

Jonah

Q&R

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Jon: Hi, this is Jon at The Bible Project. This week on the podcast, we're releasing a series of questions and responses that Tim and I did on the book of Jonah. Likely, you've heard the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet, swallowed by a large fish and sent to the city of his enemies to help them find salvation and the love of God. It's a remarkable story and it has a surprising ending.

Tim and I discussed this book and we answer questions from you, such as, is Jonah a real person or is this a parable? Why did God choose Jonah? And why did Jesus talk about Jonah in Matthew 12 in relation to his death and resurrection? We'll look at those questions and more. Here we go.

Tim: I think many people are introduced to this short book of the Bible in a really whitewashed, watered-down form of the children's story. Jonah is a perfect example of what your expectations, what you think you're going to get out of something determines what it is you'll get out of it.

Most people come to the book of Jonah thinking they're going to get out of it some moral message that's about as profound as a children's book. Unfortunately, that is just a really shallow under-reading of the book. Usually, I have three children's books at home. I collect them on Jonah because I'm so fascinated.

I have three versions of Jonah in children's book at home, and two of those three, simply omit the last chapter. They don't even include the last chapter.

Jon: Oh, yeah. In the children's book.

Tim: Yes. The whole books about evil people repenting and finding God's mercy.

Jon: And Jonah having done that.

Tim: And Jonah's the hero, forgetting the...

[crosstalk 00:02:06]

Jon: If you do the last chapter, the kids are going to be like, "Wait a second."

Tim: Yeah, the last chapters too sophisticated for toddlers, apparently. Anyway, all that to say the book of Jonah is the work of literary ninjas. It's an incredibly sophisticated story, and most people aren't aware of just how profound and subtle and brilliant this short story actually is.

So what we begin with, I'll just do a quick overview. The story is a short story. It's one of the few other than like Ruth, kind of Esther, examples of the short story in the Old Testament. It's told in four scenes that are brilliantly crafted.

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There's all of this symmetry and pairing between the two. But the first is about Jonah being sent to the worst, most murderous pagan city and Empire in the ancient world. He refuses and ends up going to get on a boat to run away from God. As it turns out, his rebellion brings disaster on himself and other people.

And so, once he becomes identified as the source of the problem, the sailors repent, and Jonah asked to get thrown overboard. Then he gets swallowed by a huge fish. In any story that you would read when somebody gets thrown overboard in a storm, —

Jon: You think it's over for them?

Tim: Yes. And then, if they will get swallowed by a gigantic fish, the story is over. So then the twists—and this is what most of the children's books focus on—

Jon: Because it's awesome.

Tim: Because it's awesome. It's crazy. It's such a bizarre image of a man being swallowed by a fish, and then, you know, composing a beautiful poem cramped in the belly of a monster. It's just very bizarre. He kind of says he's sorry, but not really. He says that he is going to follow God now, and the response of God to Jonah's prayer is that the fish vomit Jonah onto the land. The Hebrew word for vomit is Qa [SP].

Jon: Qa. It sounds more like a cough than a vomit.

Tim: So he gets vomited on to the dry land, then he goes to Nineveh. He preaches a very odd sermon, and beyond all belief, the king the people, and even the cows are brought in on a huge act of repentance. This makes—last chapter—Jonas so angry, he wants to die.

Then he goes outside of the city and there's this odd series of events with the vine that grows up over him, and then a worm that eats it, and then he wants to die again. He's having this debate with God. He chooses God out for being way too nice, being too merciful and forgiving.

He says, "The reason I didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place is because I knew you would forgive my enemies." And God says, "Wait, can't I have compassion for people if that's what I choose to do, and their cows?" And then the book ends with the word "cows."

Jon: Yeah, that's the secret to the whole book.

Tim: That's the story. It's contained within a larger work called The Book of the Twelve Prophets. It's the only book among all the Hebrew prophets that is only narrative. All of the other books of the prophets in the Old Testament are collections of the words

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of that prophet and sometimes telling a story about them. But only Jonah is complete story from beginning to end. And only Jonah is a really horrible, rebellious prophet, who consistently just doesn't like the God that he is supposed to be serving.

So this book is unique in its purpose, its style, how it goes about making its point. It's brilliant. And that's the big overview of the book.

Jon: Cool. To kind of dovetail on that then, Andrew Grimmer said that...you said it's unique book, right, the story about a prophet instead of a prophecy. So what you just said. Do you think that Jonah of the story was a real person or is he like one of Jesus's parables?

