

DROWNING WITH JONAH

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Session 1 - Chapter 1

If you need the text, you can find the Hebrew and the JPS translation on Sefaria:

<https://www.sefaria.org/Jonah.1.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

2 Kings/Melakhim 14: 23-5 (New International Version)

²³ In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴ He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. ²⁵ He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.

MIDRASH

The Six Principles of Midrash

1. Text-related - midrash is always a comment on a biblical text.
2. Omnisignificance - every feature of the Hebrew text can carry meaning.
3. Responsive - midrash always responds to the biblical text, in different ways, e.g.
 - where there is a gap in the text
 - where there is a problem or contradiction in the text
 - where there is a chance to teach an ethical lesson
 - where there is a chance to celebrate or play with the Torah's words
4. Intertextuality - every biblical book is connected to every other biblical book
5. Multiplicity - midrashic interpretations don't have to harmonize with each other
6. Joyfulness, humour, and playful exploration, as well as seriousness and piety, are praiseworthy modes in which to explore the biblical text

Yalkut shimoni (?13th century CE) on Jonah 550 (translation based on Simi Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash*, pp. 55-6)

Was he [really] fleeing from before God?

Doesn't it already say, 'Where will I go from Your spirit, and where from Your face will I flee?

If I go up to the heavens, there You are ...' [Ps. 139: 7-8]

And it says, '... the eyes of God move over the whole earth' [Zech. 4: 10]

And it is written, 'In every place the eyes of God watch' [Mishlei 15: 3]

And it is written, 'If they dig down into She'ol, from there My hand will take them' [Amos 9: 2]

And it is written, 'There is no darkness, and there is no shadow of death [in which] to hide' [Iyov 34: 22]

But rather Jonah said: 'I will go outside the Land because the Shekhinah is not revealed there, for the nations are close to repenting, [and I do not want to go to Nineveh] so as not to convict Israel!'

They gave a *mashal* [that compared this] to a servant who fled from his master, a *kohen*, to a graveyard. He said, 'I will flee to a graveyard, a place where my master cannot follow me.' His master said to him, 'I have [other] servants like you.'

Thus Jonah said, 'I will go outside the Land'. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'I have [other] servants like you.' As it says, 'But the Lord cast a mighty wind upon the sea.' [Jonah 1: 4]

Pirkei derabi eliezer 10 (?8th century CE)

On the fifth day Jonah fled before his God. Why did he flee? Because on the first occasion when [God] sent him to restore the border of Israel, his words were fulfilled, as it is said, 'And he restored the border of Israel from the entering in of Hamath' [2 Kings 14: 25]. On the second occasion [God] sent him to Jerusalem to [prophecy that He would] destroy it. But the Holy One, blessed be He, did according to the abundance of His tender mercy and repented of the evil [decree], and He did not destroy it; thereupon they called him a lying prophet. On the third occasion [God] sent him against Nineveh to destroy it. Jonah argued with himself, saying, I know that the nations are nigh to repentance, now they will repent and the Holy One, blessed be He, will direct His anger against Israel. And is it not enough for me that Israel should call me a lying prophet; but shall also the nations of the world [do likewise]? Therefore, behold, I will escape from His presence to a place where His glory is not declared. [If] I ascend above the heavens, it is said, 'Above the heavens is his glory' [Ps. 113: 4]. [If] above the earth, [it is said], 'The whole earth is full of his glory' [Isa. 6: 8]. Behold, I will escape to the sea, to a place where His glory is not proclaimed. Jonah went down to Jaffa, but he did not find a ship there in which he could embark, for the ship in which Jonah might have embarked was two days journey away from Jaffa, in order to test Jonah. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He sent against it a mighty tempest on the sea and brought it back to Jaffa. Then Jonah saw and rejoiced in his heart, saying, Now I know that my ways will prosper before me.

MEDIAEVAL COMMENTARY

Rashi (Shelomoh ben Yitshak, northern France, 1040-1105)

Joseph Kara (northern France, c. 1065-c. 1135)

Avraham Ibn Ezra (Spain & elsewhere, 1089-1164)

David Kimchi (Provence, 1160-1235)

[Translations of Rashi & commentators by Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz; some of Ibn Ezra adapted from Tali Education Fund Collections, <http://www.tali-virtualmidrash.org.il/ArticleEng.aspx?art=15#ibnez>]

Chapter 1

Ibn Ezra: v. 1: This prophet prophesied concerning Jeroboam son of Joash, as is written ‘Which the Lord spoke by way of His servant Jonah son of Amitai of Gath Hopher’ [2 Kings 14: 25]. And it is perplexing how a wise man, who knew the Lord and His ways, could think to flee from Him, since he is in His power and all is filled with His glory? And how could a rebel prophesy, since it is written that he was a prophet? [...] Additionally, if Jonah had obeyed the command of God, why would he have fled? And he says [later], ‘Therefore I was quick to flee to Tarshish’ [Jonah 4: 2]. And now, we have seen that Moses did not want to perform the Lord’s mission to free his people; how much less would Jonah have wanted to go and cause Nineveh to repent! And thus our Sages have said that he was concerned more for the honour of the son [= the Jewish people].

