



## Jonah: A Braver Interpretation

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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## Abstract

*The book of Jonah is a profound narrative about God's boundless compassion and humanity's struggle to embrace divine mercy. As such, the story has strong implications for Braver Angels and others who seek to depolarize our nation and rebuild its social capital. Jonah tells the story of a reluctant prophet who tries to flee God's call to preach repentance to the enemy city of Nineveh, only to be confronted by God's persistent grace. When Jonah finally delivers his message and the Ninevites repent, God's mercy is extended to them—much to Jonah's displeasure. The book challenges narrow, nationalistic views of God's favor, illustrating that God's concern extends to all people, even those deemed outsiders or enemies. It also highlights the tension between divine justice and mercy, inviting readers to reflect on their own attitudes toward forgiveness, grace, and the universality of God's love. The book of Jonah can serve as a kind of handbook for those seeking to build a better culture. In this short, powerful story, we are given a foundation upon which courageous citizens can begin their work—shaping a community marked not by fear or division, but by a divine love that refuses to recognize borders or boundaries.*

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## Background

This essay explores the story of the biblical prophet Jonah as a resource for faith leaders called to a ministry like his. You (unlike the prophet Jonah but like the author of book) may be burdened by the stressful political polarization in your community. You are concerned about the failure of faith communities to live out a calling of courageous citizenship that builds and nurtures curiosity and compassion for the other.

As a faith leader, you recognize both the risks and potential of involvement in such work. Places of worship can provide safe spaces for inter-tribal conversation and civic healing. Yet, sometimes, what was intended as civil discourse devolves into something neither civil nor discursive. The story of Jonah provides insights and inspiration to resource civic bond-building. The author of Jonah calls its readers to be “Braver Angels” by recognizing the humanity, value and goodness of our enemies and to be courageous enough to engender change.

The story of Jonah can and should be read through a “Braver Angels” lens as motivating and energizing an escape from the cells of our silo and into curious conversation and courageous citizenship. I intend to provide suggestions here as to how that might move and motivate the readers to not be like Jonah but to live a life that radiates divine love, compassion and courage.

## Jonah's Purpose vis-a-vie Nahum

While there are various suggestions as to the purpose of the book of Jonah, it seems clear that Jonah was written to counter the harsh anti-Nineveh tone taken by another biblical prophet. Nahum is uniquely focused on the city of Nineveh. Its first words are, “An oracle concerning Nineveh” (1:1). We find this profound dislike of Nineveh come to its pinnacle in chapter 3. In a series of disturbing taunts, Nahum describes (recently fallen?) Nineveh as a disgraced prostitute who is publicly shamed with nakedness and filth.

<sup>5</sup> I am against you,  
 says the Lord of hosts,  
 and will lift up your skirts over your face;  
 and I will let nations look on your nakedness  
 and kingdoms on your shame.  
<sup>6</sup> I will throw filth at you  
 and treat you with contempt,  
 and make you a spectacle.

These words in Nahum are some of the most disturbing words in holy scripture and depict an extraordinarily profound discord between ancient Israel and Nineveh. Jonah is likely written to lend a differing opinion about Yahweh's attitude toward the Ninevite infidels. Yahweh's care for people in Nineveh depicted in Jonah goes directly up against the anti-Ninevite prophets like Nahum. Prophets asking the same basic question—Does Yahweh love our enemies the Ninevites? —differ mightily, as we often do. Social tensions are nothing new and are sometimes displayed in the pages of what became sacred text.

The book originally written as a satire.<sup>i</sup> All of its characters act comically the opposite of what one would expect; the prophets run from God while confessing God to be everywhere, pagans pray to their gods but convert to Jonah's God, fish swallow God's foolish prophet whole, animals fast and repent in sackcloth and ashes, the king wears sackcloth along with the animals. The fact that Jonah is written as a satirical comedy adds to its present impact; our social environment and political unrealities could hardly be more comical and prone to satire.

## 1. Jonah's Call and Resistance (Jonah 1:1-3)

- **Theme:** Avoidance of engaging with the "other."
- **Lesson:** Jonah's flight from God and God's call depicts how we naturally seek to avoid and even flee from engaging with those we despise.

The book, as is well known, begins with Yahweh's<sup>ii</sup> call to Jonah to go preach against the wickedness of Nineveh (1:1-3). Instead, Jonah fled to Tarshish which we can correctly assume means that he ran the opposite direction. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Assyrians were uniquely hated for their military atrocities and expansionist goals.