Tim: Right, well, that's good.

Jon: I think a lot of people are asking this question.

Tim: We got numerous character questions.

Jon: Someone just asked in the live feed, "Is this a parable or did this really happen?" Simeon also asked, "Well respected Christian writers such as CS Lewis held doubts about the historical truth of the book of Jonah, what do we know about the historicity of this book and how does it fit into the overarching storyline of Scripture?"

I mean, there's a lot of crazy stuff that happens in the Bible that makes you go like, "Whoa, did that really happen?" But this, in particular, I think for people being swallowed by a whale—

Tim: Fish.

Jon: A fish. Not a whale, a large fish.

Tim: I didn't ever call it a whale.

Jon: A large fish.

Tim: A big fish.

Jon: Being swallowed by a big fish, surviving, is pretty strange. We've never heard of that before. But there's a lot of things in the Bible that happened and we're okay with that, but there is something specific about the book of Jonah that does set it apart as being more satirical or more of a parable. What are your thoughts on that?

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Tim: This is something of a hot topic. And sometimes even what somebody thinks about the book of Jonah, literal or metaphorical, in some circles it's like this litmus test of whether or not you're a true Christian, whether you believe in miracles. Let's just say that up front. Jon and I are both followers of Jesus and my whole worldview is built on the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, which is a very hard thing to believe.

Jon: Which is stranger than surviving a fish.

Tim: That's much stranger than surviving a fish. Yeah, totally. So compared the recreation of Jesus into a new physical form and the resurrection of the dead, that is way more off the charts than the guy getting swallowed and surviving from the fish.

So all that to say is, this has nothing to do with whether or not you believe in miracles. I don't think. The question that we're asking is, what did the author intend and what kind of book does the author want us to read it as? This is a question about what clues has the author given us?

This isn't the only mention of Jonah in the Old Testament. So we know that Jonah was a figure in Israelite history because he's mentioned one other time in the Old Testament. We talked about that at the beginning of the video. He's mentioned one other time. It's a very short cameo. It's truly a cameo.

Jon: It would be a cameo because he's such a popular prophet and he shows up...

Tim: So it's one of Israel's worst [inaudible 00:09:44] he's prophesying that a really bad idolatrous king of Israel is going to win a battle. And it's just presented as he's a prophet, he said it would happen. But as a reader of that story, you don't like Jeroboam, and the only thing you know about Jonah is Jonah prophesies in favor of this guy. That's all you know.

You read on into the rest of the Bible, and you come to a passage in the book of Amos who was just right after Jonah's period, and he prophesies about Jeroboam II too as well. He specifically says the territory that Jonah's...He doesn't mention Jonah but he mentioned the exact territory that Jeroboam won in that battle he's going to lose because he's such an unjust, idolatrous king.

That sets the stage for us to come to the book of Jonah and be like, "Yeah, I don't know about this guy."

Jon: We're suspicious of Jonah.

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Tim: Or at least to just say, "The only thing we know is that he made a prophecy that seemed like a genuine prophecy but that got reverted by Amos." That's all we know. If there was a prophet we wanted to pick to represent Israel's national, God and country kind of mindset, God is always for us, and always against our enemies, Jonah is the guy to represent that.

So he's not a parabolic figure. Jonah's a figure of history. So then the question is, is this a series of events that Jonah experienced and then he passed on the accounts of that experience, and he himself compose the book? It would seem an odd book for Jonah himself to compose since he's the butt of the book critique. I mean, literally and metaphorically, he's a butthead. In the book, he's a jerk.

So it seems odd that someone would compose this kind of book about themselves because it paints them as such a horrible person. But it's possible that he preserved the tradition and the stories about his account, and pass them on.

It's also possible that an author has composed a parable-like account, a fictional account, and has given clues within the story that we are meant to read this as a parable about or based on, inspired by a historical figure. In my view, either of those interpretations is consistent with an orthodox view of the Bible as God's word. If the author wants to write a parable under the Holy Spirit's guidance, he can do so.

Jon: It's important to take a stand either way.

Tim: Yeah. And there are people who hold that the book is satire and very literally sophisticated, who hold that it has origins in historical events, and that hold that it's a parable. There are pros and cons, for and against. I've made a big list.

