

God as Leader: *Jonah as Archetype*

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### **Abstract**

In the study of leadership, we often find ourselves struggling for context. The book of Jonah gives us context. It shows us God as a leader and Jonah as an imperfect follower—an archetype for the rest of us supposed leaders in greater society. It also makes the connection between task and relationship. In Jonah, relationship comes first, then responsibility. Yet the responsibility is not simply accomplished. It comes instead through the word, initial rejection, turmoil, sacrifice, testimony to God, reiteration of responsibility, task accomplishment without heart commitment, then finally mercy from God in revealing self-pity without other-pity. Finally, leadership implications are drawn. The central message of Jonah is “Salvation Belongs to the Lord.” His glory will be maximized; His plan will be accomplished; and He is in the lead. Will you serve?

### **Leadership in Context**

Part of the difficulty with leadership is that it requires context. How much is up for debate. On the continuum, one extreme is that leadership is completely contextual—that apart from context, leadership loses its meaning. At the other extreme, leadership is universal—meaning that the study of leadership has components applicable without regard to context. To illustrate the tension, I will use an example from the life of John Adams, the second U.S. President.

When John Adams took office, there was no precedent on what to do with the Cabinet (Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of War, and Attorney General). He decided to keep George Washington's Cabinet. McCullough (2001) describes the Cabinet, "None were of outstanding ability, but all were Federalists, and [Secretary of the Treasury] Wolcott and [Secretary of War] McHenry, like Secretary of State Pickering, were extreme Federalists, or High Federalists. They belonged to the ardently anti-French, pro-British wing of the party who considered [former Secretary of the Treasury] Alexander Hamilton their leader, and because of this, and the fact that they had served in the Washington cabinet, they were inclined to look down on John Adams" (p. 472). Considering the context of this situation, John Adams was, according to the constitution, the leader in this administration. He was often undermined by his Cabinet and just as often blamed for their decisions.

From a "leadership is universal" perspective, we could just as clearly construct an argument that President Adams was not the leader. Hamilton showed a willingness to direct the Cabinet from outside the administration and the Cabinet willingly followed that direction.

As Christians, we too, must struggle with context even as we seek to find universal truth within the study of leadership. Malphurs (2003) says, "It is possible for the leaders of a ministry

to select and develop a vision, based on a set of values that their constituency does not share. Consequently, the leadership will be moving in one direction while the followers are moving in a different direction or are not moving at all. Should they attempt to follow the leader's vision, without sharing the vision, the results will be insipid at best" (p. 29). Thankfully, we have the Scriptures to direct us and we find in Jonah vision, context, and universal truth. God is the leader, which makes the leadership he portrays universal in application, specific in context, and with a vision of gathering a people unto Himself.

### **The Psalmist Introduction**

Before we jump to the text of Jonah and the context of this Old Testament minor prophet, let's begin by considering Book V of the Psalms, specifically Psalm 107. Goulder (1998) says, "It is often noted that 107 does not stand on its own, but shares both theme and language with the two historical psalms which precede it, 105 and 106, at the end of Book IV. These psalms recite Yahweh's wonders for Israel from Abraham to the Settlement (105), and from the Exodus to the Exile (106). The latter stresses Israel's constant sinfulness, and ends with a prayer that God will 'save us ... and gather us from among the nations'; and 107 calls for thanks that the LORD has done just that." What is interesting in this context is that while the Psalm discusses the gathering of the Israelites from the nations, it also forecasts God gathering a people from all the nations. This section of scripture prefaces what God will accomplish through Christ's work on the cross—His vision. A way is being made for God to gather people from every nation. Psalm 107: 23-30 reads,

"Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to

the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.”

Several leadership themes emerge from this Psalm. Leadership requires going. The actors see the deeds of the Lord after they have gone down to the sea. Second, the challenges of life reveal the self. It was during the storm that the sailors discovered “their evil plight.” It is in the midst of suffering and difficulty that our “courage melt[s] away.” All personal knowledge, skills, and ability do not provide a forum upon which to stand when faced with dire circumstances. Instead, it is here that we cry “to the Lord in [our] trouble.” And amazingly, the Lord delivers us. Yet, as we will learn from Jonah, the delivery may not go as we might expect. We find within these verses a prequel to the scene in which Jonah will be an actor with God as director. Robbins (1996) would describe the Jonah text as a “Divine History” where “divine powers direct historical processes and events toward certain results” (p. 123).

