

“Jonah and Psalms: Do Jews and Christians Read the Same Book?”

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From the Pulpit

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“Jonah and Psalms: Do Jews and Christians Read the Same Book?”

Thank you so much for inviting me to preach on this Sunday, in this special joint program between the First Congregational Church and Congregation Tifereth Israel. I am speaking from Jerusalem, at a most difficult time for our country, the United States. Jerusalem in Hebrew is *yerushalim*, which contains the word *shalom*, peace, and my sincere hope is that we will soon see a period of peace in America, Israel, and the entire world.

For those not used to Christian Sunday worship service, a central part of the service is the lectionary — readings from the Old and New Testaments, typically from Psalms, a different Old Testament book, from the gospel, and from an epistle or Revelation. This is sort of like — but only sort of like — the Jewish *parashat hashavua* + *haftara* tradition, where Jews read from the Torah — the first five books of the Bible on every shabbat, followed by a related prophetic reading. I here mean prophetic in the Jewish sense, the books from Joshua to Malachi, rather than the Christian definition

of Prophets, namely Isaiah to Malachi. This different definition of books is an important hint at my theme — though Jews and Christians share much, we must remember differences as well, especially when each community defines the same term, such as “the prophets” differently. Thus, some Jews complete the Torah every three-years, similar to the way in which the Church has a three-year lectionary cycle — but Jews read the entire Torah, while the entirety of the gospels are not read in the typical three-year Sunday lectionary — another important difference for us to consider despite similarities.

Now back to our lectionary readings: Two of them from Jonah and Mark are connected to repentance. The first two gospel verses from Mark, read:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

The theme of this reading, the arrival of the kingdom of God, is repeated in the reading from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, where he says, “the appointed time has grown short” and this is a crucial theme for understanding much of the New Testament in its context. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God is a main assumption of the New Testament authors.

Another of today’s readings is from Jonah, which at least from a Jewish perspective, is about repentance.

The main Hebrew word for repentance is *teshuvah*, from the root *shuv*, “to turn, or return,” and it likely originally meant returning to stand before God through righteous or proper actions — something we will see in a few minutes in Jonah. In the Jewish Bible, it does not refer to a changed internal state, the way most of us now typically think of the word. It has this internal meaning in the gospel of Mark, where the Greek word *metanoia* means “a change of mind,” and refers to an internal change. Mark’s repenting here is thus connected to *belief* in the good news, the gospel: “repent, and believe in the good news” — this is likely a single action.

Let’s compare this to the repentance of the wicked people in Nineveh. Let me start with Jonah 3:5:

“The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth.”

I would like to ask two “simple” questions about this verse. In what sense is the word “believe” and “believed God” being used — is it abstract or concrete — an internal attitude or something reflected through action? And second, related to the fact that verses in the original Bible lack punctuation should there be a period after “The people of Nineveh believed God {period}” indicating that it is its own independent action, or should there be a colon after “The people of Nineveh believed God {colon}: They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth.” The colon would suggest that proclaiming a fast and putting on a sackcloth is the definition here of believing God.

Jonah 3:8, a few verses later, helps us clarify the meaning of this belief and the type of repentance enacted, and thus the colon is more appropriate than a period:

“They shall be covered with sackcloth — man and beast — and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty.”

The people of Nineveh are not merely asked to change their internal attitudes, their sense of belief, but their actions. That this is what is most important is made crystal clear by the last verse from Jonah that we read today:

“God saw what they *did*, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.”

What did God see? Not what they believed in, looking into their hearts, but “what they did!”

This difference between repentance and these two juxtaposed readings from Mark and Jonah should remind us all that Jews and Christians may often use similar religious concepts, even expressing them through the same word, but they may mean different things. Although other New Testament texts certainly speak of repentance in terms of actions, the concept of repentance is fundamentally different in the two lectionary readings today from Mark and Jonah—in Mark repentance is through belief in the Christ, while in Jonah it is through actions.