I did over a month-long sermon series on the book of Jonah at Door of Hope. You can find them all on my website at timmackie.com. The whole first message I go into this question in a more detail.

Jon: I think for some people, it's very sensitive, because, well, if you're not going to take this literally, what else are you not going to take literally? And there's this like slippery slope of, well, then the Bible, none of the stories can be trusted, and can you even trust the stories in the gospel?

I'm very sensitive to that, and I think we want to make sure that when you read the Bible, you take it very seriously and as God's Word.

Tim: Yes. But the question is, an author has chosen a certain literary vehicle or mode to communicate to a reader. And just because something is narrative in form, do I assume that this author is writing in a historical narrative? we know that that's not

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always the case because Jesus told narratives that he meant to be fictional. He called them parables. Jesus told lots of stories that were fictional parables.

The challenge for this one is that it names a historical figure. So I think the clue always is what kind of literature does the author intend for us to take this as and what are the clues within it. The gospel authors, for example, or the authors of the book of Kings, or Samuel, it's very clear they put in dates, and they put in contemporary historical events, they want you to take these events as historical events.

The book of Jonah is peculiar because it names a historical person, but there's no other historical detail in the book. Like the King of Nineveh, there's really only about two or three Assyrian kings that it could be referring to, but they're not given any names. It's as if all the historical details of the story have been kind of generalized so that the book can speak to any audience in any place.

Jon: So regardless of whether you believe that this happened or not, shouldn't destroy your view of the Bible or your faith in Jesus. It's not something to fight about. I really like if people want to take one or the other, but make sure no matter what you believe about that to read it in the way it was intended to be read.

Tim: With a message.

Jon: And you don't lose that message.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Whatever view you have, the book has a theological message that it wants to...and unfortunately, people get fixated on the fish or fixated on the historical question, and then they never actually read the message that's coming from the book, which is the whole point is to let the book mess with you.

Jon: Dive back in the questions. We're going to do one from Nicole G.

Tim: Nicole G, you say, "I would expect God to choose upright, God-fearing people to be his prophets. And yet God chose Jonah, a man who appears to be neither. Is there anything we should learn from this?"

Yes, and yes. Yes, and yes. That is what we would expect. That's pretty exactly what we would expect. And what you find starting, man, from the first book of the Bible is God consistently chooses extremely flawed people to carry out His purposes. Some more flawed than others.

Like Abraham, decent guy, he gets it right. When he gets it right, he really gets it right. But dude, when he gets it wrong, he gives his wife away two different times, so

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he really gets it wrong. You have Samson. I mean, he's a bad man. Samson's not a good man.

Jon: A lot of the judges.

Tim: Jephthah, thug. In terms of prophets, so you're asking about prophets, this was a challenge in Israel where Israel and the kings had a difficult time discerning who were the true prophets who spoke on God's behalf. Jeremiah talks about this, Micah talks about this.

So there were lots of prophets who said they were speaking on God's behalf, but actually, they weren't truly representing the covenant of God of Israel. And so, Jonah occupies the strange space in between where the word of the Lord comes to him but we're kind of suspicious of him. Then his character shows that he's not a good man at all.

But the point actually of the book of Jonah is about this tendency that tends to happen in the hearts and minds of God's people is once God's people see themselves as a unique group who have received God's mercy, they very quickly form after that an arrogance, hostility towards the nonchosen ones. And that's exactly what the book of Jonah is critiquing.

So the book of Jonah is actually critiquing a mindset that happens among God's own covenant people, and Jonah becomes the target of the critique.

Jon: Don't be like this guy.

Tim: The point of Jonah is not to get us to think, "Oh, can God speak through and use a really bad person?" Yeah, He does so a lot in the Bible.

Jon: Another example of that would be Balaam, right?

Tim: Balaam, yeah. He's not an Israelite prophet.

Jon: He wasn't an Israelite. He was who knows how gnarly have a duty was or not? But he wasn't following God or fearing God. Then he prophesied on God's behalf.

Tim: That right.

Jon: But he's not like the prophets of the prophetic books in the Bible?

Tim: Correct.

Jon: So this is unique. Jonah is one of the 12 minor prophets.

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Tim: This is something that I mentioned at the beginning of the video is that the story presents a caricature of all the key characters. So you've got the prophet who does the exact opposite of everything a prophet ought to do. And it's actually the Non-Israelites, the sailors and the kings, who respond exactly appropriately to God. And it's that contrast between the two where the message of the book lies, I think. So good question Nicole. It raises what's going on at the heart of the book.