### **Jonah in History**

Allen (1976) says, “2 K. 14:25 sets [Jonah] in the reign of eighth-century B.B. king Jeroboam II as a nationalistic prophet who forecast the extension of the frontiers of the Northern Kingdom. He is thus ideal as the butt for an attack on religious nationalism. The author’s Judean hearers would accept the fact of a prophetic revelation through Jonah, but Jonah’s nationalistic sentiments would cause a natural resentment in minds that cherished a longstanding antipathy against the people of the north” (p. 179-180). There are a couple of elements at work within this framework. As we study Jonah, we see that Jonah has no love for Gentiles, especially the

Ninevites [part of the nation of Assyria] to whom God sends him. We also see that Judah has no love for the Northern Kingdom (Israel). The two kingdoms had just fought, as described in 2 K 14:11-14, and Israel had defeated Judah and taken all of the gold and silver from the temple back to Samaria. Therefore, Jonah provides an interesting context for studying leadership. There was fighting between the Israelites, battles with neighboring countries, and a great calamity had just been done to the temple itself not by outside invaders, but the Northern Kingdom. It was in this context that God calls Jonah to go to Ninevah. Perhaps we shouldn't be so hard on Jonah when he decides to run instead of willingly following God's plan to work not to reconcile the tension between warring "siblings." Instead, God chooses to save a people not just apart from his chosen people, but indeed their enemies.

### **Jonah and the Sea**

When Jonah runs, he puts to sea (Jonah 1:3) to go "away from the presence of the Lord." The irony of this action is striking. Richter (2008) tells us, "In the mind of the Israelite, the sea evoked a mixture of myth and theology, fear and wonder" (p. 146). She goes on to show that "throughout the [Old Testament] story there is a recurring theme of Yahweh rescuing his people by delivering them from the sea. First there is creation, in which God contains and directs the sea such that its great power is harnessed to serve the needs of the created order. Then there is the flood, in which God makes use of the ark (Hebrew *tēbat*) to rescue his people from the sea and therefore from judgment. Then the great deliverance under Moses in which God parts the Red Sea such that his people pass through on dry ground. Next, Joshua leads the children of Abraham into the Promised Land by parting the Jordan River—and again God's people pass through safely on dry ground" (Richter, 2008, p. 146). Therefore, Jonah going to the sea to flee from the Lord only sets him up to see the Lord in all His glory. God makes for an interesting leader because His

leadership is chaos controlling. Unlike anything we might display, God displays His power by taking us into the chaos and forcing us to give up any sense of control while he proves His own. This action also prefaces God's action in the New Testament.

Jesus was also at sea, transiting the Sea of Galilee on a stormy day and, ironically, his disciples—fishermen no less—become scared during a storm. Richter (2008) says, “Like their ancestors, they find themselves panic-stricken that the sea will break loose and destroy them. And a very odd thing happens. The young Nazarene, seeing the fear in the eyes of his friends, stands up and speaks to the sea. And the sea, as it had on the morning of creation, obeys him. What do the witnesses to this stunning event say? Just what they ought: ‘What kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’ (Mt 8:27). The answer, of course, is that this is Yahweh the Son. And this event is one of the clearest declarations of Jesus’ deity in the New Testament” (p. 146). Here we see that God is present in the tempest and always pursuing. He brings us into the chaos to show us Himself and in doing so, constantly reaffirms our relationship to Him. God is the leader.

Returning to the text of Jonah itself, we find that after Jonah reveals that he is fleeing from God (Jonah 1:10), the mariners ask what to do with him (v. 11), and he tells them to throw him overboard (v. 12), they instead attempt to row to shore (v. 13). Spurgeon (1883) says, “the fleshly efforts of awakened sinners must inevitably fail” (p. 342). It is here that we first get a glimpse of the results of God's leadership in the life of Jonah. Jonah becomes an archetype for other earthly leaders. First, we find an honest confession. Jonah admits that he is running from God. Second, we find a willingness for self-sacrifice. We know from further study within the book that Jonah's willingness to be sacrificed did not emerge from a heart desiring to serve his fellow ship-riders. He was just as content to sleep through the storm until it sank the whole ship's

company and he could attain death instead of proclaiming God to people who didn't "deserve" His mercy. Yet even in the midst of Jonah's selfishness, he professes the truth and serves those around him, however blind he might be to the fruit of his actions. Jonah is quick to attempt to give up his life, just not his ideas. What is life if Jonah has a relationship with God, whom he trusts for his salvation? Yet what if God is not who Jonah wants him to be? Must Jonah be a willing participant or can God just as easily use an unwilling man? If God is the leader, then human leadership must find its definition in service to God (or followership in context).

