

Jonah Speaks to Nuclear War

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ABSTRACT

A new interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Book of Jonah suggests an alternate solution to the problems posed by nuclear weapons. In this new interpretation, nuclear weapons are best used coercively, to evacuate cities, rather than actually, to bomb cities or other targets. The procedure is to give “fair warning” before bombing, allow the city time to evacuate, and then not bomb the evacuated city. This allows nuclear nations to conduct a nonviolent nuclear war that neither kills people nor destroys property.

PAPER

The problem of how to prevent war, or to reduce the violence and damage which results from war, has vexed humanity for centuries. This problem has been made more urgent because of the invention of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps surprisingly, the Bible Book of Jonah suggests a new method for handling nuclear weapons. This article sets forth a new interpretation of Jonah that leads to this understanding.

Synopsis of Story in Jonah. In the Bible book of Jonah, God and Jonah are the main characters. God commands Jonah to preach to Nineveh. Instead of obeying God, Jonah flees by getting on board a ship bound for Tarshish (Spain).¹ A great storm threatens the ship and the crew cast lots to see who is responsible.² The lots point to Jonah and the ship’s crew finally throw Jonah overboard.³ A whale or big fish swallows Jonah. Jonah survives inside its belly for three days and three nights, and is then vomited onto dry land.⁴

Jonah is again sent to Nineveh.⁵ This time he preaches, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”⁶ The people and king of Nineveh proclaim a fast, wear sackcloth, and sit in ashes.⁷ The king proclaims, “... let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger so that we perish not?”⁸

God repents of the evil which he said he would do to Nineveh and does not destroy Nineveh.⁹ Jonah is exceedingly angry and says he would rather be dead.¹⁰ Jonah

¹ Jonah 1:1-3. The Christian and Jewish stories of Jonah are identical, except for slight differences in the numbering of verses. The Christian numbering of verses is used throughout this article.

² Jonah 1:4-7. From a naturalistic perspective, the casting of lots would be a form of gambling to determine who should be thrown off the ship and into the stormy sea. The participants in this superstitious custom would not view it as gambling, however, because they believed that the gods or God would control the lots so as to send a correct message concerning who on board the ship was to “blame” for the storm.

³ Jonah 1:7-16.

⁴ Jonah 1:17 – 2:10.

⁵ Jonah 3:1-3.

⁶ Jonah 3:4. The quotation is from the *Revised Standard Version* translation of the original story. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations in this article are from the *Revised Standard Version*.

⁷ Jonah 3:5-8.

⁸ Jonah 3:8-9.

⁹ Jonah 3:10.

sets up a booth outside Nineveh to see if God will destroy it.¹¹ God appoints a plant to grow over Jonah to give him shade, but then allows the plant to die so that Jonah is angry again.¹² God ends with a question, “And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”¹³

The Book of Jonah strongly implies that the prophet Jonah had a serious, hidden flaw. Jonah refused to give warning of Nineveh’s impending destruction, but was forced to repent and give warning. After Nineveh repented, Jonah still wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. Jonah was unfit to wield God’s power to destroy.

New Interpretation of Jonah. The Book of Jonah can be interpreted so as to provide some guidance on the human use of nuclear weapons. If we substitute human leader for God and substitute nuclear weapons for God’s power to destroy, we obtain the following altered story: The human leader says, “In forty days, this particular city will be destroyed.” What should the city do? In modern times, the obvious answer is to evacuate the city. Evacuation saves lives. The human leader has given “fair warning” of the bombing, so as to save lives. If any refuse to leave the city, they may be legitimately (or less unjustly) bombed.

After the city is evacuated, is there still a need to destroy the city? One possible answer is, “Yes, destroy the city.” In Jonah, God does not destroy the city. If we substitute “evacuation” for Nineveh’s repentance in this alternate interpretation, we see that once an evacuation has occurred, there is no longer good reason to bomb the city.¹⁴ So long as the city’s people remain evacuated, they are highly inconvenienced. An enemy is likely to be more amenable to negotiating a solution for the problem which caused the war. If a solution is successfully negotiated, the evacuees may return to the city.

This, in raw form, is an interpretation of Jonah that provides an alternate view of how to use nuclear weapons. To make this idea a realistic policy for controlling nuclear weapons, we must specify further details. This article discusses the extent to which this new interpretation makes any theological sense. A companion article, “Evacuations Instead of Nuclear War,” Lundgren (2007) discusses the strictly secular and practical details of how to implement this idea in a manner that works.