Jon: Should we do this one by Just Wise?

Tim: Yeah, Just Wise.

Jon: Just wise Words. That's not your real name.

Tim: Maybe Just Wise.

Jon: Maybe "Just Wise" is.

Tim: Jessica Wiseman. Jessica Wise? We don't know.

Jon: So you wrote, "Why is Jonah so angry at the fact that God had compassion over the city of Nineveh? He himself experienced God's compassion when he saved him from dying in the big fish that just happened after Jonah had fled from him.

Jonah, he knows that God's compassionate and he's stoked that God's compassionate towards him in the fish, but also his people, Israel, he's stoked that God's compassionate. Why is he got this thing at Nineveh?

Tim: The book of Jonah assumes you know some things about Nineveh and the things you would have learned from reading the books of 1 and 2 Kings. So to conjure up the emotions that the Israelite would feel when they heard the words Nineveh or the Assyrians, it's the same emotions that happen when we talk about the Nazis in the modern world.

Jon: Whoa, that's strong.

Tim: Yes. The Assyrians, they weren't the first Ancient Near Eastern Empire but they were the second, and they were then the most militarized, violent, conquest empire that the ancient world had ever seen, on the largest scale. Their warfare policies are still today like people are just, "Holy cow."

Jon: Disturbing.

Tim: Yeah, very disturbing. They built their empire by, you know, sending out large armies. They would conquer a city and impale people, pile up their heads on the

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walls, skin people alive, and then they would deport all the people of the city and take them to another place. It was horrifying what the Ninevites were known for.

The Assyrians did this very thing to many Israelite cities. It's fascinating. You guys should google the "Lachish reliefs." Have I ever shown this to you before?

Jon: No.

Tim: Oh, so amazing.

Jon: How do you?

Tim: Lachish, L-A-C-H-I-S-H. There you go. First thing you Google. So the city of Nineveh which is modern-day Mosul was the capital city. When they began excavating the ancient palace, they found all of these wall carvings that we're all about the exploits of the kings of Nineveh.

The Luchich reliefs is a long series of carvings that retells the story of the Assyrian armies conquering an Israelite city of Lachish. The stories told in the Bible and the depiction, if you just search through the images here, there are pictures of Israelites getting impaled, there's a picture of an Israelite getting his skin peeled off with a knife outside in view of the city walls. There's sieged walls and all this. Just absolutely horrifying.

Jon: A lot of archers.

Tim: A lot of archers. It's really amazing. So here's the point is that an ancient Israelite reader would also sympathize with Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites.

Jon: So when Jonah runs, you're kind of like, "Yeah, good on him."

Tim: Yeah, you're kind of like, "Yeah, I get it. I get it."

Jon: You're like, "Good, I hope he wouldn't go and do that."

Tim: Yes, totally. Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites is realistic, and it would have touched a nerve with Israelite readers. But at the same time, that raises attention in the biblical story itself. The bigger biblical story is that from the very beginning, the story of Abraham, God's purpose is to bring his blessing and salvation to all the nations through Israel. Which puts Israel in a really awkward situation when the nation's that God wants to bless and offer mercy to...

Jon: Is the baddest dudes in town.

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Tim: ...are your enemies. And so, that's what this books exploring here is that paradox that God's people find themselves in, when you have been the one to receive God's mercy, but then you have an enemy and you're struggling with the fact that God loves your enemy as much as He loves you, and that He wants your enemy to find the same mercy that you've discovered. And that's a very difficult thing to work through individually, much less on a corporate level.

So to answer your first party question, Nicole, that's why—

Jon: So to personalize this book, it would be helpful exercise when you read—

Tim: This is Just Wise question. Sorry. Go ahead.

Jon: To personalize this book, when you read it, pretend that Jonah's being called to that person or people group you hate the most.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: So whoever that is, put that person in your mind or that group of people in your mind, and that's who Jonah is going to, to get them to repent. You'd have to have not like them so much you don't even want them to find the grace of God.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: That group of people.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: It's a little convicting the fact that we all probably have those kinds of people in our hearts and we still need this book.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. It is important that the book doesn't just treat it as like the guys who stole Jonah's goat on a personal level. It's very political, and ethnic, and geopolitical.

Jon: A long hatred of people groups.