And this brings me to the larger point that I would like to make, related to the title of my sermon: “Jonah and Psalms: Do Jews and Christians Read the Same Book?” By now you should be

thinking that my answer will be “no.” In the same way that Jews and Christians both have lectionaries — but they are structured differently, and Jews and Christians both insist on repentance — but that very term means different things in each community. When reading Psalms and Jonah, Jews and Christians are not really reading the same book.

Let me explain what I mean. Jews read Jonah in Hebrew, with the nuances of Hebrew — or at the very least relate to the nuances of the Hebrew, while most Christians will read it in English only. For Roman Catholics, that English translation might be based on the Vulgate, Jerome’s Latin translation that was authoritative in the western church through the Reformation; for the Eastern Churches, LXX the Septuagint, the ancient Jewish Greek translation, would have been authoritative. For most Protestants, the Hebrew text is central — that was one of Luther’s key innovations —but it is not always the same Hebrew text used by the Jewish community. The NRSV, a standard translation used in many Protestant churches, in some cases amends or corrects the traditional text, or follows the Dead Sea Scrolls, rather than the standard text preserved within Judaism. So — Jews and Christians quite literally are sometimes reading different texts of the same biblical books!

But that difference is small compared to my main point. We always read with biases, or to use a metaphor, with eyeglasses of one type or another; it is impossible for us to leave behind our readerly or religious presuppositions. And Jews and Christians have different presuppositions about Jonah, about what is central in Jonah, and this encourages us to read the book as a whole and its contents, very differently. Through different lens. Stated more broadly—

context matters a great deal for interpretation, and Jonah is a different book in the Jewish context than in the Christian one.

Jonah's main context in Judaism is Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement, when it is read in its entirety in the afternoon service. It partakes in, and reinforces, the central theme of the day — the power of repentance, and that repentance is open to all and is fully efficacious. It is much more than a book about a guy swallowed by a whale — indeed, in the Hebrew, there is no whale, but a *dag gadol* — a big fish. From beginning to end, recognition of God and repentance are main themes. Through Jonah's actions in chapter one, the sailors on the way to Tarshish recognize God, by the end of the chapter, fearing and revering him greatly. The inhabitants of Nineveh —from king to cow (yes — read the book carefully!) put on sackcloths and cry loudly to God. God hears their cries; that seems to be the point of the second chapter of Jonah, his prayer, where he cried onto God from the belly of the big fish — Jonah there does not repent, but nevertheless the Old Testament God hears him, and commands the big fish to disgorge him on to the dry land. The book seems to embody the theme of Psalm 145:18, which is recited twice daily in the Jewish tradition:

The LORD is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity.

That is the Jewish message of Jonah: God is compassionate and forgiving to those who are sincere. I might even surprise some in the audience by using the words “full of grace” about this depiction of the Old Testament God. You see this grace in what is missing from the book: Jonah behaves throughout as a brat — but

this graceful God does not slap him across the face at the end of the book — a slap that he most certainly deserves.

For many Christian readers, from antiquity to the present, the book's primary meaning is quite different: it concerns the burial and the subsequent resurrection of Jesus. We find the first reference to, and explanation of, what is called the "sign of Jonah" in Matthew 12:38–40. When approached by some scribes and Pharisees who ask him, "Teacher, we seek a sign from you," Jesus responds, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster (that is the gospels understanding of the big fish), so for three days and three nights the Son of Man (the term for Jesus) will be in the heart of the earth." This quotation alludes to the verse in Jonah: "But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights." Indeed, among the earliest examples we have of Christian art are third-century sarcophagi that depicted Jonah, read in this light, as a symbol of resurrection and a rest in paradise.

So, do Jews and Christians read the same book of Jonah differently? You better believe it —although there is some overlap in interpretation. For one community it is largely about the power of repentance, for the other it is predominately about the risen Christ.

