

Are Saul and Jonah Also among the Prophets?
Intertextuality and Characterization
In Biblical Hebrew Narrative

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Literary critics of the Hebrew Bible have frequently marveled at how its narratives achieve such rich characterization with such a laconic style. Readers feel intimately acquainted with characters despite the lack of detailed description of appearance or psychological processes.¹ A variety of techniques contribute to this economic but nevertheless effective portraiture. Among them are hints hidden in dialogue, suggestive actions/responses by the narrative's participants, and comparison/contrast with other characters both within the narrative in question and by allusion to well-known characters from other biblical narratives.²

It is this last technique that serves as the focus of the current inquiry. The Book of Jonah is an excellent example of characterization by means of comparison or contrast with iconic figures from elsewhere in the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Scholars frequently point out parallels between Jonah and Elijah or Jonah and Moses.³ The frequency of this device in Jonah's brief narrative encourages readers to look for other, less obvious parallels between Jonah and well-known figures from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible's diverse cast of characters. One such parallel may exist between Jonah and the tragic figure of Saul, Israel's first monarch.

At first blush, Jonah and Saul may seem too remote from each other, too unrelated to serve effectively as parallel participants from distinct narratives for the purposes of characterization. A closer look, however, reveals a number of suggestive connections both in their broader characteristics as well as in certain details of their actions within their respective narratives.

Connections in the Broad Characterization of Saul and Jonah

Saul and Jonah are actually very similar characters. Both are complex, driven by ambiguous or unknown motives, simultaneously unsavory and sympathetic, prone to dramatic swings in opinion and emotion, and apprehensive regarding their respective divine commissions. Both give the impression of being pawns in a game that neither of them understands and both request death near the conclusion of their stories. Perhaps most importantly, both have an ambiguous relationship to prophecy.

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 322-323.

² Sternberg, 321-341.

³ Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy* (Hearing the Message of Scripture Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013),

Saul, for example, falls into a prophetic frenzy on his way back home after being anointed king by Samuel. This serves as the climax of three confirmatory signs of Saul's divine election to kingship (1 Sam 10:5-7, 10-12). Previous acquaintances are so surprised by Saul's prophetic ecstasy that they ask the question, "What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" The question is significant with respect to the rest of the narrative since it raises certain expectations only to disappoint them. One would expect Saul to be sensitive to the prophetic word given this experience. In fact, however, he is resistant to it (1 Sam 15:22).

When the divine spirit and prophetic word are taken from Saul, however, he misses them and craves their return (1 Sam 14:37; 28:6-7). Nonetheless, a spirit of prophecy returns to Saul at two critical junctures in his story – at the beginning of his being eclipsed by David (1 Sam 18:10) and at the beginning of his war against David (1 Sam 19:18-23). These last two occasions of prophetic ecstasy are ironic in that the narrative gives the impression that Saul is being forced to prophesy the demise of his own dynasty and the rise of David's. This is suggested both by the direction of the narrative in the context of these two events as well as by Saul's symbolic act of stripping himself (עָשָׂה) of his royal apparel under the compulsion of the prophetic spirit (1 Sam 19:24) – an act performed voluntarily by Jonathan when he surrendered to David all the symbols of his right of accession to his father's throne (also עָשָׂה 1 Sam 18:4). From this point forward, Saul is denied access to divine revelation and finally, in his desperation to manipulate the outcome of this prophetic word, resorts to what in Israel is the antithesis of legitimate prophecy - divination via necromancy (Deut. 18:9-11; 1 Sam 28:7-11). Thus, Saul's relationship to the prophetic word is ambiguous alternating from full participation, to tacit resignation, to militant opposition ultimately climaxing in the irony of Saul's prophesying to the benefit of his sworn enemy – David.