Tim: I mean, the books raises such a sensitive topic. It would be the equivalent of right now the enemy of, you know, much of the free West as a group called ISIS. So the point about the challenge of ISIS is where their headquarters become.

There's a battle in Fallujah going on right now. So it would be about a group of Christian missionaries, who actually instead of wanting the leaders of ISIS to be

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destroyed in that battle, to go share the good news about Jesus with them in hopes that they find God's mercy.

Jon: And the point of the book of Jonah is that we should want them—

Tim: If I have any kind of check in my heart about "no way, they deserve God's justice," then the book of Jonah is going to say, "What's underneath that? Why do you feel that way? Why do you think that you are in a privileged position to receive God's mercy, but somebody else is not in that same position?" That's what the book is trying to get at. It's powerful.

Jon: It's powerful.

Tim: So just where Jonah finds himself isn't a very hypocritical position by the end of the book. Because you're right, the only reason he is alive by the end of the book is because of God's mercy. And the thing that he's angry about by the end of the book is God's mercy. It's exposing him as self-deceived on a deep, deep level.

Of course, the reason why this book is so brilliant is because, by the end of the book, you as a reader feel superior to Jonah. You're like, "Oh, this idiot. I would never act like that."

Jon: It wins you over.

Tim: Yeah, wins you over to be like, "Yeah, look at this idiot. He's such a hypocrite and this kind of thing." And then the way the book ends, you realize the author is not smiling at you anymore. He's actually punching you in the gut because he's trying to expose what's inside of you.

Jon: Literary ninja.

Tim: Literary ninja.

Jon: Hey, does Hebrew have a word for whale? Some people were asking. Is that why it's big fish because there's no word for whale?

Tim: There are no whales in biblical Hebrew. Just big fish.

Jon: Big fish.

Tim: Yes. Dog. The word is "dog" in Hebrew. Dog.

Jon: Well, that's confusing. It's a whale.

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Tim: Yeah, a big fish. Whale, shark.

Jon: Cool. Next question. what do you think about five words, sermon here? Here we go. Oh, yeah, that's not a lot of magic. That's fine, Andrew. It's in a bunch in, I think.

Tim: Oh, yeah, Jonah's five-word sermon.

Jon: Why do we think it was just a five-word sermon and that wasn't it just like a summary, basically? Couldn't it be like all Jesus message in the synagogue in Luke 4 where we only have the beginning? Maybe he gave a really great sermon, and that was just the first five words.

Tim: It raises a good point. When people's speeches are represented in the Bible, they are certainly summaries. Even the long speeches in the book of Acts. When Peter gets up at Pentecost and he gives a long speech, but if you read it, you know it actually only takes about two minutes to read out loud. And surely, he spoke longer than two minutes.

So we're dealing with is a literary representation of Jonah's message. But that's all we have. But what you have to face all the same is that the author is representing Jonah's core message. And Jonah's core message is short. Jonah's core message doesn't mention God. It doesn't mention any of the normal things that the prophets did to people they preached at.

"Here's what you're doing wrong, here's how you're breaking God's law, here's how you need to respond to it, here's the warning of what will happen, and here's what will happen if you repent." That's like a standard prophetic sermon.

Jon: And if it was a summary, it would have summarized those points.

Tim: Yeah. So the representation of Jonah's message is, "You guys are going to be destroyed. The clock's ticking."

Jon: "Good luck."

Tim: That's it. So it raises the question of, is Jonah intentionally not saying what God is going to destroy you or why, and doesn't give any avenue for repentance and response. This story is so sophisticated; I do think it's intentional. It's presenting Jonah as being a minimalist because we already know he doesn't want these people to find God's mercy.

We already know he was willing to die, to give up his own life so that he wouldn't have to go to Nineveh. When he asked to be thrown off the boat in chapter 1, it's not because he's noble. I mean, why else do you get asked to be thrown out of a

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boat in the middle of a storm. It's because you want to die. And so he really, really doesn't want to go to Nineveh and he really doesn't want these people to find God's mercy.

It was actually Ray Lubeck, our first professor, he wrote a whole essay. You can google it. Ray Lubeck. There's a whole academic article asking the question, is Jonah's message intentional prophetic sabotage? That's his term, not mine. I think there's every reason that this author is painting the story to say, yes.

Jon: Just imagine you've been trying not to go there., you've even jumped out of a boat in the middle of a storm, you're doing everything you can, and then you are there—

Tim: He's resigned to...

