



Introduction

The tale of Jonah is short, lively, and comedic. At the same time, it offers profound theological and spiritual reflections on the character of God, the inclusivity of God’s love and mercy, and the complexity and tragic dimensions of human existence. Although no one actually kills themselves (or even dies) in the book, Jonah contemplates his own death more than once and threatens to take his own life in the final chapter. In his experience at the bottom of the sea and in the belly of the “whale,” Jonah wrestles directly with ideas and feelings closely associated with suicidal ideation. A close reading of Jonah provides tremendous resources for reflecting theologically and pastorally on the crisis of suicide.

Reflect

The story of Jonah and the “whale” is a familiar one. Its dramatic telling of a person’s fleeing God’s command, and the results can stir one’s soul. It naturally elicits questions of God’s actions in the world and in our lives and a person’s possible reactions. When God’s word comes to Jonah, he flees.

What would cause someone to flee from God? Is there a mood of ironic humor in the idea that one can “find cover” from God and the universe?

Study

CHAPTER 1

1. Read Jonah 1. What is God’s request in 1:1-2? Why might Nineveh’s wickedness be Jonah’s problem? If concern for his own comfort overrides God’s commission and any concern for Nineveh, what does this say about Jonah’s mental state? Is he taking himself too seriously?

2. In 1:3-6, Jonah leaves his home, attempting to sail to Tarshish [Click [HERE](#) for a map], but God unleashes a storm on the ship. Where is Jonah on the ship, and what is he doing? [Click [HERE](#) for an art image.]

Note: In exploring this scene’s relationship to suicide, it will help to know some ancient metaphors and symbols. The Hebrew term for the ship’s “recesses” [click [HERE](#)], for example, helps paint a picture of a deep spiritual descent. Jonah descends to Joppa, down in a ship’s hold (Jonah 1:3), and down to its lowest recesses (Jonah 1:5). Ezekiel 32:23 applies the same diction to the “farthest depths of the abyss” (REB). Finally, Jonah’s descent leads him literally down to Sheol (death’s prison) in Jonah 2:6.

Why does the captain care?

Notes on the Background: From an archaeological and historical perspective, Jonah could have chartered either a Philistine or a Phoenician vessel. In either case, the sailors would have been polytheists, worshipping a pantheon of deities, each with their own special area of responsibility. Check out this Ancient Ship Infographic (click [HERE](#)).


3. The sailors cast lots in 1:7-8, which fall on Jonah. What is their reaction? Why do they question him? Jonah finally speaks for the first time in the story (1:9–10). He tells the sailors that he is a Hebrew and worships the God of heaven, maker of the sea and land. Consider the role of the sea storm in the tale and its psychological and spiritual symbolism. It may help to bring the text of Jonah into conversation with the following works of art: (click [HERE](#) and [HERE](#)). Where does the conversation lead you?

What is the sailor's reaction, and why do they conclude Jonah had fled God?

4. Why does Jonah think throwing him into the sea would appease God? What does his request indicate about his mental state, and how do the sailors respond? In 1:14, they cry out to God. Think about their emotions. What are they attempting to accomplish through their pleas?

5. The sailors reluctantly throw Jonah into the sea (1:15-16). What happens next? Do you see any humor in v. 16 (Hint: the boat was wood)? Compare their reaction to that of Jonah's. Who do you consider is closer to God and more developed spiritually, the pagan sailors or God's prophet, Jonah? In what ways, if any, is Jonah's experience thus far like that of some people at risk for suicide?

6. Throughout the first chapter Jonah has run from God but he is also running from himself. He shows little concern for his own safety. How do his actions endanger himself and others?

 **Notes for Reading Chapter 2 Closely:** Other holy men across cultures interact with sea monsters. In this, Jonah is not unique. A Celtic saint named Brendan lived a wonderful part of his life on the back of a sea creature. In some tales, Brendan can even make his creature rise from the sea to become an island. A group of monks once celebrated Easter Sunday mass on the monster, even cooking a meal there. Jonah's miracle of surviving three days in the belly of this sort of monster similarly evokes a holy imagination. Centuries later, Jesus in Matthew 12:39–40 and Luke 11:29–30 talked about the "Sign of

Jonah” and his own spending of three nights in the earth (also Mark 8:31; 9:31; Matthew 16:21; 1 Cor 15:4), which stands parallel to Jonah’s descent into the underworld for three days (see Jonah 1:17). Three days sometimes represents a time of waiting before a miraculous breakthrough, sometimes a healing or resurrection (see Gen 42:17–18; Exod 19:11, 15–16; 2 Kgs 20:5; Hos 6:2; Esther 5:1).

CHAPTER 2

A Note on Prayer: Prayer is a regular part of life for the Hebrew Bible’s characters, who regularly practice prayer with no explanations by the narrator offered or needed. One notable feature of Hebrew prayer is its common association with the Jerusalem temple and other liturgical contexts. Even when offered privately, biblical prayers often reference the temple and its congregation (see Jonah 1:16; 2:4, 7–9). We will have occasion to reflect on the importance of this fact for Jonah’s “resurrection.”

7. Read Jonah 2. He is now in the belly of the beast in the depths of the sea. Think about Jonah’s situation and what he may be feeling.