A similar ambiguity pertains to Jonah throughout the book that bears his name. First, the designation "prophet" (נָבִיא) is conspicuously absent in the book of Jonah – a remarkable omission considering the importance of this theme for the narrative. In fact, the one question posed by the sailors that Jonah never really answered was the question of his occupation (Jonah 1:8). This question opened the door to the narrator's placing this word on Jonah's lips and yet Jonah dodges the designation as surely as he dodged the divine call to carry out the prophetic task (Jonah 1:9). Second, despite Jonah's best efforts to avoid being a prophet, he winds up playing a significant prophetic role for both the sailors aboard his escape boat and the inhabitants of Nineveh. In fact, in a manner similar to Saul, Jonah is forced, or perhaps better, tricked into prophesying to the advantage of his sworn enemy – the Assyrians.

Third, YHWH succeeds in tricking Jonah into carrying out the prophesy by means of an ambiguity in the oracle he gives him to deliver upon his second commissioning (Jonah 3:1-2). The reader does not know the content of the oracle until Jonah delivers it in 3:4, but upon reading it the ambiguity becomes evident. The word "overturn" (נִהְפַכְתָּ) in the Niph'al can mean either "be overthrown" or "be turned around (in repentance)." Jonah, perhaps because of his deep-seated fear and

hatred of the Assyrians, had assumed that the oracle referred to unambiguous destruction. As it turns out, he had misunderstood the oracle and wound up unwittingly contributing to Nineveh's salvation and by implication, N. Israel's (and his own) destruction. Once again, shades of Saul.

Then, fourth, also like Saul, Jonah seeks to manipulate the objectionable outcome of his own prophetic oracle by appealing the divine clemency extended to Nineveh. What kind of prophet is this? He laments the effectiveness of his own prophetic ministry and seeks to "overturn" the divine mercy that "overturned" the punishment that would have "overturned" the wicked city. Jonah's relationship to prophecy, it would appear, is as ambiguous as Saul's.

Connections in the Details of the Saul and Jonah Narratives

The connections noted above on the basis of the broad characterization of Saul and Jonah are supported by certain intriguing details in their respective stories. One particular episode in Saul's story (1 Sam 10:17-24) bears some striking resemblances to an episode in Jonah's story (Jonah 1:4-10). A comparison of these episodes will form the basis of our consideration of parallel details between the two larger narratives.

As noted earlier, Saul and Jonah are united in their apprehension regarding their divine calling. Both exhibit this apprehension by means of a characteristic reticence, an evasion of vocation, and an attempt to hide from YHWH and from the responsibilities to which he has called them. Nowhere is this more clearly on display than in the episode immediately following Saul's anointing and the episode immediately following Jonah's initial commission to go to Nineveh.

In both instances the characters withhold information and adopt a strange silence quite inappropriate to the situations in which they find themselves. Saul's reticence is noticeable in his conversation with his uncle who inquires regarding his prolonged absence in his search for his father's donkeys. Saul explains that when he had failed to find the donkeys he went to Samuel to see if he could divine their location. He fails, however, to mention anything about the fact that Samuel anointed him king of Israel even after his uncle inquires as to what Samuel had said. Saul's silence regarding this momentous news betrays his misgivings about filling this role.

Similarly, Jonah flees YHWH's presence after his commission without so much as a word. This is unusual in commission narratives which are normally characterized by verbal objections raised by YHWH's chosen agents in response to the divine call.⁴ Jonah's reticence is then underscored by the contrast between the sailors' frantic praying in the midst of the storm and Jonah's silent slumber. Even after the chief helmsman awakens the sleeping prophet with the rebuking command to rise and pray to his God, the narrative gives no evidence that Jonah complies. In fact, Jonah remains strangely silent as the sailors try to figure out the cause of the life-threatening storm until he is finally forced to speak after YHWH implicates him by means of the sailors' lot-casting.

⁴ Norman C. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297-323.

