subtle forms, to some of the most important aspects of the story. From the very beginning of the book, the sensitive reader notes the repetition of certain words and phrases used in such a way as to arouse his/her attention. Indeed, these repetitions which do not contribute any new information are intended to serve as clues for the understanding of the story and its message. They are employed to enrich the artistic narrative of the book.

The third verse is quite puzzling: "but Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord; and he went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord." The biblical narrator is almost always laconic and concise, citing that which is significant and informative and omitting the insignificant. Yet in this verse, the narrator repeats the name Tarshish, Jonah's desired place of escape, three times. Clearly, this repetition does not contribute any new geographical information. However, this repetition - Tarshish! - creates a rhythm in the story of Jonah's escape, and is intended to reveal Jonah's emotions. Through the use of this technique, the narrator externalizes Jonah's spiritual and emotional state as he attempts to evade his prophetic mission. We may hear his heart beat, if we so desire, or the tempo of his escape. The

puzzle of the runaway prophet, his behavior and his moral stand intensifies. The imaginative reader may even find in this repetition an echo of a terse dialogue (which, of course, does not exist in our text but nevertheless is quite realistic) between Jonah and a mariner as to the destination of the ship.

Whether Tarshish refers to Tartessus in Spain or to Tunis concerns us less than the notion of Tarshish as "a faraway place," the end of the world, so to speak. The biblical narrator alludes to this notion of Tarshish here as well as elsewhere in the Bible.

Similarly, we must pay attention to another repetition in the beginning of chapter one which also serves to enhance the artistic qualities of the book. The first word in the phrase which God commissions Jonah is: "Arise,"

וַיִּקְרָא . The verse reads, "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and inform them that their wickedness has become known to me." The word "arise" is very often used in the Bible as a preparatory expression which calls for action. When used, the word does not connote that one has actually to rise in order to act, although the original meaning of the word was to rise. The narrator, however, utilizes this linguistic convention of expression for ironic purposes in order to build some tension between the divine directive and Jonah's act. God commands him "arise," (1:2), so Jonah "rose" (1:3). The reader is full of expectations. The narrator indeed wants him, by use of the identical verb "to rise," to assume that Jonah is about to undertake the mission. But Jonah rises in order to escape. The narrator employs that very word, "arise," in chapter three as God sends him for the second time on the prophetic mission. The imperative "arise" also appears in the shipmaster's statement in chapter one: "What meanest thou that thou sleepest? Arise, call upon God" (1.6).

In addition to the ironic function of the word "arise," this expression is intended to relate major cycles within the story to one another. These cycles form an intrinsic structure, or underlying pattern, in chapter one which contain the main themes of the story. These cycles serve to unify the story and solidify the various components in the book. This overall structure is of closing in, somewhat resembling an entrapment. From the beginning, the entrapment is depicted by Jonah's portrayal as being selected by God to be His messenger; he is singled out by God for a prophetic mission, and the authoritarian command is unequivocal about Jonah's obligation to fulfill the mission.

During the storm, while everyone else is looking to alleviate the situation, Jonah goes down into the innermost parts of the ship (which, by the way, parallels his act of going down to Joppa). Further, he is "fast asleep" (1:5). The shipmaster, the omnipotent authority on board the ship, is a reminder of the divine mission imposed on Jonah. He calls on Jonah, as God did previously: "arise," and his message is "call upon thy God." In this cycle of the

story, we note the structural pattern of the book: the authority selects Jonah for a mission, and Jonah is reminded of it through the sub-plot of the shipmaster and the storm.