One might think that Jonah—the actual prophet and not the book—would be delighted to preach against Assyrian wickedness, grievous as it was. However, to preach against someone's wickedness implies the possibility of their repentance and opportunity for forgiveness. Jonah seems to have struggled with this concept. While other biblical prophets (namely Jeremiah) believe that prophecy of coming judgement always implies hope, Jonah's prophecy seems almost comically doom-filled. While God might have compassion on Israel when they repent and turn from sin, Jonah's God (as he understood Him to be) could not possibly be so willing to forgive Israel's wicked pagan enemies.

What is more, God repeatedly describes Nineveh as being "that great city!" (four times to be exact - 1:2, 3:3, 3:3 and 4:11). Jonah's God seems to be quite impressed with the greatness of this

evil city. One can imagine the mixed feelings some people have for a large beautiful yet decadent city today. But it is remarkable that while God says that Nineveh is evil, he also describes it as a *great* city. The word “great” here (*gadol*) generally has positive connotations. How can Nineveh be a great city if it is also evil?

So, Jonah went to Joppa (modern day Tel-Aviv) and boarded a ship headed toward Tarshish. Tarshish is mentioned in several other texts (Jer. 10:9 and Ezek. 27:12) as a port city on the Mediterranean to the west of Israel. For a person interested in the depolarization angle, Jonah’s flight from God and God’s call depicts how we naturally seek to avoid and even flee from engaging with those we despise.

## **2. God’s Sovereignty Over Creation (Jonah 1:4-16)**

- **Theme:** Shared humanity in times of crisis.
- **Lesson:** The sailors, despite their different cultural and religious backgrounds, show compassion and concern for Jonah, modeling compassion in diversity during shared challenges.

During their trip to Tarshish, a great storm came upon the sea and the mariners were frightened. They threw their cargo overboard and each sailor cried out to their own god. Jonah, oddly, had gone into the ship’s hold and fell fast asleep! He was awakened from his sleep by the captain who urged him to call upon his god. The sailors drew straws to determine on whose account this calamity had befallen them. Jonah drew the short straw and informed them of his guilt due to his disobedience in running from the creator-deity of all the world. He urges the sailors to throw him overboard to quiet the waters. Remarkably, they refuse and row toward the land. When this didn’t work, they threw Jonah overboard and the sea quieted.

The pagan mariners are depicted as thoroughly good people and Jonah is depicted as an unbeliever who ran from God who created the whole universe. Yet, against Jonah’s suggestion, they refused to throw him overboard. The mariners initially cried out to their individual or regional gods. But when Jonah told them about Yahweh the creator of all, they immediately ceased calling on their deities and called out directly to Yahweh.

The lesson provided is that in times of shared crisis, we often find a shared humanity that crosses barriers and opens the heart toward new modalities of understanding. It is as if their crisis provided context for conversion as indicated by their calling upon Yahweh. These mariners showed compassion and concern for Jonah by trying to save his life. They displayed unity and cooperation in crisis. They pray and behave as believers who receive what they ask from Yahweh and treat God’s servant with compassion and dignity. In the end, they had to throw Jonah overboard despite all their efforts, but they worshipped Yahweh with “profound reverence” (CEB). Their faith was more impressive than Jonah’s by a country mile.

## **3. Jonah’s Prayer in the Belly of the Fish (Jonah 2)**

- **Theme:** Self-awareness and transformation.

- **Braver Angels Lesson:** Jonah's isolation in the fish's belly prompts fearfulness, prayer, thanks and renewed mission. The next time YAHWEH's word came to Jonah, he promptly head off toward Nineveh.

Upon being thrown overboard, the text makes clear that YAHWEH provided the fish—likely envisioned as a great sea monster—that swallowed Jonah whole. It wasn't some unfortunate accident but the provision of YAHWEH to provide him transport and protection from the storm. Jonah, famously, prays a psalm of thanks from the belly of the fish. Jonah delights in his deliverance, "I called YAHWEH in my distress, and he answered me" (2:2). Jonah is delighted to receive God's deliverance, saying, "You have heard my voice" (2:3). Jonah 2 starts out sounding like a typical psalm of thanks, of which there are many in the Psalms.

Even so, Jonah is trapped in the belly of a fish, and he describes his condition as dire. He opines, "Waters have grasped me to the point of death" (2:5a). He wonders, "Will I ever look upon your holy temple?" (2:4). But the movement in this psalm seems to be from praise to prayer and back to praise. The themes of thankfulness and faith build toward the climax, "Deliverance belongs to YAHWEH!" (2:9). Then Yahweh delivered Jonah a second time and directed the great fish to vomit Jonah onto the dry land.

