

*Dr. Ann Plogsterth*

## JONAH IN ART: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Over time, Jonah has inspired varied religious and artistic interpretations, focusing on different aspects of the complex tale. It is even found in the Quran (37:139) and in Near Eastern art (fig. 1). Only the first part of Jonah's story is covered in our oratorio, and it focuses on the theme of the prophet's disobedience.

The first Christians were, of course, Jews, well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. They knew the book of Jonah, unique among the prophetic books in that it is entirely narrative and contains no real oracle. They also knew the tradition that would later become the New Testament. Both Matthew (12:40–41; 16:4) and Luke (11:29–32) speak of the sign of Jonah, whose three days and three nights in the belly of the whale<sup>1</sup> were seen as prefiguring Jesus's three days in the abode of the dead and his ultimate Resurrection; this connection is explicitly spelled out in the first Matthean passage.

So it should be no surprise that Early Christian sarcophagi and catacomb frescoes are especially fond of Jonah's story, perhaps adding allusions to baptism, the gateway to resurrection—allusions which would have been apparent only to initiates. Jonah often emerges from the fish naked and bald, with a baby face (as if newly reborn) and in an orant pose, and the scene of him resting under the gourd tree (an incident not included in the oratorio) reflects the blessed soul of the baptized and resurrected Christian.<sup>2</sup> In some fourth-century sarcophagi

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1. Actually "great fish" in Hebrew, and variously depicted as fish, seahorse, or sea monster.

2. The Vatican's famous Jonah Sarcophagus pairs the prophet's story with several scenes suggesting the saving waters of baptism (Noah in his ark receiving the returning dove [cf. 1 Peter 3:20–21], Moses striking water at Massah and Meribah) and the resurrection of the dead (raising of Lazarus).

(fig. 2), Jonah under the tree is juxtaposed with a scene of Peter baptizing his jailers: first, baptism in this life, then paradise in the next.

In the sixth to eleventh centuries, Byzantine manuscripts expanded the narrative cycle to include further events: Jonah's calling, his embarkation, and his preaching at Nineveh (fig. 3). These exquisite works influenced Jonah's depiction in icons through subsequent centuries.

In the Middle Ages, the connection with Jesus's Resurrection remains (figs. 4, 5), as do the narrative scenes, but, apart from these, Jonah also appears among group depictions of the prophets. In psalters and books of hours, Jonah and his whale were sometimes placed with Psalm 68/69,<sup>3</sup> with its references to rising waters. An Ordo for commending a soul at the time of death prayed, "Sicut liberasti Jonam de ventre ceti, eicias me de morte ad vitam" (As you freed Jonah from the whale's belly, may you cast me from death into life).<sup>4</sup> One curious use of the Jonah theme is on South Italian ambros and preacher's chairs, where it might be seen as a warning to reluctant preachers: Jonah's disinclination to address the Ninevites did not work out well for him.

An important new medieval use of the Jonah theme is found in manuscripts and printed books like the *Biblia pauperum* and *Speculum humanae salvationis*. Both were collections of New Testament events joined to their Hebrew prototypes, with suitable quotations from the prophets, often in the vernacular (figs. 6, 7). For instance, Jesus's burial is paired with Jonah swallowed by the whale and Joseph thrown into the cistern; the Resurrection parallels are Sampson destroying the gates of Gaza (as Christ burst the gates of death) and Jonah emerging from the whale.

In the Renaissance and Baroque, both narrative cycles and allegorical allusions disappear, and we find more or less realistic depictions of a large fish and a man (fig. 8). Although Jonah is usually shown elderly, befitting a prophet, Lorenzetto portrayed

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3. The Hebrew and Greek Bibles number the psalms differently. Jews, Protestants, academics, and modern Catholics use the Hebrew system; Orthodox and traditional Catholics follow the Greek Septuagint.

4. Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 1955, Vol. 2, Part 1, p. 415.

an Apollo-like young Jonah (fig. 9); writing of this work, Vasari noted its allusion to the resurrection of the dead, a symbolism still remembered then. Michelangelo's massive Jonah in the Sistine Chapel makes, by its placement, a connection between Jonah and the Christ of the Last Judgment (fig. 10), again perhaps reiterating the Resurrection theme.