The mention of lot-casting leads to yet another parallel detail in the two episodes. Both Saul and Jonah are singled out and exposed by YHWH by means of some kind of lot-casting ritual. In Saul's case, the ritual appears to be part of a planned ceremony, a well-known practice of designating an individual by means of a process of elimination that narrows from nation to tribe, to clan, to family, to individual (cf. Josh. 7:14-19). Though the Hebrew word for "lot" (גורל) never explicitly occurs in the text, it is implied by the verb in this context (לקח) and most English translations supply it as a gloss (cf. ESV, NASB, NRSV, NET).⁵ It is by this means that YHWH and Samuel publicly announce that Saul has been designated as Israel's king.

Similarly, the storm-tossed sailors, desperate for some explanation as to the cause of their predicament, decide to cast lots to discern the source of the problem. The lot falls on Jonah and, as in Saul's case, the renegade is exposed, forced out into the open by YHWH to face the responsibilities of his calling. It is at this point in the episode that Jonah is forced to explain his heritage as a Hebrew and his relationship to YHWH. The mention of YHWH's name marks a decisive turn in the narrative and in the piety of the sailors which now focuses exclusively on YHWH. Jonah has been forced to play the prophetic role he tried so desperately to avoid just as Saul was forced to play the kingly role that he too tried to avoid.

A third parallel detail shared by these narratives is Saul's and Jonah's choice of hiding place. They both choose to hide in the midst of "baggage" (כלים). After the lot-casting ritual has designated Saul as the king, the people search for him in vain. At this point, YHWH informs the Israelites "Look! He has hidden himself amidst the baggage." Even after having been exposed, Saul must actually be retrieved and forced out of hiding by the people who proceed to hail him as king. Once Saul is dragged out into the open, he is conspicuous for his height – a fact that makes his hiding amidst the bags seem even more ridiculous. The narrative may be hinting at some relationship between Saul and the baggage, as though underscoring Saul's role as YHWH instrument or vessel, terms designated in Hebrew by the same word as that used for the baggage amidst which Saul tried to hide (כלים). It is also possible that Saul is being portrayed as passive and inert, like one of the pieces of luggage he used for cover.

Jonah likewise seeks to hide from his calling by seeking cover in the midst of the cargo hold of the ship that he has hired for his escape. The narrative indicates this by contrasting Jonah's location and activity during the onset of the storm with that of the sailors. The sailors are on deck dealing with the threat at hand while

⁵ Strawn argues that lot-casting was the only form of divination permitted in Israel. This being the case, it is no wonder that that word for "lot" need not occur in a description of a lot-casting ritual. It would be easily inferred from the fact that a means of inquiring of YHWH other than prophecy was involved. The only other possible means would be by some form of lot casting whether it be the Urim and Thumim or some other kind of lot. Cf. Brent A. Strawn, "Jonah's Sailors and Their Lot Casting: A Rhetorical-Critical Observation," *Biblica* 91 (2010), 66-76.

Jonah is below deck in the “cargo hold” fast asleep. The word I have translated “cargo hold” (ספינה) occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. It is often thought to be a synonym of the more common Hebrew word for ship (אניה) but recent lexical analysis has clarified that it refers to a covered room on a ship normally associated with storage.⁶ The use of the unusual term, therefore, may well be intended to emphasize Jonah’s hiding amidst the baggage (כלים) on board the ship. The resulting narrative picture is the humorous depiction of the sailors happening upon the sleeping prophet in the process of emptying the cargo hold to lighten the ship and improve their chances of weathering the storm. The association of Jonah with this baggage is confirmed later in the narrative when he shares its fate and is thrown overboard by the sailors. In a manner analogous to the Saul narrative, Jonah is associated with the baggage. Perhaps again the reader is encouraged to think of Jonah as passive and inert, like the cargo. In fact, rather than being a help, Jonah is a threat to the ship much as the cargo is once the storm hits. Again, we have an image of a human instrument (כלי) who is uncooperative and therefore subject to divine judgment.