### **Working for Salvation**

Also interesting in this passage is the willingness of the ship's crew to work for their salvation instead of accepting the profession of Jonah. Spurgeon (1883) says, "It is contrary to God's law for a sinner to get comfort by anything he can do for and by himself" (p. 342). It is not by our efforts that salvation comes, it is through submission to God. Instead, the crew is forced to throw Jonah overboard. It is here that the story gets interesting. Angry, discouraged, and ready to die, Jonah goes into the water. But he does not die. Instead, he is confined to the innards of a fish, and it is in this fish that Jonah is both kept from death and lovingly embraced by the Father. In this embrace, he is allowed to struggle all he wants even considering the vanity of his actions. This scenario is similar to the tactics taken in mental hospitals and by parents of children who temporarily lose control. In both cases, the goal is to restrain the individual not to prevent them from fighting, but to keep them safe as they fight. Once the fighting is done, they can be released. So it was with Jonah. After three days, Jonah prayed (Jonah 2:1), and in this prayer, he gives testimony to God. When confronted with the reality of human frailty, Jonah testifies, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).



Jonah has a patron and what is interesting about this patron is His willingness to use an ingrate. DeSilva (2000) describes it this way, “A generous-hearted patron may even choose a known ingrate—even someone who has previously failed to show gratitude for a previous gift granted by this same patron—to receive a favor ... Repeated acts of kindness, like a farmer’s ongoing labor over difficult soil, may yet awaken a slow heart to show gratitude and respond nobly” (p. 109). Therefore, if we take the Near Eastern view of patronage, we can see that Jonah (who has previously received a gift from God—relationship) does not show gratitude when that relationship creates an opportunity for Jonah to be a spokesman for God in calling a foreign city to repentance. God is offering to others the same salvation he offered to Jonah. Yet Jonah doesn’t think they deserve it. Even after he testifies, the lesson has not sunk in.

Instead, Jonah is presumptuous in his relationship to God. Stott (2006) says, “Frequently in the Bible the God of creation and covenant is called ‘the Most High God,’ and is personally addressed in several Psalms as ‘Yahweh Most High.’ His lofty exaltation expresses both his sovereignty over the nations, the earth, and ‘all gods’ ... who does not live in humanly constructed temples, since heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool; so sinners should not presume” (p. 108). If we don’t want to be thrown in the bucket with “sinners,” Stott (2006) goes on to say, “We need to hear again the apostle Peter’s sobering words: ‘Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives ... in reverent fear’ (1 Peter 1:17). In other words, if we dare to call our judge our Father, we must beware presuming upon him” (p. 110). No one may presume upon God. Yet Jonah is not smitten for his presumption and mercy triumphs over justice. God continues to use him even as he continues to use us; he doesn’t use us because he has to, but because he wants to. God’s goal is not to tear us down, but build us up. Sproul (1985) says, “Far from God seeking to destroy the ‘self,’ as many distortions of

Christianity would claim, God redeems the self. He heals the self so that it may be useful and fulfilled in the mission to which the person is called” (p. 33). It is only in reliance upon God that we can fully understand our responsibility before him. Brunner (1939) says, “One who has understood the nature of responsibility has understood the nature of man. Responsibility is not an attribute, it is the ‘substance’ of human existence. It contains everything, ... [it is] that which distinguishes man from all other creatures.’ Therefore, “if responsibility be eliminated, the whole meaning of human existence disappears” (p. 50). Jonah is given another chance to preach repentance to the Ninevites. God still wants to extend salvation. Relationship has been righted between God and Jonah. He is now in the position to get on with the task.