Typically, Jonah's reaction is known only from his very eloquent silence. Indeed, this meaningful silence characterizes Jonah as a runaway prophet throughout the book. This lacuna in the story causes the reader to seek explanation and to ask the following questions: What does Jonah answer the shipmaster? If he does not speak, why doesn't he? Undoubtedly, the narrator's portrayal of Jonah as being silent and the apparent omission of Jonah's answer are skillfully planned. It is intended to build expectations in the reader and to open the story for a number of possible future developments. More significantly, this silence manifests the principal movement in the flow of the story: the movement is fleeing, running away, escaping. Jonah has escaped from the presence of God in the first cycle upon the prophetic appointment as he goes down to a boat sailing to Tarshish. Now Jonah continues his escape in the second cycle of the story, at the encounter with the shipmaster; and the narrator is true to his original characterization of Jonah as a silent escapist rather than a rebelling fighter.

The third cycle takes place as the sailors cast lots to find out who is to blame for the storm. The entrapment structure recurs as Jonah again is the one selected; he is, in a sense, entrapped. The verse reads: "and the lot fell upon Jonah." The proverbial lot falls upon him first as he is commissioned by God, and this structure intensifies for the second time as he is entrapped by the shipmaster.

In the fourth cycle, the entrapment is further enhanced as Jonah is physically captured. The third-cycle entrapment of the lot casting, clarifies the nature of Jonah's entrapment. Here it is obvious that Jonah's problem goes beyond human idiosyncrasy, as we would assume from the encounter with the shipmaster. It is now apparent that Jonah's problem lies in the realm of the super-human. Unknown powers - God or fate - are after Jonah. Upon admitting his responsibility, the sailors "cast him forth into the sea" (1:15). This act is highly important since it covertly reflects one of the messages of the book. The act foreshadows, at this preliminary stage, the fate of the individual who seems to prefer his own narrow and limited interests to those related to the well-being of humanity. The traditional commentators explain that Jonah had either a "professional" pride dictating his action, namely, the concern that the people of Nineveh would repent and thus his prophecy of doom would not occur, and he would be considered a false prophet, or, Jonah had a "national" concern for the fate of Israel once its enemy, Nineveh, would be saved, and eventually defeat Israel.

According to this concept, God is depicted as having concern for humanity in general, whereas Jonah is portrayed as narrow-minded. At a later stage of the story,

this ostensible characterization of Jonah is given a significant twist: Jonah appears to have acted or refrained from action as a result of deep theological conviction. Only at a later development in the story do we note that in the core of the Book of Jonah there lies a basic theological dispute regarding the attributes of God and his relation to man.

One should note that this inner rhythm of the story, that movement of enclosure which continuously zeroes in on Jonah, does not end in the act of the sailors casting him into the sea. The swallowing of Jonah by the great fish continues this movement of entrapment in a physical sense. Importantly, this is a spiritual entrapment for it puts Jonah, for the first time since his initial encounter and his escape, vis-a-vis his God. Indeed, now Jonah is at the mercy of God. What appears to be an act of rescue through the fish may in effect become Jonah's final trap. It is not death which is the final trap of the prophet escaping from his mission. The final entrapment of the runaway prophet is indeed the very renewal of the original prophetic commission. Yet Jonah is still not content with the mission, and this is apparent in chapter four.

The cyclical movement is now completed. Jonah is no further from his God, or from his mission, than he was in the beginning of the book. The biblical narrator endeavors to let the reader know of this cyclical movement by using almost identical phrases in chapter three, thus relating both missions. Chapter three begins as follows: "And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying: Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and make unto it the proclamation that I bid thee" (3:1-2).

The significance of chapter one, the scenes it depicts, and the characters it portrays, to the understanding of the entire book is overlooked by most scholars dealing with the book. With very few exceptions, the role of the sailors, for example, does not appear to merit much attention in the literature on Jonah. Thus the traditional reading of the book loses so much of its artistic qualities.

In my interpretation of the book, the sailors play a vital role through their deeds as well as their words. The narrator has very cleverly foreshadowed the theological and spiritual message of the book, as enunciated in the last chapter, in the first chapter. In many respects, the sailors serve to foreshadow and to parallel the people of Nineveh. The author of the book establishes many similarities between the sailors and the Ninevites. Both are delineated as confronting Jonah and as having some conflict with him. Both are portrayed as heathens who, at first, do not believe in Jonah's God. Yet the narrator depicts the sailors as repenting by saying "then the men feared the Lord Exceedingly" (1:16). Their repentance purposefully foreshadows the repentance of the Ninevites.