While Jonah's isolation and terror in the belly of the fish instigated cries of lament, his salvation provided him with a new opportunity to serve Yahweh. When he is delivered by the fish near the road to Nineveh, he next encounters the word of Yahweh again, he sets off immediately in the proper direction (toward Nineveh as God required). The text seems to want to emphasize this point, by noting a second time that Jonah went to Nineveh according to "Yahweh's word."

#### 4. God's Admiration for Nineveh (Jonah 3)

- **Theme:** Our hatreds and animosity for the political or cultural "other" can blind us to that which is admirable and exemplary in the 'other.'
- **Braver Faith Lesson:** Hatred of our opponents blinds us to their laudable qualities and makes us obsess upon their faults.

Again, we see that the word of Yahweh comes to Jonah with the reminder that it is a 'great' city. Jonah is told two times that the city is indeed a great city (1:2 and 3:2). In chapter 1, God tells Jonah that he is called to preach to the Ninevites "because their wickedness has come up before me (1:2)." The city is both great and wicked simultaneously. Interestingly, in Jonah's second calling in chapter 3, God drops any mention of the wickedness of the city (3:3), yet God reminded Jonah of the greatness of the city (3:3).

Perhaps even more striking is the fact that the Hebrew text includes a rather perplexing description of Nineveh that isn't often clearly translated into English. The Hebrew text includes the words *leElohim* (Hebrew translated "to/for Elohim" – "belonging to God") directly after "large city."<sup>iii</sup>

But there are better ways to translated *leElohim*. It seems to emphasize God's sovereignty or concern over Nineveh. God cares for Nineveh and has a plan and purpose for it. It is not just a

large collection of humans, it is a city that God cares for and intends to use for God's plan and purpose. It emphasizes the greatness of the city in God's own estimation; it is a 'great city' *l'Elohim* (that is, a great city to God). The city of Jerusalem could have been described in the same verbiage. By contrast, Jonah hated this place and despised Ninevites as having no divine relevance.

But the story goes on as the plot thickens. Jonah obeyed Yahweh and walked 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the way through the city and proclaimed simply, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). He never said, "Thus says Yahweh" which is what prophets always say when delivering Yahweh's word. He mentions nothing of hope, nothing of God's purpose for the city, nothing but doom and destruction. His message consisted of six words in Hebrew. This is the shortest, most theologically vacuous prophetic oracle in scripture. Without the tag, "Thus saith Yahweh," we are left to wonder whose words Jonah brought forth.

And yet, the response of the Ninevites was overwhelming, almost to the point of comedy. The Ninevites did what the people of Israel never did. They believed the prophet and repented in a big way, both great and small. This is a story of maximal repentance like we have nowhere else in the Bible! Even the king hears and delivers his own proclamation of repentance. He puts on sackcloth and sits in ashes. He proclaims a decree that demands a strict fast (neither food nor water) for all, both great and small. Both humans and animals were ordered to wear sackcloth and ashes and cry mightily to Yahweh for mercy. All were required to turn from their evil ways and to hope in God.

Again, in the whole of the Hebrew scriptures, in either Israel or Judah, there is no similar prophetic message which brings about such a thorough and nationwide repentance. The Ninevites' humility and grief challenge stereotypes and encourages an openness to the possibility of transformation in others.<sup>iv</sup>

## 5. Jonah's Anger at God's Mercy (Jonah 4:1-4)

- **Theme:** Resentment toward the flourishing of others.
- **Braver Lesson:** Jonah's anger underscores how entrenched biases can blind us to the goodness of reconciliation and shared well-being.

Jonah is deeply upset with God for relenting from punishing the Ninevites. Jonah longed to see the Ninevites and their magnificent city "overthrown." We might doubt that Jonah preached the message that Yahweh gave him to speak since it lacked the important words, "Thus says Yahweh." But it was a very odd in other ways. Typically, prophets combined both doom and hope in their proclamations. Jonah's message was pure doom and now he's angry at Yahweh for not following through with the judgment aspect. Jonah wanted judgement and we can only wonder that his message of doom was more his word for the city than Yahweh's. Only Nahum's prophecy is as doom-driven as Jonah's.

Jonah wanted the future to be frozen and immovable. He did not want Yahweh's compassion to alter the future.<sup>v</sup> So now that Yahweh relented from judgment, Jonah is angry and hurt. He likely felt as if his own status as a prophet is in dispute seeing, according to Deut. 18:22, when

the words of a prophet do not come to pass, the prophet is false. Varying perspectives on the topic (a changeable or unchangeable future) sit side-by-side in the Bible. Jonah may have felt that Yahweh's mercy implied Jonah's falsity and bogusness.