### **Jonah Prefaces Christ**

There are several ways in which Jonah prefaces Christ in both the task and relationship responsibilities God gives him, which is an honorable comparison considering that Jesus himself says that Jonah is the sign (Mt 12, Luke 11). First, Jonah is sent to save a people outside of Israel. Christ serves to broaden those accepted by God to every nation and tribe. Second, Jonah must give himself over to God completely, acknowledging that salvation belongs to the Lord. Christ prays to the Father, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). We know from this prayer that Christ is wholly reliant on the Father at the point of death. Third, Jonah’s testimony—like Christ’s sacrifice—is accepted by God. The fish vomits out Jonah and Jesus’ resurrection marks acceptance by God for Christ’s sacrifice. Fourth, repentance is preached in Ninevah. Similarly, testimony to the finished work of Christ calls all people to repent. Fifth, God extends mercy to the Ninevites. This same mercy is now available to all people who place their trust in Christ’s finished work on the cross. God’s leadership always requires that we correctly

identify ourselves in relationship to him. To see God is to recognize oneself. Correctly identifying self necessitates repentance.

### **Jonah Shows His Heart**

Yet Jonah is not satisfied with God's work, and complains in a prayer that the reason he ran from God's instruction was because he knew what God would do (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew God deeply. The entire story began with a relationship, but Jonah wanted to choose who might receive mercy and the Ninevites were not on Jonah's list of the deserving. Under the fig tree, Jonah experienced Taylor's theory, "we cannot simply preserve our identity when our values collapse, just as we cannot simply maintain our value orientations during an identity crisis" (Joas, 2000, p. 146). Malphurs (1996) differentiates vision from values in this way, "a vision answers the question, *What* are we going to do? ... values answer the question, *Why* do we do what we do?" (p. 32). Jonah's problem is that he wants his values to drive his behavior instead of God's vision. We saw earlier that God's vision is to draw a people for Himself from every nation. Jonah simply did not value people from every nation. He was more moved by self-pity than other-pity as evidenced by Jonah 4:6-11. And it is here that God illustrates the difference between ethics and God-led behavior. Kantian and post-Kantian ethics would tell us "that unless we are concerned with others in a non-impersonal way, our proper concern for the well-being of our own [moral character] is misguided in that it is doomed to be ineffectual" (Rist, 2001, p. 35). We find in the story of Jonah the opposite. Outside circumstances (Ninevah's repentance) force internal struggle (Jonah's anger) because others have been affected in a very personal way (their very lives have been saved). God did not choose Jonah because he was ethical or cared for the Ninevites on a personal level. He chose Jonah to multiply his impact to three distinct groups: the Ninevites, the ship's company when Jonah fled, and Jonah himself. God was teaching Jonah to

care in a personal way, not to be effective, but to honor God who cares in a very personal way. God reveals Himself to Jonah in a way that Jonah had a hard time accepting. God cares more deeply and more personally than Jonah ever would.

### **Leadership Implications**

Jonah illustrates three likely responses from followers when tasks are given. The first reaction is shown in Jonah's initial rejection of the task. He disagrees with the task, so he runs. The second reaction is depicted in Jonah's willingness to go to Ninevah, but to fulfill the task from a sense of obligation, "what I have vowed I will pay" (Jonah 2:9). The third reaction is evidenced following task completion with regret, anger, and self-pity. The follower has fulfilled his obligations, but takes no delight in the vision.

The right response found within Jonah occurs when he is in the fish and testifies that "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). It is interesting that a wrong response so often occurs right next to a right one. The right response illustrates clearly what God's leadership will produce; when God leads, change and growth will result, not death. It requires going, reveals the self, and turns people to God. God's leadership is chaos controlling, present in the tempest, and always pursuing.

Yet framing God as leader forces us to re-examine our own roles. If God is the leader, then human leadership must find its definition in service to God. It is essentially followership in context. Using Jonah as an archetype, we find that this service requires honest confession, self-sacrifice, testimony to God, task fulfillment, repentance to be preached, and values realignment. This realignment will result in us becoming more of who we are, not less.

### **Conclusions**

By framing human leadership under the sovereign leadership of God, we are forced to re-examine our view of tasks and relationships. For Christians, relationship must come first. We cannot and will not serve a God we do not know. However, relationship does not preclude tasks, it anticipates them. Likewise, relationship does not merit presumption. Correctly identifying ourselves as sinners helps to frame our role in our relationship to God. We can ask what we will of God as Father, but we are often given tasks that we may neither anticipate or particularly desire.

From Jonah, we learn that service isn't always to those we want to serve. We learn that service won't always produce what we want. We learn that service won't always give comfort or happiness. Likewise, we learn that the most important component of service is not that it's *our* service. The central message of Jonah is that Salvation Belongs to the Lord: His glory will be maximized, His plan will be accomplished, and He is in the lead. The question left to us is "will we serve?"

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