Methods of Scriptural Interpretation. There are three basic methods of scriptural interpretation. One is the fundamentalist method which assumes the literal truth of most or all scripture. In this method of interpretation, Jonah’s being swallowed by a whale for three days and surviving is an event that actually happened. Of course, since God is all-powerful, it is easy for God to perform such a miracle.

¹⁰ Jonah 4:1-4.

¹¹ Jonah 4:5.

¹² Jonah 4:6-10.

¹³ Jonah 4:11. The reference to not knowing the right hand from the left hand means not knowing the difference between right and wrong (at least not to the level of knowledge of an ordinary Jew who knew God’s law).

¹⁴ To be sure, we may wonder if there is ever a good reason to bomb a whole city. Regardless of whether it is right or just, the threat to bomb whole cities has been with us since Hiroshima and the Cold War, and continues today. Evacuation or other non-lethal alternatives to bombing whole cities has rarely been discussed.

Another method of scriptural interpretation is less literal. Many believers disbelieve that the whole Bible is literally true. This more liberal method of interpretation allows for the possibility that the whole story may be fictional.¹⁵ Maybe Jonah was swallowed by a whale, maybe he wasn't. Maybe Jonah preached to Nineveh, maybe he didn't. What is important is not whether the story is literally true, but what moral and spiritual lessons can be derived from the story.

The third method of interpreting scripture is strictly naturalistic. Miracles don't happen. Therefore, Jonah did not survive for three days inside a whale. There are no historical records outside the Book of Jonah to indicate that Jonah ever preached to Nineveh or that Nineveh ever repented. Therefore, these events likely never happened.

For purposes of understanding a story, it is always necessary to suspend disbelief. For example, in Aesop's fables, animals talk.¹⁶ In real life, animals don't talk. For purposes of understanding the fables, it is necessary to suspend disbelief and at least imagine that animals talk. The inability of animals to talk is irrelevant to understanding the moral lessons of Aesop's fables. Similarly, to understand Jonah, it is necessary to suspend disbelief as to whether the story really happened. One can then ponder the moral lessons within the story.

Whether the story is literally true or not, it is commonly understood that Jonah represents an attitude of many Jews within ancient Israel. It is an attitude of nationalism or ethnocentrism. My people, my religion, my country, and my tribe are important and well-deserving of God's favor. Other countries, peoples, tribes, and religions are unimportant, and perhaps deserve to be hated and destroyed. It is an attitude that still prevails today, in many countries and in many peoples. The book of Jonah ridicules Jonah's attitude, and contrasts that bad attitude with the better attitude of God and the various non-Jews whom Jonah meets.

Christian Interpretations of Jonah. The Gospels claim that Jesus predicted his own death and resurrection as the "sign of the prophet Jonah": "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."¹⁷ The book of Jonah itself says nothing about the death and resurrection of a future Messiah. It is only Jesus' statement that creates this relationship.

Christians are apt to see in the story the repentance by Nineveh followed by forgiveness from God. This is no doubt an appropriate interpretation, since it is clear that Nineveh did repent. That is why God did not destroy Nineveh.

However, it is notable that the word "repent" is applied to only one character in the story. It is the character who has the most power to cause harm and who has the most responsibility to refrain from evil. That character is God. God's change of heart is

¹⁵ The type of fiction is still debated. For example, Hamel (1995), "In numerous studies, commentators... wonder if the author is being ironic, satirical, parodic, allegorical, or didactic."

¹⁶ Aesop was a Greek slave (later freed) who lived in the sixth century B.C. He is credited with telling hundreds of short stories (fables) that had moral lessons. These fables often had talking animals, including "Belling the Cat" (a.k.a. "The Cat and the Mice"), "The Tortoise and the Hare," and many others.

¹⁷ Matthew 12:39-40. Other Gospel verses mention the "sign of Jonah" but do not specify what the sign means. See Luke 11:29-30 and Matthew 16:4.

described this way: “God repented of the evil which he said he would do to them; and he did not do it.”¹⁸

It is as if God is reprising the role of a human leader who has the power to destroy a city, a country, or even the whole world. God shows how to exercise this power. By contrast, Jonah insists that God should destroy Nineveh, even though Nineveh has repented.¹⁹ Jonah shows how not to exercise the power to destroy. A human leader must choose: God’s way or Jonah’s way?

Muslim Accounts of Jonah. There are six passages in the Quran which relate to Jonah.²⁰ The Quran recognizes Jonah (Yunus) as one of about 25 prophets. (Surah 4:163, 6:86) The Quran references or partially retells the story of Jonah in four different places (Surah 10:98, 21:87-88, 37:139-148, 68:48-50) Surah 10 is commonly called Jonah.