A final parallel detail shared between the two stories is the reference to a period of three days. Once in the Saul narrative and twice in the Jonah narrative a three-day period factors into the plot. In Saul’s case a three-day period is mentioned in passing in reference to his acquaintances’ shock at his prophetic frenzy in First Samuel 10:11. The text literally says, “When all those who had known him three days before saw him, they were surprised that he prophesied with the prophets and said, “What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?” Most English versions obscure the reference to three days by translating the phrase idiomatically as “previously” or “in the past.” It may be significant, however, that the text references three days. A period of three days is frequently symbolic of a significant or momentous transition in the Hebrew Bible. As Bauer has pointed out, journeys are frequently portrayed in Scripture as transpiring over a three day period – a time frame associated with an indefinitely long period.⁷ Landes took Bauer’s observation a step further, suggesting that the time period “three days” or “three days and three nights” relates particularly to the time required for one to journey from the realm of life to Sheol or vice versa.

Landes’ suggestion finds support in a number of biblical texts in which a journey of three days brings a person close to death or restores a person back to life. Genesis 22:4, for example, indicates that Abraham’s journey to Mt. Moriah where he would sacrifice Isaac to YHWH was a journey of three days.⁸ Similarly, the Israelites wander without water in the desert for three days before YHWH provides a stream

⁶ Martin Mulzer, ספינה (Jona 1,5) "(gedeckter) Laderaum," *BN* 104 (2000): 83-94.

⁷ H. B. Bauer, “Drei Tage,” *Biblica* 39 (1958), 354-358.

⁸ Genesis Rabbah LVI:I actually appeals to Jonah 2:2, in addition to a host of other biblical references, as commentary on the significance of the third day of Genesis 22:4. Rabbinic tradition was well aware of the ancient symbolism of a three day journey. See Neusner, 74.

from the rock (Ex 15:22). Movement from death back to life also requires a journey of three days as indicated by Hosea 6:1-2.

"Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. ² After two days he will revive us; **on the third** day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. (NIV, emphasis added)

The general idea seems to be that life-changing experiences are often associated in Scripture with a three-day period. Samuel explicitly states that Saul would be turned into another man once the Spirit rushed upon him and he prophesied (1 Sam 10:6) and it is precisely in the context of Saul's prophesying that the three day period is mentioned.

Jonah experiences two three-day journeys in his narrative. The first is in the belly of the fish when Jonah is rescued from drowning at sea. After this experience Jonah does change. He resigns himself to the divine commission to go and prophesy in Nineveh. The second three-day journey is a reference to the size of the city of Nineveh. Jonah is changed again after this three-day journey and becomes indignant at the divine clemency shown to the Assyrian city. In the end, Jonah remains at odds with YHWH and the mysterious workings of divine mercy.

Conclusions

Sufficient parallels exist between Saul and Jonah to suggest some kind of connection between the two characters. The brevity of the book of Jonah is part of its charm and its conciseness was achieved without any apparent diminishment to its literary art. This may in part be due to the brilliant use of intertextuality as a means of characterization. By relying on and alluding to the more developed characters in longer antecedent narratives, Jonah achieved a remarkably rich portrait of the prophet Jonah with an economy of words.

Additionally, the associations suggested here between Jonah and Saul may contribute to the book's theological message. Saul's reputation as a failed king who was never able to coordinate his rule with the greater rule of YHWH serves the purposes of Jonah's author quite well. Like Saul, Jonah is a tragic figure, a failed prophet, who is never able to align his heart with YHWH's and as a result suffers under a similar misery and morbidity as that which afflicted Saul. Furthermore, Jonah is as obsessed with Nineveh's destruction as Saul is with David's and like Saul, devotes himself to reversing by manipulation the divine word related to the fate of his foes. An important point to underscore here is that in both the case of Saul and Jonah, failure was not primarily due to any particular mistake they made in carrying out their vocation. Rather, it was due to their inability to align their hearts and their ambitions with those of YHWH, to participate in the new thing that he was doing by playing a role quite different than the one they had envisioned for themselves.