By the time of our oratorio, the *Biblia pauperum* was hardly current reading and the scholastic mindset that searched for typologies was no longer prevalent, although probably remaining as a subconscious influence.<sup>5</sup> *Giona* ignores the traditional connections with resurrection and baptism, focusing entirely on the motif of Jonah's disobedience and subsequent obedience, a theme much harder to depict visually.

By the nineteenth century, all connections beyond the details of the actual story seem to have been lost, and we are left with a simple adventure story. Perhaps the most significant artist to depict Jonah then was James Tissot in his massive series of watercolors on the Bible (fig. 11). Eventually, the theme is taken over by Sunday-school illustrations (fig. 12), which can come to rival very bad cartoons (fig. 13). Sometimes the depiction reflects a hyper-literal interpretation of Scripture (figs. 14, 15). In Israel Jonah has generally received more serious artistic treatment (figs. 16–18), though, even there, one finds exceptions (fig. 19). Perhaps humanity can no longer deal with miracles or with metaphor; in this modern age we cannot see past the details of whale anatomy to perceive the prophet's underlying message.

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5. The connection of Jonah to the Resurrection persists in odd places: a gravestone c.2013 in the Ratzeburg cathedral cemetery depicts Jonah and the whale, and a 2014 Good Friday procession in Malta includes Jonah and his maritime companion.





Fig. 1. Folio from a Jami al-Tavarikh (Compendium of Chronicles), Iranian, c.1400, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 2. Sarcophagus, 4<sup>th</sup> century, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican, inventory 31533. From left to right: Noah and the dove, Jonah goes head-first into the whale, an infant Jonah emerges from the whale, Peter baptizes his jailers.



Fig. 3. Paris Psalter, Paris, Bibliothèque National (BnF MS Grec 139), folio 431v. From left to right and background to foreground: Jonah preaches to the Ninevites, God calls Jonah, Jonah thrown overboard, Jonah leaves the whale.



Fig. 4. Lieven van Lathem, Prayer Book of Charles the Bold, c.1471, Getty Center, Los Angeles. Jesus laid in the tomb is paired with a small depiction of Jonah thrown into the whale's mouth.

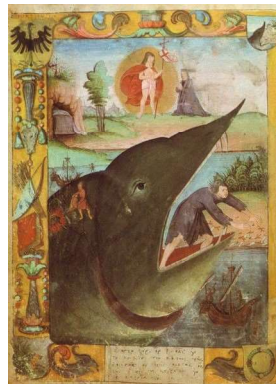


Fig. 5. Justus Jonas the Elder (1493–1555), Universitätsmatrikel, Erfurt. Here the main scene is a bedraggled Jonah emerging from the whale, with a small Resurrection in the background.



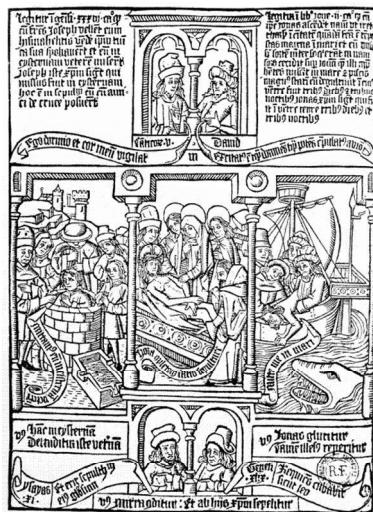


Fig. 6. *Biblia pauperum*, Netherlandish, 1480–85, Paris, Bibliothèque National (Xylo-5), Pl. 37, Block m. Jesus's burial is paired with Jonah swallowed by the whale and Joseph thrown into the cistern by his brothers (Gen. 37:18–24). Joseph's scroll says, "Miseruntque eum in cisternam veteram" (And they placed him in an old cistern, Gen. 37:24); Jonah's, "Mittite me in mare" (Throw me into the sea, Jonah 1:12). Prophets are Solomon and David above and Isaiah below. Scripture quotes from left to right and top to bottom: Song of Sol. 5:2 "Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat" (I sleep, and my heart is awake); Ps. 77/78:65 "Et excitatus est tamquam dormiens Dominus, tamquam potens crapulatus a vino" (The Lord awoke as from sleep, like a warrior drunk with wine); Is. 11:10 "Et erit sepulchrum eius gloriosum" (And his sepulcher will be glorious); Gen. 49:9 "Requies cubavit sicut leo" (He has lain down like a lion). On numbering of psalms, see note 3.