This parallel between the sailors and the Ninevites is revealed to us gradually, as early portions of the story, especially in chapter one, are so artistically constructed as

to fill in omissions in the latter part of the book. Thus we have a complex and artistic structure of the story which is attractive and interesting, and calls the readers to be involved in deciphering the overt and covert messages in the story.

As mentioned above, by casting Jonah into the sea, the sailors enact or concretize the message of the Divine concern for all of God's creatures in contrast to the limited interests of the individual. The prayer which the sailors say in chapter one functions as the missing argument of the people of Nineveh, in chapter three, pleading for their lives vis-a-vis the prophet who desires their destruction. "We beseech Thee, O Lord," the sailors cry, "we beseech Thee, let us not perish for this man's life." Listening carefully to the inner echoes of the text is thus very rewarding. For the conflict between the people of Nineveh and Jonah is thus intensified beyond the one-sided conflict as reported overtly by the narrator. The parallel between the sailors and the Ninevites enriches the story, as the Ninevites seem to be saying - as were the sailors - "let us not perish for this man's life." God appears in the last chapter as Supreme Judge, deciding between two rivals in a theological argument which will be discussed below.

The mariners' pleading "lay not upon us innocent blood" (1:14) refers, of course, to Jonah who is about to be cast into the sea so as to save the ship and its crew. However, from the correspondence which we have established between the sailors and the Ninevites in the context of our reading, we may also hear an echo of the people of Nineveh continuing to plead for their own lives in opposition to Jonah, saying, as it were, 'Do not hold us responsible for this man's death.' More significant is the latter part of this verse, which reads: "For Thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased Thee" (1:14). This phrase establishes, at this early stage of the story, the epitome of the idea which is about to be uttered and enacted by God in the last chapter. Namely, the utter subjugation of man to the omnipotent God. Additionally, the saving of the mariners by God in chapter one foretells and foreshadows God's saving the people of Nineveh in chapter three.

Another action of the mariners serves a purpose which transcends the scope of the overt plot in the first chapter and extends beyond the boundaries of the textual information it contains. The mariners, we are told, "offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows" (1:16). This act helps explain a textual omission in chapter two. While chapter three begins with Jonah being told again to go on the mission to Nineveh, nowhere does the narrator reveal an overt change in Jonah's mind to undertake this mission. Only in the last verse of Jonah's thanksgiving psalm do we have a vague allusion as follows: "I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; that which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is of the Lord" (2:10). This phrase by itself does not declare Jonah's change of heart nor his intention to undertake the mission

to Nineveh. The narrator, however, subtly relates Jonah's phrase to the last act of the mariners, namely, sacrifices and vows. Both sacrifices and vows signify the mariners' fearing "the Lord exceedingly"; thus, the parallel indirectly establishes Jonah's fear of the Lord as well. Moreover, through the structural parallel between the mariners and the people of Nineveh, we have concluded that the mariners are characterized as fearing the Lord exceedingly, foreshadowing perhaps the repentance of the people of Nineveh. Thus, their act of sacrifices and vows is not only related to Jonah's fear of the Lord but to his inferred repentance.

Noting these patterns in the story, we may now examine the protagonist, Jonah. The author of the book clearly intends to delineate an acute irony that characterizes Jonah's personality. Jonah is made to undergo a preliminary process that is later to take place with the people of Nineveh, namely, sin, repentance, and deliverance from punishment (or rescue). For, indeed, Jonah is held as a transgressor in his attempt to evade the prophetic mission. Upon his consent to undertake the mission again, he is being rescued (God instructing the fish to vomit Jonah upon dry land). It appears that Jonah is ready to accept God's compassion as directed at himself. Yet he is unwilling to accept a similar treatment by God regarding the people of Nineveh.