An Optional Reflection / Visual Interpretation of Jonah: Jonah and the Whale, 1987, by Albert Herbert (Oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in.). Click: [HERE](#).

Albert Herbert produced tiny oil paintings in the simplistic abstract style he was exploring with his etchings. These often had religious themes, such as Jonah and the Whale. Herbert’s painting of a whale resembling a sock-puppet on a child’s hand captures, for many viewers, the terror of Jonah’s salvation. It is a hand cloaked in primal darkness that brings Jonah up from the sea. To be near God is to know his tender love and mysterious, *terrifying* power.

In what ways does Jonah’s situation speak to a mental health crisis?

8. When reading Jonah’s prayer, do you suppose that his thinking has changed or not?

9. In his prayer, does Jonah take responsibility for his actions? Why or why not?

10. His prayer is full of images (e.g., water, the deep, the mountains, bars). How do they represent his anguish?

Note on Ancient Near Eastern Parallels:

Check out an ancient cylinder seal impression, which may portray the god Dumuzi retained in the underworld, flanked by seasnakes: Click [HERE](#).

An Optional Reflection Opportunity: 3D Interactive Model / Virtual Artwork: Click [HERE](#).

11. Note the importance of the holy temple of Jerusalem on Mount Zion in Jonah's prayer (2:4, 7–9). Consider the place of Sheol and Temple in the poetic and archetypal imagination behind Jonah's imagery [For a diagram of this cosmic model, click [HERE](#)].

Jonah's prayer imagery extends toward the temple where God's light and life, symbolized by the temple menorah, burn with intensity. The life power of the temple contradicts death and indeed holds the promise of conquering death (resurrection). Ancient Near Eastern iconography knows well the waters and plants of life associated with the temple gardens (see the following artwork meditation).

An Optional Reflection Opportunity:

"Olive Trees," by Vincent van Gogh (1889), Click [HERE](#)

The trees of life in Psalm 52:8 are reminiscent of Vincent Van Gogh's artistic representations of olive trees in the late 1800s. In his paintings of olive trees, the trees swirl with life. The leafy tops of van Gogh's olive trees are energized "life-darts" collectively undulating in sync with the rhythm of life power. Van Gogh's life was nourished by these olive trees, though his life had chaos—the ground slides in the painting towards the lower right, just as Jonah slipped down the slimy tongue of the great fish monster.

12. Jonah appears to hit an emotional bottom. What are the indications that he's reached his end?

An Optional Reflection Opportunity:

"The Child and Death," by Edvard Munch (1899), Click [HERE](#)

Spend some time with this powerful painting of a child at the time of her mother's death. Edvard Munch wrestled desperately with the terror and the crisis of death in existence. He confronts the threat and the sadness at the end of life but also the terror that this is the ongoing threat of chaos—the watery, murky powers that death poses in life and human existence. Note how in the artwork, the young girl is the focus of his painting, not the dead mother in the bed. You can see almost a scream in her expression, wanting to come out, a scream of horror. She can't scream, but her eyes betray the terror that she's feeling. The book of Jonah deals with this existential threat, and it deals with it profoundly. Of course, the book gives us a positive resolution. Jonah prays from the belly of the fish a prayer of thanks.

13. Have you ever felt like the world is closing in on you? When? Why?

14. Jonah seems to bargain with God in 2:9. He promises to make a sacrifice to God and vows to pay it. Have you ever made bargains with God? If so, when? What happened? What is comforting or troubling about them?

15. Throughout his crisis, Jonah doesn't doubt God's existence. He flees and hides, but when he realizes he cannot outrun God, he accepts his fate and trusts God. "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" (2:9). How does Jonah's prayer speak to you? Do you see hope in it? If so, how?

16. What is your overall reaction to Jonah's predicament so far?

Mental Health Key Points

A mental health crisis signifies a broken or ill mind and brain. Similarly, it is difficult to think clearly when one has a broken bone or a severe illness.

During such a crisis, one can feel sleepy or exhausted, even in unusual circumstances.

To an outside observer, one's thoughts seem irrational. Our decisions may appear perfectly valid to us, but we can lack clarity.

Despair and anguish are symptoms of our mind and brain's condition.

During such crises, a person can shut themselves off from others by physically or emotionally fleeing.

Mental illness and crises can have a profoundly spiritual element to them.

God can seem like the cause of a mental health crisis.

One can feel abandoned by God or closer to God. Like Jonah, sometimes both.

Pray

O Lord, my God, to know you is awesome and terrifying. Moreover, life is sometimes awful and overwhelming, and I can feel like I'm drowning and beyond saving. From the depths, I cry out to you for mercy and grace. May I feel your gentle and loving presence when I am weak and wracked by the torments of this life. Be gracious with me, O Lover of souls, for I am a mere creature of your making, and I give you my all. Amen.

I pray this day for all who are lost and alone. Be with those who shed tears of sorrow this day, comfort those whose lament shakes their bones, soothe the weary hearted, who no longer can feel, and alleviate the pain of those suffering where no medicine helps. Hear the whispered prayers of those cast into the abyss and abandon. Amen.