

Mercy and negotiation: Nineveh's beasts

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I invite reconsideration of two matters in the study of scriptures: first, the matter of methodology (drawing from the discipline of biblical studies, in which i am engaged, and affirming that the methods of biblical criticisms may be used in the study of other scriptures) and second, the tone of the readings (or, theologies) that arise from the narrative (methodological) turn that i advocate in this short reflection. I present both invitations in light of the role that the beasts (are made to) play in the narrative plot of Jonah, after briefly locating three of my points of departure.

Contexts

This reflection arises from, and consequently responds to, three contexts that shape my work and views as a biblical critic:

First, this reflection presents an alternative way to what i learned from my training in traditional biblical scholarship, according to which, for instance, a study on the topic of “mercy” would involve lexical studies on Hebrew terms such as *hesed* (חסד, loving kindness, covenantal love) and *racham* (רחם, compassion, womb) and how they are used in different parts of the Hebrew Bible. This alternative way is in (but not limited to) narrative criticism, which challenged and reshaped the discipline of biblical studies since the 1980s (with the rise of interest in literary and ideological criticisms).

Second, this reflection presents an alternative to what is known as “prevenient grace” in my Methodist heritage, which claims that God’s mercy precedes human decisions. The role of beasts in the Jonah narrative shows that God is open to being influenced and to being conditioned.

Third, this reflection goes against the claim of traditional biblical theology that God’s mercy is a gift that is freely given, and unconditional. I argue on the other hand, on the basis of the narrative turn and the focus on Nineveh’s beasts, that God’s mercy is open for negotiation.

Narrative turn

The narrative turn involves shifting the focus from a word (philological, etymological) to a narrative (e.g., Jonah), as well as shifting from a historical to a narrative form of reading. Both shifts invite a shift in the tone of reading, from asserting that Yhwh showed mercy to Nineveh out of Yhwh’s own compassionate nature (traditional reading) to also suggesting that Nineveh influenced Yhwh (in other words, that Nineveh conditioned Yhwh). The key in these shifts is the beasts in the Jonah narrative, and i propose to read the narrative backwards (or as David Clines puts it, “from right to left” against the left-to-right flow of the English language and of the usual reading orientation).

The Jonah narrative may be abridged as follows: Yhwh told Jonah to go and preach against Nineveh. Jonah instead boarded a ship and fled from the presence of Yhwh and away from Nineveh. Yhwh threw a storm onto the sea to trap the boat and stop Jonah’s flight. Jonah gave instruction and was thrown into the sea, and the storm calmed down. Yhwh sent a fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in it for three days. Jonah prayed; Yhwh told the fish to spit Jonah out. Yhwh again told Jonah to go to Nineveh; this time he went, he preached, and the city believed and changed their ways. The

king joined the people and ordered that beasts too should join. God¹ repented and decided not to bring disaster against Nineveh. Jonah left the city, expressed his frustration, asked God to let him die, and the narrative closes with God stating that he cared for Nineveh, the people and the beasts.

Nineveh's beasts

The final verse in the Jonah narrative reads: "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 also **many animals**?" (Jonah 4:11, NRSV). The word translated as "animals" is בהמה and it could also be translated as "cattle" (KJV), "livestock" (NKJV) and "beasts" (NJPS). The same word is used in Jonah 3:6–9, which i quote in full and highlight the intention of the king in ordering that they too should mourn and fast:

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or **animal** (הַבְּהֵמָה), no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and **animals** (הַבְּהֵמָה) shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹**Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.**" (NRSV)

The king's intention is clear: to influence God, so that God may "**relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.**"

In Jon. 3:6–9, the beasts are to join so that, together with the humans, they may influence the compassion (mercy) of Yhwh. Was it not enough that humans were fasting? Not only did the people and animals fast and put on sackcloth, they were also ordered to "cry mightily to God." When one reads to the end of the narrative, one finds that the strategy of Nineveh's king worked for Yhwh explained that he was concerned for Nineveh on account of both its people and beasts.

I prefer to use "beasts" for בהמה because in most modern minds the term connotes wild creatures that are uncontrollable and ferocious. In this connection, there are two radical insights to note from the focus on the beasts: first, that Nineveh was able to control their beasts and second, that the beasts were able to influence Yhwh.

Reasoning beasts

In my Methodist heritage also is what's known as the "Wesleyan quadrilateral": scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Interweaving strands from these four "events" (to use a postmodern image) produces readings and theologies. In this regard, the narrative turn and alternative reading presented above are Methodist in their roots. But with several twists: that beasts are characters in the scripture, that beasts can participate in religious rituals and traditions, that the experiences of beasts matter, and that beasts too can reason with God.

¹ There is a shift from Yhwh to 'Elohim (God) in the narrative, but i treat the two titles as referring to the same narrative character. Grammatically, the masculine pronoun is used for this character, but this should not be taken as sanction for or restriction of its gender.