[crosstalk 00:32:05]

Jon: He's resigned to himself. "Okay, I'll go." And then he shows up and he's like, "All right, you guys are going to be destroyed." I don't think he really changed his heart about these guys.

Tim: I don't think so at all.

Jon: I think that's the point.

Tim: Which is why we depicted Jonah is going to Nineveh but like—

Jon: So we're really beating up on Jonah here. I think a lot of people, that's hard for them because they've read a lot of children's books where Jonah's the hero. A lot of Sunday school lessons. And Jonah's kind of this dear figure. And also, he's a prophet in the Bible so they are all good guys. A lot of people get, I think, a little tense about how much you beat up Jonah in this.

Then someone just wrote in the live stream...this Yuri Alonzo 94. "Tim, from what verse do you interpret that Jonah hated to God. In Spanish that translates as displeased or deeply saddened. You say this is a prophet who hated God. And that's a strong word, hate. Do you want to back off that word at all? Where do you get that?"

Tim: It's good. It's an interpretive decision I'm making, but it's all about chapter 4. The reason children's books leave out chapter 4 on a regular basis is, because the portrait of Jonah and what it says about Jonah's character, is so harsh and so disturbing, that it's easier to not account for it.

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What it says is, "When Jonah saw that God forgave Nineveh," literally in Hebrew is it was [unintelligible 00:33:45]. It was evil in his eyes. For God to forgive Nineveh is evil to Jonah. And it's the classic words from Genesis 1, the knowledge of good and evil.

So Jonah's estimation of a God who would forgive then Ninevites is that, that God is evil. That's the language that the author uses. I don't know. Is the leap too far from there to say that Jonah hates his God

You're right, I'm one using the word "hate," but what else could it mean for the author to say that Jonah thought God was evil, doing evil to forgive Ninevites?

Jon: Maybe what it is is that Jonah likes God, and he likes the fact that God saves him and he likes that God loves Israel. So he likes maybe a version of God, but he doesn't like this God he's encountering.

Tim: Correct. Yeah, that's the whole point.

Jon: That's the whole point.

Tim: He would much prefer a—

Jon: He very much doesn't like, strongly dislikes, in fact, you may even say, hates possibly, that God he's encountering.

Tim: Yeah. He also no longer wants to live with this kind of God in his life. God tries to work with him two times. "Is your anger justified? You know, can I show compassion on people?" And Jonah shuts down and all he wants God to do is kill him.

Jon: So it's an interpretive move of sorts.

Tim: It is, that's right, but I don't think it's illegitimate one. Here we just have to deal with the fact that the Bible doesn't portray all of its main characters as heroes. Just the opposite. Some of them are flawed heroes and some of them are anti-heroes and some of them are just not good people at all.

I think Jonah chapter 4 is portraying Jonah in the worst light possible. And it's part of the book's characters, it's part of the literary style to get you to think that you are better than him so that you can receive the punch in the gut by the time the book finishes because Jonah never answers God's question. I mean what else could a book mean that ends with God asking the main character a question and that question will unlock the whole meaning of the book, and then the book ends without any answer to that question?

Jon: Maybe we're supposed to answer that question.

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Tim: Exactly. And that's the purpose of the book is not about Jonah, it's about you the reader. Dude, the book of Jonah is so amazing. How brilliant is this book?

Jon: We've got to get to Jesus, but let's do one question before Jesus. This is "Effortchoice [SP]. This is from really bad puppets, which is because you had a really bad puppet show.

Tim: Oh, yeah.

Jon: But you know what? Maybe it's not bad. Let us decide. "What changed between Jonah and Nahum? Was the Assyrian repentance story a fluke or temporary thing? So basically at some point, Nineveh goes back to their ways. So what...?"

[crosstalk 00:36:59]

Tim: This is another the puzzle. You have to factor this into the discussion about is the book a parable or historical narrative? Did the author intend that parable? Because the repentance of the Ninevites, it doesn't stick? If you interpret it as historical narrative, it doesn't stick because the Ninevites continued on this kind of rampage afterwards.

So much so that there's a whole book of the Bible, Nahum dedicated to announcing God orchestrating the downfall of Nineveh and Assyrians. So, how do you account for that? There's a great, great commentary by Doug Stuart. A guy named Douglas Stuart, a great Old Testament scholar.

