

Jonah — Teaching Notes

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Part 1—Midrash

The Tanach and Talmud

- ❖ The first five books of the *Tanach* are called the *Torah* or *Chumash*, and mean 'law' or 'instruction'. They contain God's 613 written commandments given to Moses and Israel through the Mosaic covenant.
- ❖ Accompanying the written law was the oral law, the *Mishna*. This narrative and its accompanying rabbinic commentaries, the *Gemara* comprise the two volumes of the *Talmud* (Jerusalem and Babylonian). *Talmud* means 'teaching' or 'study'.

Biblical Exegesis

- ❖ According to Jewish lexical tradition, any given biblical text can have four levels of meaning.
- ❖ These four levels correlate with four classical methods of biblical exegesis, i.e. interpretation used by the rabbis and Jewish scholars in reading the Hebrew bible, the *Tanach*.
- ❖ The classical methods together are called *Pardes*, and can be remembered by their acrostic, PRDS or paradise. They are listed below in their order of interpretation:
 1. *Peshat* – Literal sense
 2. *Remez* – Allusion
 3. *Drash* – Deeper sense
 4. *Sod* – Secret
- ❖ *Peshat* looks at the simple literal meaning of the text, and is the most common form used in Christian biblical study.
- ❖ *Remez* follows hints built into the biblical text that create an illusion to another related text found somewhere else in the bible.
- ❖ *Drash* unveils the depth meaning in the text, which can only be brought out through excavation.
- ❖ *Sod* explores the secret, deepest and most mystical dimension of the text.
 - The us a simple principle: "A biblical text does not depart from its simple meaning." Learn your midrash; find the secret meaning—but leave the simple meaning intact.

Origin of Midrash

- ❖ The word *Midrash* comes from the Hebrew root *Drash*, which means to 'study,' 'inquire,' or 'investigate'. It is also the root of the word *Derasha*, which means 'homily' or 'sermon'.
- ❖ Compilation of the *Midrash* occurred over many centuries, with some of the earliest writings dating back to around 400 B.C., and later writings dating from 10 A.D. to 1200 A.D.

What is Midrash?

- ❖ *Midrash* (plural, *Midrashim*) is the rabbinic sages, called *Chazal's* methodical and thought provoking process to teach the *Tanach* and the *Talmud*.
 - The Encyclopedia Britannica says: "*Midrash* developed into a sophisticated interpretive system that reconciled apparent biblical contradictions, established the scriptural basis of new laws, and enriched biblical content with new meaning."
 - The Jewish Encyclopedia says: "The term *Midrash* designates an exegesis which, going more deeply than the mere literal sense, attempts to penetrate into the spirit of the Scriptures, to examine the text from all sides, and thereby to derive interpretations which are not immediately obvious."
- ❖ *Midrash* assumes that something in the text is missing, i.e. the text says something but beneath or behind the said there is the meaningful unsaid.
- ❖ *Midrash* reads between the lines to extract vital meaning that are not there explicitly in black and white, but are certainly there implicitly.
- ❖ One of the ways that *Midrash* operates is by way of what is called *Haggadah*, e.g. legends, stories, folklore, and traditions.

Types of Midrash

- ❖ *Midrash* exists to two major forms: *Halakhic* or *Halakha* which incorporates the body of legal teachings derived from the *Tanach* and the *Talmud*, i.e., study of the Mosaic Law, and
- ❖ *Haggada* which is the interpretive and homiletic story telling derived from the *Tanach's* biblical narrative. Included in this category are also stories about the rabbis, historiography, proverbs, and parables that are metaphoric in nature.
 - *Midrash Haggada*, a subset of *Haggada* generally correlates directly to a biblical verse or topic, and incorporates interpretations of the biblical text.

