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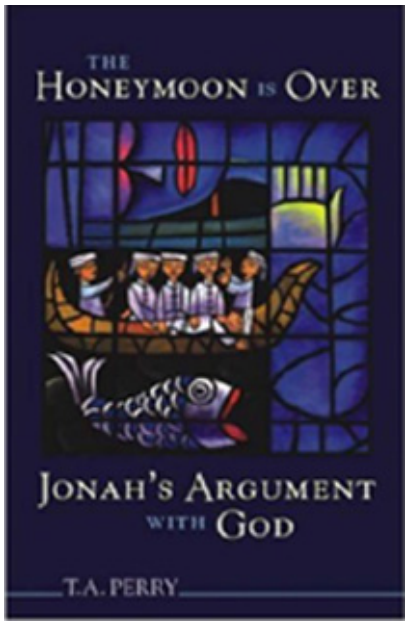


**Perry, T. A.**

***The Honeymoon Is Over: Jonah's Argument with God***

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006. Pp. xxxvii + 248.
Paper. $19.95. ISBN 1565636724.

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As scholars of narrative have recently reminded us, stories typically unfold so as to leave gaps between developments that are ostensibly connected, leaving it to the reader to fill them in. The book of Jonah takes this to an extreme, so that many of its interpretive cruxes are questions of why one thing leads to another, given what is indirectly suggested by the narrative's explicit rhetorical, stylistic, and lexical features. For example, the reader is confronted right away with the key question of Jonah's motivation for not complying with God's command to prophesy to the Ninevites and why he instead "set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" (1:3a NRSV)—about which the text says absolutely nothing. When such gaps are filled in so that the narrative progresses consistently through conflict to resolution, the result is a plausible reading. Recognizing this to be the main challenge, Perry has given a masterful interpretation of Jonah that draws on a rich range of scriptural parallels, traditional Jewish commentators, and modern literary analogies.

In chapters 1–4 Perry gives an overview of the plot, which he views as having two more or less parallel major sections (Jonah 1–2 and 3–4). As the title suggests, he characterizes Jonah as a jilted lover, twice impelled by a death wish to flee the presence of the divine object of his love and twice halted from realizing his death wish by the intervention of God's outsized appointed envoys. Against the background of these similarities, the

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differences are foregrounded. In the first case he flees to the sea, and in the second to the dry land. In the first case God intervenes by appointing a great fish, and in the second by appointing a gigantic and rapidly growing *kikayon* plant, along with a devouring worm and an east wind. In the first case Jonah turns back at the last minute from his desire to die, but in the second case the story ends without clarifying whether or not he will again do so. Perry explores this basic plot framework, making fascinating observations at every turn. Then in chapters 5–8 he retraces the story four times, focusing on the themes of love, prayer, repentance, and prophecy. This entails considerable repetitiveness, but it creates a context in which the reader can readily grasp why even the most minutely detailed analysis matters with regard to the overall thematic development.

In the course of his wide-ranging discussion Perry points out the deficiencies in various other interpretations of Jonah, as he touches on such topics as (assisted) suicide, near-death experiences, mere survival and existence conceived as theological imperatives in contrast with righteousness and evil, the moral capacity of animals, erotic theory, Jew-Gentile relationships, and repentance, including the possibility that God can change his mind or even be educated.

In chapters 9 and 10 Perry suggests as possible generic parallels the pastoral fable (e.g., Thoreau) and the tale of the fantastic (e.g., Poe). The book closes with a section devoted to a summary of major conclusions, four excursus, and a bibliography, as well as indices of names and subjects, ancient sources, and Hebrew words (the last of which is strangely in Hebrew type, although transliteration is used throughout the body of the book).

A distinctive feature of Perry's analysis is his illuminating comparison of key points in Jonah with other scriptural, rabbinic, and modern literary texts. For example, he adduces one of Jean de la Fontaine's *Fables*, "Death of the Woodcutter," as a parallel description of a last-minute reversal of a death wish, to help show how Jonah's psalm (2:2–9) can both thank God for granting his prayer to die and plead with God to save his life. He cites the Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael and a comment of Ibn Ezra as sources of the insight that Jonah is motivated by a death wish. And he compares Jonah's encounter with the *kikayon* plant, the devouring worm, the silent east wind, and the burning sun to Elijah's encounter with the wind, earthquake, fire, and "thin, silent voice," when his prophetic career similarly brought him to the point of retreating and wanting to die (1 Kgs 19). Here I cannot do justice to way in which Perry uses such comparisons to the advantage of his argument—and often to this reader's delight as well. The only ones that I find far-fetched are the generic parallels in chapters 9 and 10, but even these are illuminating as far as they go.

This interpretation of Jonah is a magisterial demonstration of how fruitful the traditional midrashic and allegorical approaches can be, when tempered with the kinds of controls

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afforded by modern structural analysis. The first of the four excursus, which deals (all too) briefly with methodology, advocates that readers first do an independent reading of their own before they resort to secondary sources, arguing that secondary sources are most useful when readers have first developed questions of their own. I would agree but add that when readers do reach the point at which secondary sources would be helpful, they could have no finer guide than Perry.

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