Surah 10:98 praises the “people of Jonah” as the only city which profited from their belief, because they were saved from immediate punishment. Muslims generally acknowledge that this unnamed city was Nineveh at the time it repented. Surah 21:87-88 and 37:139-146 both indicate that Jonah angrily abandoned his prophetic mission, ended up in darkness in the belly of a fish, glorified God and admitted his sin, and was delivered from his distress. Surah 37:147-148 indicates that Jonah subsequently preached to a city of over 100,000 people who believed his preaching. Surah 68:48 cautions us to accept the Lord’s commands, and not be like the “companion of the fish” (Jonah) who cried out in agony. Surah 68:49-50 indicates that even a sinner like Jonah can receive the Lord’s grace and be made righteous.

Outside the Quran, there are several folk tales of Jonah that appear on Muslim websites.²¹ In the website tales, Jonah is portrayed as a prophet who constantly preached to Nineveh, but who then left the city and was swallowed by the big fish or whale.²² In most of the stories, the people of Nineveh repented while Jonah was absent.²³ In some of these tales, there were signs in the sky of Nineveh that frightened the people considerably so that they repented.²⁴

These folk tales speak more favorably of Jonah’s work as a prophet than the original Jewish story, but they speak less favorably of Nineveh’s repentance. In these alternate accounts, Jonah is portrayed as having preached long and diligently, even though Nineveh refused to believe. According to these alternate accounts, Nineveh refused to repent until the very day that God was about to judge them.

¹⁸ Jonah 3:10. Quotation is from *Revised Standard Version*. Here are two more translations: “God relented of the disaster...” (*English Standard Version*) and “God changed his mind about the calamity...” (*New Revised Standard Version*).

¹⁹ Jonah 4:1-5.

²⁰ To understand these passages, I reviewed five different English translations of the Quran (or Koran). These English translations are available from the website, <http://www.quranbrowser.org/>.

²¹ Of the thirteen English-language Muslim websites I reviewed, only one contained a condensed version of the original Jewish tale. Appendix A provides a list of these websites.

²² Twelve of the thirteen Muslim websites made this claim.

²³ Seven of the Muslim websites make this claim. Five say Nineveh repented after Jonah returned from the whale. One does not say.

²⁴ Four of the tales (all nearly identical) say, “The skies began to change color and looked as if they were on fire.” One of the tales says, “A huge cloud came over the whole area and the land was plunged into darkness.”

For those who believe the Quran, Surah 37:139-148 provides the order of events. The Quran nowhere states that Jonah preached to Nineveh prior to being swallowed by the whale. After Jonah returned from the whale, he then preached to Nineveh and Nineveh believed. The Quran nowhere states that God provided signs in the sky.

For purposes of this article, we focus on the original Jewish story, which the Quran does not contradict.

Evacuation versus Repentance. When faced with natural disasters, sometimes called “Acts of God,” the rational response is to escape or evacuate or otherwise protect oneself. If a hurricane is about to flood New Orleans, it is rational for the residents to evacuate. If there are signs a tsunami is approaching, it is rational to run away from the beach and not follow the receding waters that precede the tsunami. If it can be predicted that a volcano is about to explode, it is rational to flee the places where lava is likely to flow.

In the disasters alleged in Genesis, escape or evacuation is also a rational strategy. For example, Noah survived the Flood because he built an ark.²⁵ In principle, everyone in the world could have built arks. Lot and his family survived the fire-bombing of Sodom and Gomorrah by fleeing those cities.²⁶ In principle, everyone could have fled from those cities. Similarly, Jonah waited outside Nineveh to see if God would destroy Nineveh.²⁷ In principle, everyone in Nineveh could have evacuated and waited outside Nineveh.

Why did the people of Nineveh repent rather than evacuate or do nothing? In the original story, a traveling Jew comes to Nineveh from a far-away land. He preaches that Nineveh will soon be destroyed. There are no signs in the sky or other portents to prove that God is really serious. The people are not so alarmed that they decide to flee in a wave of panic.

Perhaps Jonah tells the people of Nineveh that he was swallowed by a whale, yet survives. In an ancient world that still believes in gods, who can be sure his tale is false? Perhaps Jonah tells them God will destroy their city because their city is wicked. That would sound reasonable. Sometimes the gods get angry.

The people of Nineveh are not sufficiently alarmed to flee the city, but they are still quite concerned. It is not every day or every year that someone comes from a far-away land to warn of their city’s impending destruction. The people of Nineveh decide to fast and to repent of their wickedness. God does not destroy Nineveh. From a strictly naturalistic perspective, this sequence of events could have happened, even if there is no secular proof that it actually happened.