Midrashic Structure

- ❖ *Midrash Haggada* typically incorporates several systematic elements into its methodology:
 1. A *Mashal*, which is the *Midrashic* story. The *Mashal* can either be a parable or an expansion of the biblical story that fills in missing gaps. It is usually introduced with a phrase like: "To what might this thing be compared?" Or "This may be compared to?"
 2. A *Nimshal* which is an explanation of the *Mashal*. The *Nimshal* can also be in parable form or can be an expansion of the biblical story. It is usually introduced with the word 'thus'. There can be more than one *Mashal* or *Nimshal* in a *Midrashic* narrative.
 3. The *Mashal* and *Nimshal* are attached to the biblical story from the *Tanach* which is called the *Akeda*. Elements of the *Akeda* can be pulled directly into the *Midrashic* narrative.
 4. Midrashic Structure
 5. A rabbinical question characteristic of *Chazal*: '*Lama Li*', which translates: "Why do I need this word, verse, or phrase?" Or "What does the *Mashal* add to my understanding of the text, and what would be missing if I read the text without the aid of this *Mashal*?" It can also include other rabbinical questions that directly challenge the narrative, sometimes rhetorical.
 6. A proof-text called a *Pethita*, which is a verse from another part of the bible that is used for commentary.

Part 2—Jonah

History

- ❖ The Book of Jonah is one of the Minor Prophets in the Bible. It tells of a Hebrew prophet named Jonah son of Amittai who is sent by God to prophesy the destruction of Nineveh but tries to escape the divine mission.
- ❖ Set in the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.), it was probably written in the post-exilic period, sometime between the late 5th to early 4th century B.C.
- ❖ Nineveh, where Jonah preached, was the capital of the ancient Assyrian empire, which fell to the Babylonians and the Medes in 612 B.C. (Wikipedia)

Jonah

- ⌘ "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
- ⌘ 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.'
- ⌘ But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." *Jonah 1:1-3 (NKJV)*

Questions?

1. How can Jonah, a divinely appointed prophet, think he can flee from the presence of God?
2. Why has God sent Jonah to Nineveh?
3. Why doesn't Jonah want to go?
4. Why does Jonah seek out a boat?
5. And why is he headed to Tarshish?

Midrashic Commentary

- ❖ And Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from before God:
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|--|---|--|
| Opening Question | { | 1. Was he (really) fleeing from before God?! |
| | | 2. 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..." <i>Psalms 139:7-8</i> |
| Prooftexts
<i>Pethita</i> | { | 3. And it says, "...the eyes of God move over the whole earth" <i>Zechariah 4:10</i> |
| | | 4. And it is written, "In every place, the eyes of God watch..." <i>Proverbs 15:3</i> |
| | | 5. And it is written, "If they dig down into the grave, from there My hand will take them..." <i>Amos 9:2</i> |
| Narrative Expansion | { | 6. And it is written, "There is no darkness, and there is no shadow of death (in which) to hide..." <i>Job 34:22</i> |
| | | 7. But rather Jonah said, |
| | | 8. "I will go outside the Land (of Israel) because the Divine presence is not revealed there, |
| 9. For the nations (Nineveh) are close to repenting, | | |
| | | 10. (and I do not want to go to Nineveh) so as not to convict Israel." |

Mashal	{	11. They gave a parable (that compares to this)
		12. To a servant who fled from his master, a priest, to a graveyard.
		13. He said, "I will flee to a graveyard, a place that my master cannot follow me."
		14. His master said to him, "I have (other) servants like you."
		15. Thus Jonah said, "I will go outside the Land (of Israel)..."
Nimshal	{	16. The Holy One blessed be He said, "I have (other) servants like you."
		17. As it says, "And God cast a great wind on the sea..." <i>Jonah 1:4</i>

Midrashic Discourse

- ❖ Biblical verses cited in the *Midrash* may be in violation of customary rules of logic, context, and chronology.
- ❖ Quotation of a verse may distort or cancel its plain sense.
- ❖ *Chazal* views the *Tanach* as self-interpreting text, meaning that all of scripture, especially the writings and prophets are a treasure of clues for interpreting other parts of the bible.
- ❖ The books of the *Tanach* stand in dialogical relationship with one another, i.e. they are all connected.
- ❖ To understand Midrash, readers must have a command of the *Tanach*, checking every biblical citation in context to ensure an understanding of the plain sense of the text.