Jonah's feeling of being misused by Yahweh was off course. There was a way in which God *had* overthrown the city – in a spiritual sense. The Hebrew word he used often refers to a spiritual or personal change or conversion. Jonah could have rejoiced at God's overturning the city in such a powerful yet spiritual manner.

One more interesting aspect of this story can be brought forward. When Jonah registered his complaint to Yahweh, he uses these words (4:2).

Please, Yahweh, wasn't this what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore, I hurried to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that *you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and you relent of doing harm.*

What is striking here is that Jonah is parroting and adapting words from Exodus 34:6 when Moses, on Mt. Sinai, asked to see the glory of Yahweh. Yahweh, at his request, passed before him saying, "Yahweh! Yahweh, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth, keeping loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and disobedience and sin . . ." Jonah is literally taking these words of powerful display of God's compassion toward sin and God's magnificent willingness to forgive sin and throwing these promises back in God's face. The verbal match is very close and it is clear that Jonah adds a final few words to improve the correlation and apply it to his situation.

We might paraphrase Jonah's words here with something like this. "God, you're such a softie! You should not have forgiven these terrible people. They repent and say their sorry and immediately you forgave them. You should not have forgiven so quickly, especially seeing they are awful Ninevites! You can have mercy on us, but not on our enemies! In fact, it was because I knew what a pushover-God you are, that I jumped in the first boat to Tarshish. I knew that I should not trust you to bring judgement because you're looking for any excuse to forgive! Why you say this of yourself when you told Moses that you're a gracious and merciful God . . . (Exod. 34:6)."

At which point, Jonah opines, "I would rather die than live!" God responds with a question, "Is it right for you to be so angry?" The implied answer is no. We shouldn't miss the irony just below the surface. Jonah had no reason to be angry because he knew all along (as he just admits) that God is a compassionate and forgiving God (Exod 34:6). He had no cause for complaint and his desire to die proves his short-sightedness.

## 6. The Lesson of the Plant (Jonah 4:5-10)

- **Theme:** God's universal care.
- **Braver Lesson:** God contrasts Jonah's concern for a plant with God's own concern for Nineveh, emphasizing the value of every life, even those alien to us.

So, Jonah set up a booth where he will wait to see what would become of the city. Even though Jonah knew God had relented from punishing the Ninevites, Jonah still hopes to see the destruction of Nineveh. Apparently, he thinks that God may change his mind again. Jonah's anger underscores how entrenched biases can blind us to the goodness of reconciliation and shared well-being. That is true today as it was then. Most of us would rather die than admit when we've been wrong or done wrong.

So Jonah sat in his booth. God made a vine grow quickly over him to provide him with shade. Jonah was delighted, but when the plant dies shortly thereafter and a heavy hot wind starts to blow, Jonah is once again ready to die. This provided Jonah with an object lesson by contrast. Jonah cares for the plant but doesn't care for the Ninevites. God cares for the Ninevites and not the plant. The point for Jonah, and for the readers, is that we should care less about our own comfort and more about the salvation of those who God loves. God's compassion is expressed to all. The prophet should bear the heart of God. We tend to privilege our biased perspective and miss out on God's expansive mission.

The message here is certainly that God's care and concern for all includes Israel's enemies. Jonah, in his prophetic call, is obligated to bear the concerns of God and the universal love of God. He has been clouded by his own bigotries and prejudices. To live into his prophetic call, Jonah must repent of his narrow-minded bigotry and intentionally cultivate a heart that more reflects the one who called him to prophesy. All those who believe in our calling to be Braver Angels must at least attempt to do the same. Our vocation is to display the universal love of God depicted in this story.

## 7. God's Universal Care and Concern (4:11)

- **Theme: Our Struggle with Compassion for the Other**
  - **Lesson:** God's expansive and universal love stands in contrast to our human limitation and challenges us to grow and learn.

Jonah's story calls readers to recognize that God's love and purposes include all peoples, dismantling the "us vs. them" mindset. The story closes with a final question that goes unanswered, except by the story's implication and our imagination.

You have been concerned for the vine . . . And should I not be concerned about 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 many animals (4:10-11)?

