

Rhetorical Questions
Rev. George M. Schwab, Ph.D.
August 28, 2017

Jonah 4:9a, 11a

(BHS)	(KJV)
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־יוֹנָה הֲהֵיטֵב תִּרְהַרְהֵל עַל־הַקִּיקִיּוֹן	And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?
וַאֲנִי לֹא אַחֹס עַל־נִינְוֶה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה	And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city ... ?

Line 1 is straightforward. You may recognize “Jonah.” Line 2 begins with the interrogative, then the *hifil* of *yatab*, “to be good.” In Line 3 you may recognize “Nineveh.” KJV reads “spare;” the verb means to pity, to have compassion, to show mercy. My musings are based on researchers such as Barry Allen Jones (1995). The bibliography is available.

The Hebrew Bible has three sections: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The great Prophecy corpus is comprised of eight books. The first four are the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The second four are the Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. Thus the Twelve is the last prophetic scroll in the Hebrew Bible.

What really fires my imagination is the possibility that in at least one collection found in cave 4 at Qumran, namely 4QXII^a, Jonah was placed at the end of the Twelve (the “minor prophets”). That probably means that someone thought the Book of Jonah was a fitting last word on prophecy. Hmm. How would that work?

The other Latter Prophets are mostly oracles. But Jonah is mostly historical narrative about the prophet himself. The whole oracular portion of

Jonah is only five Hebrew words (3:4). Jonah is a prophecy about prophecy. If a prophecy doesn't come true, does that mean it was false? If the prophet is of dubious character, does that mean he can't speak for God? Jonah addresses these issues through its unfolding story. I'll leave it to you to decide what it says about them.

Jonah ends with two rhetorical questions. The first one goes like this: You mere human being, you small created thing—when you observe some aspect of the grand design of God's universe, and it doesn't conform to your own personal moral preferences or sense of justice—are you right to be angry at the Creator over it? Are you right to foster a sense of indignation towards God because of some slight or because you can imagine a better scenario for yourself? Are you right to expect him to treat you better than he has? Are you right to be angry? Do you do well to be, like Jonah, angry enough to die?

The second rhetorical question is similar. It is simply this: Should not God have compassion? Should he not show mercy to your enemies? Should he not show others the same pity and forbearance he has shown to you? Should he not spare them too?

I bet these rhetorical questions are relevant to you. We have all felt like Jonah at times. The Book of Jonah says to you, "Are you right to be angry?" And, "Should not God have compassion?" And then leaves you to ponder.

But what really impresses me is that the community of scroll 4QXII^a apparently felt that the whole of the Twelve should end on this note. In fact it is bigger than that: the whole corpus of biblical prophecy would conclude that way. By this analysis then, when you read through Joshua, Judges, Samuel,

and Kings; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve—and then stand back and contemplate the whole sweep of that great collection, it leaves you with two questions. Are you right to be angry? Should not God show compassion?

This takes on special meaning for a Christian. God gave his only Son for you. Jesus died so you may live. In the light of this, are you then right to be angry at him when things don't go your way? Jonah was angry over a leaf, which sprang into existence in a day and then faded away. What does it take to disturb your tranquility? How small of a setback can set you off? Just under the surface, are you ready to find fault with God when things go awry?

And what about other people? How small an offense can raise your ire? Someone butting in line ahead of you? An insensitive comment? How does a slight make you feel? And let's not even talk about real enemies who do actual harm—to you or to others. Jesus could have called down fire from heaven at his arrest. Think about that.

Are you right to be angry?

Should not God show compassion?