Human Rights and Capabilities. Should humans imitate God’s example? In some cases the answer may be yes; in other cases the answer may be no. It really depends on human rights and capabilities versus God’s rights and capabilities.

God may have an unrestricted right and capacity to judge human lives and souls. Humans have no such unlimited right or capacity. The human right to kill humans is, at most, very much limited and restricted. God may have the right to demand worship, but humans have no such right.

²⁵ Genesis 6:5 – 8:19.

²⁶ Genesis 19:1-29.

²⁷ Jonah 4:5.

Humans have no right to use the sword (including the sword of law) to demand that others convert to Islam, to Christianity, or to atheism, or to refrain from such conversion. Even if humans had such a right, a nuclear weapon is too blunt and too indiscriminating an instrument to allow one to convert a whole city. God has the power and capacity to destroy a whole city, while saving those in the city who may be righteous. Nuclear weaponry has no such capacity.

Hence, humans cannot threaten to destroy a wicked city, and then withhold destruction because the city has repented. The natural alternative to repentance is evacuation. Humans cannot use a nuclear weapon to require repentance, but they can use the nuclear weapon to require evacuation. Seen from this alternative perspective, the Book of Jonah provides an important clue as to how human leaders may properly use nuclear weapons in a just war.

Jonah's Attitude. We may suppose that a prophet of God is always outwardly righteous. If Jonah were clearly wicked, God presumably would have chosen a different messenger. Despite his outward righteousness, the prophet Jonah had a serious, hidden flaw. He refused to give warning of Nineveh's destruction, but was forced to repent and give warning. After Nineveh repented, Jonah still wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. Jonah was unfit to wield God's power to destroy. By implication, our own not-so-righteous human leaders are likewise unfit to wield the nuclear power of destruction.

God's final question in the story indicates that Jonah needed to repent of his desire to destroy Nineveh. Even though the story does not say, we can imagine that Jonah eventually did repent. This leaves it as an open question. Will the modern-day nuclear Jonahs also repent? Will they repent in time to prevent our destruction?

References

Hamel, Gildas (1995). "Taking the Argo to Nineveh: Jonah and Jason in a Mediterranean context" *Judaism*, Summer. Available online at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is_n3_v44/ai_17422984/print.

Lundgren, Carl (2007). "Evacuations Instead of Nuclear War," manuscript, May.

Appendix A. English-Language Muslim Websites That Tell the Story of Jonah

In my web research, I encountered 13 English-language Muslim websites that tell the story of the prophet Jonah (or Yunus). Some of these websites were obtained from <http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/jonah/islam.html>. Other websites were obtained from Google or other searches.

Only website 3 has a simplified version of the original Jewish story. All websites, except website 3, claim that Jonah preached to Nineveh before being swallowed by a whale. Websites 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 claim that the people of Nineveh repented while Jonah was absent; websites 2, 3, 5, 6, 13 say that Nineveh repented after Jonah returned from the whale; website 7 does not say. Websites 1, 4, 10, 12 say, "The skies began to change color and looked as if they were on fire." Website 8 says, "A huge cloud came over the whole area and the land was plunged into darkness." Websites 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13 do not mention any signs in the sky.

These are the 13 websites:

1. www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/Prophet/yunus.htm
2. www.islam101.com/history/people/prophets/jonah.htm
3. www.islamicdigest.net/v61/copntent/view/1517/44/ (printed on 10/18/2006; item unavailable on 5/15/2007)
4. <http://anwary-islam.com/prophet-story/yunus.htm>
5. www.jamaat.org/islam/Yunus.html
6. <http://members.tripod.com/islamickids/id41.htm>
7. <http://forum.shiasource.com/board/index.php?showtopic=529> (printed on 9/2/2005; server unavailable on 5/15/2007)
8. www.playandlearn.org/reader.asp?Type=History&fn=142
9. www.islamweb.net/ver2/archive/article.php?lang=E&id=52328 (printed on 10/15/2006; item unavailable on server, 5/15/2007; item available from Google only as cached webpage by searching: islamweb story of yunus jonah.)
10. www.iisca.org/articles/document.jsp?id=77
11. [www.tafseercomparison.org/study6A.asp?TitleText=Study%206A:%20Yunus%20\(a.s.\)](http://www.tafseercomparison.org/study6A.asp?TitleText=Study%206A:%20Yunus%20(a.s.))
12. www.angelfire.com/on/ummiby1/jonah.html
13. <http://al-islam.org/gallery/kids/Books/stories/part10.htm>