THE BOOK OF JONAH

Parody of a Prophet?
“The Bible is the longest book in the world without a shred of humour”

- attributed to Mark Twain
Some previous examples

- Jesus
- Proverbs 31
- The ‘frame story’ in Job
The ‘point’ of Biblical humour

- Memorable
- Holds audience attention
- ‘Disarms’ listeners
- Softens the blow
- To parody theological opponents
Humour ‘clusters’

- Exaggeration
- Hyperbole
- Surrealism
- Word play
- Irony, satire, parody
Irony - *contradiction* between an action or expression and the message it is conveying.

Satire - has a *target* which is being ridiculed, derided or parodied.

Parody - *mimics* the style of another writer or genre, in a humorous or satirical way.
A humour cluster in *Jonah*

- Wordplay
- Exaggeration / hyperbole
- Irony
- Surrealism
- Comic elements
A. I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. (1:9)

B. Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. (1:12)

C. Jonah prayed to the LORD … you brought up my life from the pit … When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord … (2:2ff)

D. Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown! (3:4)

C1. And he prayed to the LORD … please take my life from me … (4:2-3)

B1. It is better for me to die than to live. (4:8)

A1. Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die. (4:9)
Jonah’s five prophetic words

“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown”

עוד ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת

“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown”
Everything in the story is either very large or very small:

- the greatest of creatures
- a great wind
- a large fish
- Jonah’s distress and Jonah’s joy
- the smallest of creatures, a worm.
- Fourteen occurrences of פְּדוֹל.
Exaggeration / hyperbole

- Nineveh a city of ‘three days journey’ (3:3) - probably 1.6km but no more than 5km across.
- Population of Nineveh ‘more than a hundred and twenty thousand people’ (4:11) - an overly high estimate for the population of the walled city.
Surrealism

- Thinking ships
- Repenting animals
- Dramatic and unrealistic response to Jonah’s preaching and the conversion of the Ninevites
- A model repentance
Jonah has an inflated perception of his own abilities as a prophet:

- Jonah fled to Tarshish because he ‘knew’ that the city would repent (and so would God)
- Even though no other prophet in Israel’s history had been so successful
- Ventured only one day’s journey into a city three days journey in breadth - even a half-hearted effort would be enough to get a result

The king repents, and commands a massive reformation, even though he hears only a second-hand account of Jonah’s message
‘And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?’ (4:11)

- Makes best sense if it is understood as a jocular allusion to the earlier ‘repentance’ of the cattle.
Jonah the prophet is made to appear ridiculous insofar as he acts in ways which are contrary to those expected of a prophet.

Jonah is told to rise up and preach but flees in disobedience, beginning a series of descents.

Jonah first ‘went down (ירד) to Joppa’ (1:3), then we find he ‘had gone down (ירד) into the hold of the vessel’ (1:5), and eventually he ‘sank (ירד) to the base of the mountains’ (2:6).

During the storm Jonah sleeps while the pagan sailors acknowledge the God of Israel.

He is upset over the repentance of the Ninevites which spares the city from destruction, but grieves for the demise of a plant.

‘The portrayal of Jonah deliberately inverts the typical expected obedience of a prophet.’
Parody?

- **Target**
- **Jonah** is portrayed as weak, hypocritical, and a kind of anti-hero
  - By contrast, pointing to what the proper behaviour of a prophet should be
  - An anti-prophetic satire aimed at prophets in general?
- **Narrator** may be targeting his Jewish readers and their exclusivist attitudes, perhaps as a polemic against the exclusivism of Ezra and Nehemiah
Possibly authored by the wisdom teachers who

a) challenged self-righteous Israel with the devastating book of Job; and

b) similarly perhaps produced the book of Jonah as another shock for a self-centred community
Parodies the prophet in an effort to raise questions about the rival claims of justice and mercy and Israel’s relationship to God.

Prophet seems to be trapped in a dilemma which goes to the core of Israel’s basic tenets of faith. Jonah is caught between two extreme ideas:

a) God's justice and anger in response to Israel's failures; and

b) God’s infinite patience and compassion.
Jonah’s five prophetic words

"Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown"

In five words Jonah did what Isaiah and Jeremiah never did.
This cluster of unusual features suggests that what we have is a clever story which is not meant to be taken literally or even too seriously. The message of the Book of Jonah may be a serious one, but the intended message is not the folk-tale itself but the underlying point the writer is making in his comical portrayal of the prophet. It is almost certain that the story contains humour, irony, satire and parody.
'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.' (Exodus 34:6-7)
‘You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing’ (Jonah 4:2)

‘A jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty’ (Nahum 1:2-3)
stephencook.wordpress.com
‘Jonah’