He is persuaded that the book's historical narrative. And what he thinks is the book historically what happened is he conjectures that the king of Nineveh saw some omen in this guy. He's as polytheist as any other ancient king. He sees Jonah representing a deity. Something happened that convinced him to repent and pay homage to this God. But the moment this king passed from the scene, then the kings of Nineveh went on doing what they were doing.

So historically, it's plausible, you know, we can make up a scenario. But what's interesting to me was that for the author, the Ninevites have become just a caricature or an archetype of pagan Israelite, violent heathens who respond to God's mercy more than God's people do.

Even Doug Stuart recognizes the portrait of the Ninevites in Jonah has been—

Jon: There's a purpose of it more. Even if it was historical, there's a purpose of this story.

Tim: Which is why the king of Assyria is never named. That's intentional because the point isn't about this is only true of the king of Assyria. The point is is that Nineveh in the

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story represents all of the Gentile nations before God. So one way or another, Nineveh, they repented of their repentance.

Jon: Okay. We got to get to Jesus. We only have ten minutes left. Also, people are getting really distracted by the pokey ball back there, which I didn't even know about.

Tim: I didn't even see that.

Jon: I don't know when that happened. Pokémon, that's everywhere. It's getting crazy. Okay.

Tim: Jesus.

Jon: Yeah, Jesus talks about Jonah.

Tim: Ye Sharon [SP] asked a question, where he said, "What is Jesus depicting when he said, 'an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'" This is Matthew chapter 12. Yes, dude, the sign of Jonah.

Jon: And this set this up a little bit more, the context around this, why were they asking for sign?

Tim: Matthew chapter 12, Jesus has been announcing the kingdom of God for many chapters now. In Matthew 11, Matthew starts compiling all the stories of the religious leaders of Israel and Jerusalem opposing Jesus. But Jesus is attracting all of these Israelite and Non-Israelites followers—that's an important part of the story—and it's making the Israelite leaders reject Jesus.

And so when they say, "Prove to us who you are, give us a sign," by which they mean a miraculous sign, he, first of all...

Jon: Some sort of prove.

Tim: Yeah, some sort of prove. He, first of all, says, "Listen, the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites, they turned back to God at Jonah, and the Queen of Sheba, she came to Solomon." Jesus first retells stories of all these Non-Israelites who discovered the God of Israel and turned to Him, and then he mentioned the fact that Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of this fish. Which in Jonah's poem he described being in the fish as being in the grave. He uses language of the great.

Jon: Sheol. Which was another question. Someone asked, "Did he go to the underworld sheol?" But that's just a Hebrew word for grave.

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Tim: The grave, yeah. Jonah describes being in the fish's belly as being in the grave and wouldn't eat too.

Jon: Yeah, totally.

Tim: Because he's going to die. If you get swallowed by fish, you could die. Jesus actually seems to draw two things out of the story of Jonah. One is, it's a story of how the people you would never expect are discovering God's mercy, like the audience of his disciples, and that drives the Israelite leaders crazy.

But then he draws out of the vehicle - Jonah, also, how does he get to Nineveh and announce God's Word to Nineveh? It's through this strange watery grave in which he spends three days and three nights. And Jesus uses it as this cryptic—nobody gets it in the moment—a cryptic allusion to his death, that he too is a prophet speaking to Israel.

And he's not going to perform some magic miracle to get them to believe. He says, "You're rejecting me, that's fine. So here's the only sign you're going to get. You're going to kill me, and I'm going to let you." He's going to undergo his own experience of death and resurrection and only then will they see and realize that he was a true prophet. So I don't think Jesus is saying the book of Jonah is itself a predictive prophecy.

Jon: That's the sign.

Tim: I think Jesus is using a story that was subversive and challenging in the Old Testament. And he uses the image as a type or a metaphor to point to his actual death and resurrection from the grave.

Jon: And isn't it similar to when Jesus goes to the temple and overturns everything, and then they say, "Hey, what are you doing?" And they're like, "Show us some sort of sign that you have the authority to do this."

Tim: And he won't do it. Jesus refuses to do stupid things.

Jon: But he does tell them, "Well, tear down this temple and I'll rebuild in three days." That's your sign.

Tim: That's your sign. "You're going to kill me."

Jon: It's the same sign. "I'm going to be dead for three days and I'm going to come back. If you want some like crazy miraculous proof that what I'm doing is legit, that's what you're going to get."