Arise ... Nineveh: The royal house of Assyria, which lies in ruins today. And Jewish scholars in Greece say that it is called ‘Troy’, though I did not know of this. And this is not the occasion on which [God] commanded him to say ‘Forty days more [and Nineveh shall be overturned]’ [Jonah 3: 4], but He only said **for their wickedness has come before Me**. And he who explains this to mean that [Jonah] was afraid that he would be called a false prophet since [God] would repent of the intended punishment is wrong, for He did not tell him about this at this time but only on the second occasion, where it says ‘proclaim to it what I tell you’ [Jonah 3: 2], and that is: ‘Forty days more ...’ [Jonah 3: 4]. And also, how would the prophet rebel against God’s command because of his fear that the people of Nineveh would call him a false prophet? How would it hurt him, since he did not live with them? And also the people of Nineveh were not stupid, or why would God send them His prophet? Only so that they would return to God in repentance! And if they had not repented He would have put His decree against them into effect. And if they truly knew this—that if they repented, He would repent of the planned punishment—then why would they call him a false prophet? But rather the opinion of the ancient Sages is correct, that he did not want them to repent, for the sake of Israel.

Rashi: v. 3: to flee to Tarshish: a sea which is called Tarshish, and it lies outside the Land of Israel. He said, ‘I will flee to the sea, for the Shekhinah does not dwell outside the Land of Israel.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘By your life, I have [other] servants like you, to send after you and bring you back from there.’ A *mashal*: [this is like] the servant of a *kohen*, who ran away from his master and entered a graveyard. His master said to him, ‘I have [other] servants like you, to send after you and bring you back from there.’ [*Yalkut Shimoni*, Jonah, ch. 1, 549]. And what did Jonah see, that he did not want to go to Nineveh? He said, ‘[Those] idol-worshippers are close to repenting. If I tell them [that they will be punished] and they repent, I will have cast guilt upon Israel, who do not listen to the words of the prophets.’

He paid the fare: He paid in advance, although sea-travellers do not usually pay the fare until the departure, and not only this, but he paid the entire fare.

Ibn Ezra: v. 3: Sa’adiah Gaon said that **Tarshish** is Tarsus; and Rabbi Mevasser said that it is the city Tunis in Africa. **He paid the fare:** It does not say ‘all the fare’, only what he had to pay as his share.

Rashi: v. 4: lit. thought to be broken [JPS: was in danger of breaking up]: [the ship] seemed as though it was breaking up.

Rashi: v. 5: each to his own god: representatives of all the 70 idolatrous nations were there [*Pirkei derabbi eliezer*, 10].

Rashi: v. 6: the captain [lit. the chief linesman]: the chief of the sailors, who are also called sea linesmen, in Old French: *gouvernail* [?].

How can you be sleeping [could be read: Why are you sleeping?!]: How can you be sleeping? Now is not the time for sleep!

will give us a thought (yitashet) [JPS: will be kind to us]: this indicates thought, as in Ps. 146: 4: 'his plans (*eshtonot*) [come to nothing]', and in Daniel 6: 4: 'the king considered (*ashit*)'.

Rashi: v. 7: Let us cast lots: They saw all the other ships proceeding peacefully upon the sea, while theirs was breaking up. They said, 'It must be thus because of one of us'; we find this in *Pirkei derabi eli'ezer* [10].

Rashi: v. 8: Tell us ba'asher mi [JPS: you who have]: against whom have you sinned, on account of which this evil has come upon us?

what is your business?: perhaps you have sinned in a business matter [lit.: in your craft].

Where have you come from?: perhaps a [divine] decree has been decreed against the inhabitants of that place, even though you are not there now.

and of what people are you?: perhaps your people has sinned.

Rashi: v. 10: What have you done?: why have you done thus, fleeing from such a ruler [i.e. God]?

Rashi: v. 13: the men rowed hard [vayachteru]: they laboured and toiled as a man who digs [*choter*] a tunnel.

Rashi: v. 15: they made vows: that they would convert to Judaism.

Ibn Ezra: v. 15: and they feared .. and they made vows: after they disembarked.

Kimhi: v. 15: and they made sacrifices: And how would they have sacrificed on board the ship? But explain it as the Targum does: 'they said they would offer sacrifices to God [later]'. **And they made vows:** other vows, apart from **sacrifices**, such as giving *tsedakah* to the poor.

Kara: v. 15: and they feared the Lord greatly: they converted for the sake of God.