The assumed answer to this question, again, is Yes! God should be concerned about Nineveh, especially since they don't know their right hand from their left! The phrase that the people of Nineveh "do not know their right hand from their left" has been interpreted in several ways. The most common interpretation is that the phrase symbolizes the moral and spiritual ignorance of the Ninevites. They did not fully understand the depth of their sin or the ethical requirements of God's law. In this view, God's mercy is emphasized because God is compassionate toward those who sin out of ignorance rather than willful defiance (*cf.* Leviticus 4).

Why does this matter for our Braver interpretation? The phrase "not knowing their right hand from their left" emphasizes the Ninevites' moral ignorance or innocence. It serves to justify God's mercy toward them. It invites readers to consider the depth of God's compassion and the challenge of extending that same grace to those we might view as outsiders or enemies. This is especially the case toward those who lack knowledge of God's laws and ways. They especially are due the compassion and forgiveness of God.

The logic here employed by Yahweh is familiar in rabbinic literature and is called *qal va-khomer*. This means "light and heavy" in rabbinic Hebrew. It is used when author wants to say something like, "if this is true in a small matter (light), how much the more is it true in a major case?" God is saying, "if you are so concerned about the death of the vine (a light matter), shouldn't I care for the death of the whole city of Nineveh and the animals in it? (a heavy matter, Jacobs, 224).

Again, God points out that Nineveh is indeed a great city, something highly valued by God but not yet by God's prophetic emissary. Yet, the people of Nineveh are lacking in knowledge. The implication is that they should be pitied because of their lack of understanding. Even the animals should be pitied yet Jonah didn't care about the people of Nineveh much less its animals. At least, that is where the story ends. Let us hope Jonah learned his lesson and ceased from his bigoted ways. Let's seek the same for all who wish to be Braver Angels.

Jonah's journey reminds us that depolarization begins with confronting our own prejudices and learning to embrace God's inclusive vision. We humans have a natural tendency to curve ourselves in on ourselves. Our sinful nature seems to provide us with a permission structure to dislike—even despise—those with whom we disagree. Disagreement becomes disagreeableness which devolves into contempt. It is painfully difficult to meaningfully converse with someone who is alien to our opinions and perspectives. It is this 'us vs. them' dichotomy that we find in Jonah as we find it within ourselves.

In the end, Jonah's silence in response to God's question is profound. He does not answer because the answer is obvious: God's love calls us beyond our ethnic grievances and into a larger story of mercy and grace for all people. The book of Jonah calls its readers to share in this expansive vision, to love even those whom we have every reason to hate, because God's love is not bound by human prejudices.

God's Braver message is clear: love and compassion are not confined to one nation or one group of people. Jonah's anger with God's mercy reveals how difficult it can be for humans to embrace this divine vision of love. Yet, God's final reminder to Jonah concerns those who are ignorant - they especially stand in need of divine compassion. God's care and compassion extend to all, even those we might fiercely dislike.

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<sup>i</sup> H.S. Wolff understands Jonah to be a novella incorporating both irony and satire (pp. 83-85). Also, I recommend watching the "Jonah" video produced by Bible Project that can. Here also, the book is shown to be primarily satire.

<sup>ii</sup> I translate "Lord" as "Yahweh" due to my preference for using the divine name. Many Christian Bible translators translate "Yahweh" in Hebrew as "The Lord" in English in accordance with rabbinic traditions to avoid speaking the divine name to protect it from misuse and to use *Adonai* in its place. I find the reasoning here to be wooden on both Jewish and Christian levels. Non-use doesn't constitute protection especially if Yahweh wants his name to be used (which seems to be the case in Exod. 3 and 6). Why would Yahweh reveal his name if he didn't want it to be used? Christian reluctance makes even less sense. We disregard all sorts of rabbinic legal traditions (food laws, sabbath laws to name a few broad categories). What is the point in choosing this particular case to adhere to rabbinic legal precedent? Seeing the Hebrew scriptures are repeat with the name YHWH (or Yahweh – used almost 8,000 times!), it seems safe to assume that God intends us to use the sacred name and this pronunciation is most likely the correct one.

<sup>iii</sup> Wolff points out that it is pointless to try to find archaeological evidence for a city of such massive proportions. It is fairytale language meant to indicate its massive status, even for God" (Ibid., 148).

<sup>iv</sup> Just to keep track, let me identify at least four aspects of Jonah ch. 3 that are completely unique in the Bible.

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Jonah's prophetic message is the shortest in scripture – six words in Hebrew.  
Jonah's is the only prophetic message lacking the words "Thus says Yahweh."  
Jonah 3 is the only time animals are said to fast and wear sackcloth and ashes.  
Jonah 3 describes the most thorough national repentance due to a prophet's words in the Bible.

v