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Tim: That's a good analogy. And it's a metaphor. "Tear down this temple," which he's talking about his body, but he uses the metaphor of the temple as a symbol.

Jon: Saying that he is the temple.

Tim: I think it's very similar to what he's doing the sign of Jonah. Good question.

Jon: Very cool. Wendy and this guy, Luke, they're really anxious for you to their answer a question. I'm trying to figure out. I think it's this one. You guys could tell me if it's what's wrong. Can Tim comment on the difference between Jonah's explanation of God's character and Job and elsewhere in the Old Testament? I don't think I understand the question. Is that the question, guys? Wendy?

Tim: Jonah's explanation of God's character at the beginning of chapter 4. What about it?

Jon: The difference between that and elsewhere in the Old Testament? So like, is God's character described differently elsewhere?

Tim: Oh. No. Actually, that's the brilliance is that Jonah is quoting from God's self-description in the book of Exodus. Actually, this is great. This is why this is so brilliant and ironic. Jonah's, quoting from how God describes himself. "The Lord the Lord gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in covenant faithfulness." It's how God summarizes His response to Israel after the debacle of the golden calf.

And so what God does is bring justice on some idolatrous Israelites there at Mount Sinai after the golden calf, but He doesn't walk away from his covenant promises with them. In other words, Israel exists after the golden calf story because of God's mercy and forgiveness.

The irony is that Jonah's saying, "Yeah, I know that you forgive us, that's why I can't stand you." But the reason he can't stand God is precisely the reason that he exists as an Israelite in covenant relationship with God. Exodus 34:6,7 is the most requested verse within the Old Testament about God. There are about eight different times that different biblical authors will use the language of Exodus 34:6 and 7 to describe God's character.

Actually, I think Exodus 34:6,7 is the basic summary of the God of Israel's character as displayed in the story of the Old Testament.

Jon: For some reason, they were connecting it to Job. I don't think we have time to discuss any connections with Job, but Job does in with kind of a question too, right? Leviathan. When God's response to Job, he's like, "Hey, I made these creatures. Didn't I?" Doesn't he pose it as a question?

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Tim: Yeah. It's just different. It's just different. Maybe we would just say wait for the video and podcasts on Job. We're going to talk about that.

But what Job struggling with is, I'm struggling to see God as merciful right now. And that's because of his suffering. But it's different set of questions, but that are awesome.

Jon: You want to tell them about this?

Tim: Okay. You guys you need to know about this. My favorite non-commentary on the book of Jonah, it's not a commentary at all, but it unpacks the book so brilliantly. It's a collection of poems by Thomas Carlisle. The book, you can find it on Amazon. It's called "You! Jonah!"

It's a commentary on each chapter of the book in poems. It's so amazing. It's so brilliant. We have three minutes and we have the trivia question.

Jon: We can go over for a few minutes.

Tim: Can I read you a poem?

[crosstalk 00:48:06]

Tim: It's a poetry reading.

Jon: Yeah, that's good.

Tim: This one is from chapter 3, and it's about how Jonah find God's mercy evil. It's called tantrum.

The generosity of God

Displeased Jonah exceedingly

And he slashed with angry prayer

At the graciousness of the Almighty.

"I told You so," he screamed.

"I knew what You would do,

You dirty Forgiver.

You bless Your enemies

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And show kindness to those

Who despitefully use You.

I would rather die

Than live in a world

With a God like You.

And don't try to forgive me either."

Jon: Wow. You dirty forgiver.

Tim: You dirty forgiver.

Jon: That's not a good thing to pray.

Tim: Okay, sorry. One more?

Jon: Okay, one more.

Tim: This is called "Let's Play It Cool."

I know a better way to circumvent your silly streak of mixing love with righteous judgment

All I need to do is take the next flight west, beyond your jurisdiction

This will give you time, O Lord, for sober second thoughts.

You may find yourself swearing off this kick of simple-minded kindness.

Dude, you Jonah.

Jon: That's a rough prayer.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "I'm going to give you God's some time to think this through."

Tim: Jonah, dude, I'm telling you. It's a brilliant gem in the Old Testament.

Jon: Thanks guys for joining us for the live Q&R today.

Tim: Totally. You guys rock. Thank you for your support. Have a great week. We'll see you.

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Jon: Thank you for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. We're so grateful that you're part of this project with us. You could go to our YouTube page and see all of the videos that we have there on biblical books and biblical themes.

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