Given the limited time I have, I would like to extend my point to Psalms; my example about reading the same book differently will not come from this week's lectionary Psalms reading but will

concern a Psalm that plays a much more central role in Christian tradition — Psalm 22. This psalm hardly plays as significant a role in Judaism, illustrating my general point in a different way — even when both traditions share the same text, often in one tradition it is very central, while in the other it is peripheral or ho-hum. The average Jew would not be able to identify, or to assign much significance to the words while the average Christian will recognize the words as one of the, if not the, most important quotations of the Old Testament in the New, from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have You abandoned me.”

The centrality of Psalm 22 in the Gospel writers is seen for example in Mark 15:34: At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew, the Gospel continues which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But the centrality of Psalm 22 to the gospels goes well beyond this reference. For example, alluding to Psalm 22:18, “they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots,” all four Gospels depict the Roman soldiers casting lots for Jesus’s clothing. As Mark 15:24 states, “As they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, dividing lots to decide what each should take” (also in Matthew 27:35; Luke 23:34; John 19:23–24). John 19:23–24 introduces a separate item of clothing, sensitive to the fact that in the first part of this verse, the Psalm uses a plural word for clothing, but a singular in the second part, John reads: They took his clothes [plural] and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic [singular]; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So, they said to one another, Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” That was to

fulfill what the scripture says. Now Psalm 22 is quoted “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” This quotation follows the Greek version, the Septuagint of Psalm 22:18 as is typical of Hebrew Bible or Old Testament quotes in the New Testament.

I could offer several more examples of how Psalm 22 is so central to the Gospel authors — if you are so inclined, these are collected in the recent book I wrote with Amy-Jill Levine, *The Bible with and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* — but my main point should be clear: One difference between how Jews and Christians read the same book is in which of its texts they consider most important; tradition, in essence, suggests that different verses are in different font sizes. For Christians, Psalm 22 is 48 point bold; for most Jews it is a ho-hum 10 or 12 point text. And as an aside let me mention one other broad difference between Jews and Christians reading Psalms: For the New Testament authors, Psalms was a prophetic book, focused on Jesus, while for most Jews it is a book of prayers and about the past of King David. These are two hugely different ways of reading the same words, which yield very different interpretations.

The last point, about the way that much Christian interpretation of the Old Testament centers around the Christ, returns me to the lectionary readings from today, specifically to a phrase from Psalm 62:12: “One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard.” Here the tables are turned—this is not a very significant verse within Christianity — so let’s imagine it printed in 10 or 12 point font, but it is a 36 point verse within Judaism, where the classical rabbis ponder: What could it mean when we hear two things if God speaks only one? Therefore, they say, that biblical texts have

at least two meanings — two things have I heard and often many more; one Jewish biblical scholar, James Kugel has coined the term “omnisignificance” to refer to this idea. This foreshadows the contemporary notion of “two Jews, three opinions.” Thus, unlike classical Christian interpretation of the Old Testament which tends to move in one direction — the text refers to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus — in Judaism the same texts are not only interpreted differently, but much more diffusely. As a result, we do not end up reading the same book.

I am happy to have come full-circle to Psalm 62, parts of which seem prophetic for the events of the last few weeks — Jews, Christians, and all people can certainly ponder and appreciate the psalmist’s words: “Do not trust in violence or put false hopes in robbery; if force bears fruit pay it no mind.” In such cases, scripture, can and should unite us. But shared scripture cannot always unite us. Thinking about the Bible in Jewish and Christian traditions often reminds me of a famous quote attributed to either George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill or Oscar Wilde: “England and America are two countries separated by a common language.” Similarly, “Judaism and Christianity are two religions separated by a common Bible.” We are joined but also separated by the text of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, how we translate it, in reference to whom or what we interpret, what we consider its main themes to be, even what we name this collection and which verses within it we consider to be central. In the past, such differences often led to ugly polemics, but let us hope that in the present and future, they can lead to a better understanding of our differences, and appreciation of what we do share in common.