Framing the 1st Question

- ❖ How can Jonah, a divinely appointed prophet, think he can flee from the presence of God? In other words, was he 'really' fleeing from before God?
 1. 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..." *Psalms 139:7-8*
 2. And it says, "...the eyes of God move over the whole earth" *Zechariah 4:10*
 3. And it is written, "In every place, the eyes of God watch..." *Proverbs 15:3*
 4. And it is written, "If they dig down into the grave, from there My hand will take them..." *Amos 9:2*
 5. And it is written, "There is no darkness, and there is no shadow of death (in which) to hide..." *Job 34:22*

The Narrative Expansion

- ❖ If Jonah is not able to flee from the presence of God, then he is fleeing from his responsibility to act as a prophet of God. Why?
 7. But rather Jonah said,

8. "I will go outside the Land (of Israel) because the Divine presence is not revealed there,
9. For the nations (Nineveh) are close to repenting,
10. (and I do not want to go to Nineveh) so as not to convict Israel."

- ❖ Jonah knows the people of Nineveh are on the verge of repenting. Israel however is not even close, even after many prophets have been sent to them, and even after the Assyrian occupation and exile.
- ❖ What dilemma does this pose for Jonah, and (in his perception) for God?
 - A Jewish prophet is sent to a gentile nation, an arched enemy of Israel. They repent but Israel does not?
 - What will the nations say about God? He can't even save His own people?
 - Will this defile God's name? Will it shame God's people, Israel?
 - And, will this bring God's further judgment against the Jewish people?

The Mashal and Nimshal

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|----------------|---|---|
| <i>Mashal</i> | { | 11. They gave a parable (that compares to this)
12. To a <u>servant</u> who fled from his <u>master, a priest, to a graveyard</u> .
13. He said, "I will flee to a graveyard, a place that my master <u>cannot follow me</u> ."
14. His master said to him, "I have <u>(other) servants</u> like you." |
| <i>Nimshal</i> | { | 15. Thus Jonah said, "I will go <u>outside the Land (of Israel)</u> ..."
16. The Holy One blessed be He said, "I have <u>(other) servants</u> like you."
17. As it says, "And God cast <u>a great wind</u> on the sea..." <i>Jonah 1:4</i> |

Comparing the Elements

<i>Mashal</i>	<i>Nimshal</i>
The servant	Jonah
The master, priest	The Holy One blessed be He
The servant's choice of a graveyard	Jonah's decision to leave Israel
The graveyard	Outside the land of Israel
The master's response	God's statement, "I have other servants..."
The master's other servants	God's casting a great wind on the sea

Conclusions

- I. Jonah's desire to avoid being the instrument of God's plan is seriously flawed:
 - If God wants to convict Israel, Jonah's flight cannot prevent it.
 - Either God will send another prophet to do Jonah's job, or
 - God will somehow force Jonah to return to Israel, receive the prophesy, and carry at his assignment.
- II. The *Mashal* and its associated *Nimshal* do not so much focus on why Jonah was fleeing his prophetic assignment, but more on the place where Jonah was fleeing to. Why?

The Graveyard

- III. The *Mashal* forcefully makes the point that a prophet's abandoning the Land of Israel cuts himself off from prophesy. This is tantamount to seeking death. This is a graveyard for Jonah.
 - Similar, a prophet who removes himself from God's people is also cutting himself off from God's life. It is a form of spiritual death.
- IV. It is now clear that Jonah himself is seeking death. He would rather die than fulfill his prophetic assignment.
 - This is further reinforced in the story of Jonah, e.g., his descent to the hold of the ship to sleep during the storm, his willingness to be thrown overboard into a

raging sea, and his two requests to God in chapter 4, verses 3 and 8 that he would rather die than live.

The Belly of Sheol

- ✠ "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly.
- ✠ And he said: 'I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction', And He answered me. 'Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, And You heard my voice.'...
- ✠ 'I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.'" *Jonah 2:12 & 6*
 - "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." *Matthew 12:40*

Final Conclusions

- V. God will not allow Jonah to die, and will force him to fulfill his mission.
- VI. The servants God employs will not replace Jonah, but will be used to bring him back to the land of Israel, to receive the prophesy and deliver it.
- VII. The ship, storm, sailors, and the huge fish are all God's servants, instruments of His will, just as Jonah will be.
- VIII. Jonah will have to change from a person who seeks death and evades his prophetic role, into a prophet who learns the lessons God wants to teach him, and becomes obedient to God's will.

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