This apparent enigma about Jonah, coupled with the very notion of his attempt to escape from the presence of the Lord, has perplexed readers of the book since time immemorial. Numerous attempts have been made to explain this phenomenon. There is a theory which is predominantly Christian that Jonah represents a narrow, rather parochial view of God, and a limited concept of His providence over the Israelite nation alone. By contrast, the author of the book views God as a universal God, whose providence is over the heathens as well. Thus, according to this theory, the author criticizes Jonah and his limited, nationalistic view. Others, as I have mentioned before, attribute Jonah's refusal to prophesy to Nineveh and his desire to evade the prophetic mission as resulting from his love for Israel, knowing that Nineveh, or Assyria, is to destroy Israel. The Midrash portrays Jonah as being apprehensive lest his prophecy would not materialize, upon the Ninevites' repentance, and he would appear to be a liar and a false prophet to the heathens.

This delineation of Jonah is rather negative. Accordingly, he is made to look a complete fool when he flees from God into the sea, which is ostensibly beyond the realm of the providence of God. Yet, Jonah is the one who openly declares the reign of God as reaching the sea. He tells the sailors: "I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who hath made the sea and the dry land" (1:9). This apparent inconsistency makes him more than just a fool and would also reveal a weak literary characterization on the part of the author. As mentioned earlier, this concept of Jonah

is epitomized in one scholar's portrayal of him as a Schlemiel.

I believe that this negative portrayal of Jonah indicates an inability to fathom the text and a lack of sensitivity to discern the literary techniques employed by the author of the book. It is inconceivable that the author would be insensitive to the unique situation which he had created, or that he would utilize it to portray a stupid prophet. For the act of fleeing from the presence of God and evading the prophetic mission is indeed unique. Against the background of the biblical set of values and *Weltanschauung*, Jonah is made to perform an exceptionally extraordinary act which requires courage, decisiveness, and a great deal of *Hutzpah*. I am referring to Jonah but, of course, this is true of the author of the book who has characterized the prophet as such. Furthermore, it is far-fetched that the editor who included the Book of Jonah in the biblical canon would have this superficial view of the spiritual traits of Jonah.

A thorough examination of the book should reveal that we are confronting a central theological problem around which the narrative is structured. Let us examine Jonah's own explanation as to his position: "I pray thee, O Lord," he says in the last chapter, "was not this my saying, when I was yet in mine own country? Therefore I fled beforehand to Tarshish; for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and compassionate, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil" (4:2). To paraphrase Jonah: I know that you tend to apply Midat Harahamim (that is, merciful justice, or leniency), that you are inclined to forgive the transgressor upon his repentance, and not apply Midat Hadin (strict justice, or severity). I know it, yet I, Jonah, tend to disagree with Thee.

The sensitive and knowledgeable reader should not fail to discern that the kernel of Jonah's argument is a quotation from the Book of Joel 2:13, as follows: "And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for He is gracious and compassionate, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy, and repenteth Him of the evil." Jonah obviously alludes to Joel's stand regarding God's merciful justice, Midat Harahamim, which he, Jonah, opposes. It is eye-opening and of utmost importance to discover that the King of Nineveh, too, is made to use a partial quotation from the Book of Joel in the verse immediately following the one cited by Jonah. His goal, as planned by a skillful author, is to plead for God's mercy and for the employment of Midat Harahamim - leniency - upon their repentance, against Jonah's expressed plea for Midat Hadin - strict justice. The King says: "Who knoweth whether He will not turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?" (3:9). The verse in Joel reads: "Who knoweth whether He will not turn and repent" (2:14). The author of the Book of Jonah has the King of Nineveh employ a

quotation taken from Joel in order to plead for leniency. Joel, although a prophet of doom, nevertheless allows a last-minute repentance (2:12). Jonah is portrayed by the author as adhering to the concept of Midat Hadin as the true attribute of God. This concept is manifested in the well-known verses in Exodus 34:6-7, as follows:

The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers' upon the children's children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation.