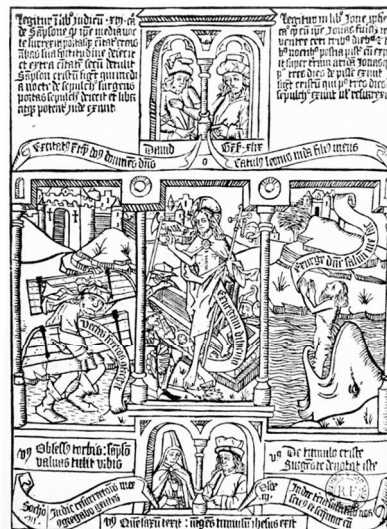


Fig. 7. *Biblia pauperum*, Netherlandish, 1480–85, Paris, Bibliothèque National (Xylo-5), Pl. 39, Block o. Resurrection parallels are Sampson destroying the gates of Gaza (Judges 16:1–3) and Jonah emerging from the whale. Christ's scroll says, "Exsurgam diluculo" (I will arise at dawn, Ps. 56/57:9 = Ps. 107/108:3); Samson's, "Vectes ferreos confregit" (I will break iron bonds, Ps. 106/107:17); Jonah's, "Exsurge Domine saluum me fac" (Arise, O Lord, save me, Ps. 3:7). Prophets are David above and Zephaniah and Hosea below. Scripture quotes from left to right and top to bottom: Ps. 77/78:65 again "Excitatus est tamquam dormiens Dominus" (The Lord awoke as from sleep); Gen. 49:9 "Catulus leonis Juda filius meus" (My son Judah is a lion's cub); Zeph. 3:8 "In die resurrectionis meae in futurum ut congregem gentes" (In the day of my rising up in the future to gather the nations); Hosea 6:3 "In die tertia suscitabit nos. Sciemus, sequemurque" (On the third day he will raise us up. Let us know, let us press on to know).



Fig. 8. Pieter Lastman, 1621, Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.



Fig. 9. Lorenzetto, 1519-20, Chigi Chapel, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.



Fig. 10. Michelangelo, 1511, Sistine Chapel, Vatican.

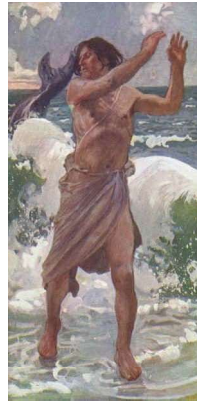


Fig. 11. James Tissot, 1898/1902, New York, The Jewish Museum.

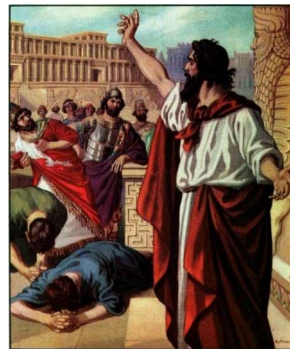


Fig. 12. Adolf Hult, *Bible Primer, Old Testament, for Use in the Primary Department of Sunday Schools*, Augustana Synod [Lutheran], 1919.



Fig. 13. Ministry-to-Children.com.

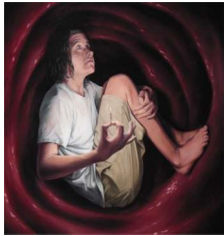


Fig. 14. Stephen Rue, *Jonah Inside the Whale*, 2006.



Fig. 15. Kevin Davidson, *Jonah Inside the Whale*, 2010. Detailed explanations of how Jonah could have survived inside, some complete with photographs of whale innards, are available on the internet.



Fig. 16. Jean David, 1954 travel poster.



Fig. 17. Michael Sgan-Cohen, 1983.



Fig. 18. Israel stamp set, 1963. Scenes are the storm, Jonah in the whale, and the gourd tree.



Fig. 19. Israel stamp, 2010, in a set of Bible stories with Sampson and the lion and Adam and Eve.