

EBR_Band14_LaterArticles

IV. Jonah (Book and Person) — Modern Judaism

1. Jonah in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Jonah is cited in only one place in the HB outside of his eponymous book: 2 Kings 14: 25. This verse identifies Jonah as a prophet who lived during the time of Jeroboam king of Israel. Yet modern Jewish interpreters follow rabbinic tradition that Jonah appears in other biblical stories. Malbim (1809–1879), for instance, cites a tradition recorded in the mid-rashic compilation *Pirquet de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* that Jonah was the child who was miraculously revived by the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17 (Malbim: 360).

2. Jonah in the Fish. While the MT uses the standard Hebrew word for fish (*dag*), modern and ancient folklore identify the creature who swallows Jonah for three days and nights as a whale. The earliest text to make this association is the LXX, which refers to the fish as a sea-monster or whale (κῆτος), and is cited in Matt 12: 40. This tradition has endured because of its obvious logic; only a whale would be large enough to hold a human in its belly. Jonah remains inside the fish for three days and nights before he utters a hymn of thanksgiving. His silence suggests that even inside the fish, he continues to refuse to acquiesce to God's commands. When Jonah realizes that he will not be removed from the fish as long as he remains silent, he makes an overture to God (Simon: 15). The content of this psalm has helped scholars to determine Jonah's historical context: The emphasis on temple and sacrifice point towards a post-monarchic setting in which the author believed that God's judgment against His people would yield to a period of restoration that required the judgment of all of humankind (Ben Zvi: 120). Other modern interpreters appreciate the literary import of this psalm. The fact that Jonah is depicted as uttering words of thanksgiving rather than lament or repentance indicates that while Jonah has come to terms with the fact that he must communicate with God, he still refuses to say anything beyond what he truly believes, and he remains unrepentant and skeptical regarding God's just behavior (Simon: 16).

3. Jonah and the Themes of Human Accountability and Divine Grace. The book of Jonah is often read by Jewish interpreters as an instructive tale that emphasizes the inescapable omnipotence of a God who demands human accountability, and yet remains eminently benevolent (Heschel: 369). For some scholars, this story highlights the universality of God's dominion and his concern for all of humankind (Ginzberg: 4:349; Goitein: 65; Bickerman: 25; Ben Zvi: 149). The recent tendency of Jewish interpreters to underscore the book's universalist outlook may be a self-conscious re-

sponse to Christian theologians who have read Jonah as reflective of an outsider's critique of Jewish exclusivity rather than expressive of a universalist outlook that is inherent in Judaism. These theologians have built on comparisons in the NT between Jesus and Jonah (Luke 11:30; Matt 12:40; Eddy: 248; Ruether/Ruether: xx).

4. Jonah and the Day of Atonement. The book of Jonah is traditionally recited in synagogues during the afternoon (*minḥah*) service on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is considered to be the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. The matter of how the book of Jonah is symbolically related to Yom Kippur continues to be fertile ground for homiletical discussion. S. Y. Agnon connects the book of Jonah with the theme that no creature may escape from God, an idea that is found in the Yom Kippur liturgy (Agnon: 262). Likewise, the emphasis on Gentile repentance which lies at the foreground of the book suggests that on Yom Kippur, God judges Jews and Gentile alike, and that all people may appeal to his benevolent mercy (Wiesel: 151).

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