I may add that the affinity between Joel and Jonah may explain the Rabbinic suggestion that the Ninevites have not repented whole-heartedly, and that Jonah is aware of it. Accordingly, by use of the quotation from Joel, the author could have alluded to Joel's criterion for authentic repentance which appears in that verse in Joel: "And rend your heart, and not your garment" (2:13). Thus Jonah, in effect, accuses the people of Nineveh of a false or partial repentance.

The author of the Book of Jonah appears to have taken a stand which is contrary to the one expressed by his protagonist. We have previously noted that the author had arranged the plot in such a way as to portray Jonah as desiring Midat Harahamim - leniency - for himself, yet demanding the severity of judgment upon his fellow men. In the final encounter with God, the author arranges the situation to highlight the intense contradiction found in Jonah's image, personality and outlook. Through use of the gourd and the worm, God is made to prove a major point to Jonah. It is not, as suggested, that Jonah is selfish and petty, and that he is interested in his own well-being or reputation. Would this kind of proof necessitate the utilization of an almighty God? God is brought down, so to speak, in order to clarify to Jonah that he, Jonah, is inconsistent in his theological doctrine; that he has a double standard; that his argument for severity in justice lacks authenticity, and that he, Jonah, lacks integrity. Who but God should be the best choice for expressing the divine attributes?

The proverbial gourd and worm, used by God to concretize the contradictions within Jonah, are also intrinsically bound to the Book of Joel. We have seen Jonah employing an argument extracted from Joel, and now God is made to answer in kind. The gourd and the worm are supposed to exemplify to Jonah the realization of Joel's prophecy which has some bearing on the theological ques-

tion of God's attributes, namely whether Midat Hadin or Midat Harahamim prevails in regards to repentance. Joel presents a very powerful apocalyptic prophecy of the coming of the mighty and numberless locust which destroys all growing things:

Be ashamed, O ye husbandmen, wail, O ye vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley; because the harvest of the field is perished. The vine is withered, and the fig-tree languisheth; the pomegranate-tree, the palm-tree also, and the apple-tree, even all trees of the field are withered (Joel, 1:11-12).

Joel's prophecy emphasizes the very "wither" repeatedly as a most terrible catastrophe. Let us note that the Hebrew for "be ashamed" in Joel's prophecy is *Hovish*, הוֹבִישׁ , which is etymologically related to *Yavesh*, יָבֵשׁ , meaning wither. No only do they sound alike, but in fact *Hovish* could be both "be ashamed" and "wither." We note also that the verb "perish," אָבַד , appears in Joel's prophecy. Significantly, the author of the fable of the gourd and the worm capitalizes on these two verbs: אָבַד , וַיִּבֶשׁ ("and it smote the gourd, that it withered").

Jonah, who disagrees with Joel's viewpoint, must, in our story, undergo the experience of which he is talking in theological terms, very much like the experience of his repentance. The worm-locust destroy the gourd, thus paralleling the catastrophe prophesied by Joel. The author of the Book of Jonah makes the point that the theological discussion is far from being a metaphysical question. It is, rather, a down-to-earth problem involving the fate of human beings.

Against the background of the prophecy of Joel, we fully understand the meaning and the message of the fable of the gourd which puzzled many scholars and readers. One must bear in mind that Joel's prophecy of doom provides a solution for repentance. Jonah, advocating the severity in justice, demands the complete annihilation of the vine, the fig-tree, the apple-tree (appearing in the prophecy of Joel) - and the gourd and the people of Nineveh. Yet Jonah discovers quite surprisingly (and the reader shares the surprise with him) that he, Jonah, has pity [ חָסַם = to be sparing of] on the gourd and that his demand for Midat Hadin contains a destructive contradiction. Upon his discovery, God being instrumental in this insight, Jonah can do nothing but remain quiet. The last verse of the Book of Jonah, verse 12, a verse which has not been written in our text, is the thundering silence of Jonah.