

Step One: Select a Text

Jonah 1

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

⁷The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” ¹³Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Step Two: Probe Your Text. Probe the text for any explicit and implicit oral performance features.

- 1:2. The term *wickedness* is personified here; it is pictured as ascending heavenward into the very presence of God. This figuratively depicts how God became aware of their evil—it had ascended into heaven right into his presence.¹ Further, the term translated as “before me,” literally means “face.”

¹ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

- The similar sounding vowels and consonants in the phrase *ḥšbh lhšbr* in Jon. 1:4 can be translated “bashed to bits” to replicate at least a little of the alliteration and sibilance of the original Hebrew.²
- 1:5 is literally “The mariners feared a great fear.” It emphasizes the sailors’ escalating fright.
- 1:6. The phrase “What are you doing sleeping!” can express surprise or indignation and contempt. Accordingly, the captain is either surprised that Jonah is able to sleep so soundly through the storm (“How can you sleep?”; “How can you be sleeping so soundly?”; “What, sound asleep?”) or indignant that Jonah would sleep in a life-threatening situation when he should be praying (“How can you sleep at a time like this?”; “What are you doing [+ sound] asleep?”; “What do you mean by sleeping?”).
- In Jon. 1:9, the prophet is asked a series of questions about his origins, to which he replies “I am a Hebrew . . . I worship the Lord, the God of heaven” (NRSV and many other translations). The verb translated “worship” in v. 9, is also used by the sailors in Jon. 1:16. Surprisingly, however, the NRSV and many other versions translate v. 16 as “the men *feared* the Lord.” A few versions translate “fear” in both verses, and this seems to be the point of the author: the prophet of YHWH who should “fear” YHWH does not, running away from his commissioned task; whereas pagan sailors who have no relationship with YHWH do, in fact, fear him.³
- The verb translated “[he] went down” is used three times within two verses (1:3 [x2], 1:5), signifying a deliberate movement to the depths by the prophet in his attempt to flee the “god of the heavens” (1:9). Jonah’s “downward” journey from Jerusalem *down* to Joppa (1:3a) *down* into the ship (1:3b) *down* into the cargo hold (1:5) and ultimately *down* into the bottom of the sea, pictured as down to the very gates of the netherworld (2:7).

Step Three: Prepare the Script. Begin to prepare a script based on the oral features you have discovered.

JONAH 1

THE SETTING IS THREE CHAIRS ON A BARE STAGE. THREE ACTORS STAND UPSTAGE OF THE THREE CHAIRS, ACTORS EVENLY SPACED IN A STRAIGHT LEFT-TO-RIGHT LINE AT THE CENTER OF THE SPACE. ACTORS 1, 2, & 3 FACING UPSTAGE

² Jeanette Mathews, “Jonah as a Performance. Performance Critical Guidelines for Reading a Prophetic Text,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 12 (2016): 28.

³ Mathews, “Jonah as a Performance,” 27.

NARRATOR STANDS DOWN RIGHT OF ACTORS AND ADDRESSES AUDIENCE

ACTOR 1 PORTRAYS SAILOR 1/CAPTAIN (STANDS RIGHT OF JONAH)

ACTOR 2 PORTRAYS JONAH

ACTOR 3 PORTRAYS SAILOR 2 (STANDS LEFT OF JONAH)

Scripture is written in italics.

(STAGE DIRECTIONS ARE BOLD IN ALL CAPS AND IN PARENTHESIS)

NARRATOR

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah (ACTOR 2 TURNS TO FACE AUDIENCE) son of Amittai, saying,

ACTORS 1 & 3

(STILL FACING UPSTAGE)

² “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up in my face!”⁴

NARRATOR

³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (ACTOR 2 LOOKS UP SUSPICIOUSLY, BOTH DIRECTIONS OVER SHOULDER AND CREEPS DOWNSTAGE, RIGHT OF CENTER CHAIR) He went down to Joppa (ACTOR 1 CROSSES TO RIGHT OF JONAH WHILE ACTOR 2 CROSSES TO LEFT OF JONAH) and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid (ACTOR 2 MIMES HANDING COINS TO ACTOR 1) his fare and went (ACTOR 3 GESTURES FOR ACTOR 2 TO SIT ON CENTER CHAIR) on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. (ACTOR 2 LOOKS UP SUSPICIOUSLY, BOTH DIRECTIONS OVER SHOULDER) (ACTORS 1 & 3 BEGIN TO MIME ROWING ACTION)

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to be bashed to bits. ⁵ Then the mariners feared a great fear, (ACTORS 1 & 3 STAND AND LOOK FRIGHTENED) and each cried to his god. (ACTORS 1 & 3 LOOK TO HEAVENS, SHAKE FISTS TOWARD SKY) They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. (ACTORS 1 & 3 MIME THROWING THINGS OVERBOARD AND PUSH CHAIRS TO CENTER CHAIR, CREATING A “BENCH” AND STAND UPSTAGE OF “BENCH”, FACING UPSTAGE) Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold (ACTOR 2 YAWNS, STRETCHES, AND LAYS DOWN ACROSS “BENCH”) of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him,

ACTOR 1

(TURNING TO ACTOR 2)

“What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

NARRATOR

⁷ The sailors said to one another,

⁴ Mathews suggests “in my face.” (“Jonah as a Performance,” 36).

ACTOR 3

(TURNING TO ACTOR 1)

“Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.”

(ACTORS 1 & 3 DUCK DOWN TOGETHER BEHIND THE “BENCH” TO MIME CASTING LOTS)

NARRATOR

So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him,

ACTOR 1

(POPPING UP TO STANDING - TO ACTOR 2)

“Tell us why this calamity has come upon us.

ACTOR 3

(POPPING UP TO STANDING - TO ACTOR 2)

What is your occupation?

ACTOR 1

(TO ACTOR 2)

Where do you come from?

ACTOR 3

(TO ACTOR 2)

What is your country?

ACTOR 1 & 3

(TO ACTOR 2)

And of what people are you?”

ACTOR 2

(SITTING UP)

⁹ “I am a Hebrew,”

NARRATOR

he replied.

ACTOR 2

“I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

NARRATOR

¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him,

ACTOR 1 & 3

(LOUDLY, TO ACTOR 2)

“What is this that you have done!”

NARRATOR

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

¹¹ Then they said to him,

ACTOR 1

“What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?”

NARRATOR

For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them,

ACTOR 2

(STANDING)

“Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”

NARRATOR

(ACTORS 1 & 3 MOVE OUTSIDE CHAIRS BACK TO ORIGINAL POSITIONS AND MIME ROWING)

¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD,

ACTOR 1

“Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life.

ACTOR 2

Do not make us guilty of innocent blood;

ACTORS 1 & 2

for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”

(JONAH MOVES UPSTAGE OF CENTER CHAIR)

NARRATOR

¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up (ACTORS 1 & 3 CROSS BESIDE ACTOR 2, FACING UPSTAGE, TAKE ACTOR 2 ARMS AND MOVE HIM UPSTAGE) and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.

(JONAH TURNS UPSTAGE, AWAY FROM AUDIENCE)

¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a (ACTORS 1 & 3 CROSS BACK TO CHAIRS, RAISE HANDS AND LOOK TO HEAVENS) sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷ But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

(END)

Step Four: Other Important Issues for a Successful Performance

For this example we are attempting a much more creative approach. Jonah's direct disobedience is expressed in his actions, looking around as he makes moves away from the command of God. This imaginative presentation of the text could be used with a younger group, providing an opportunity to act out the scene, or for younger children to understand the action of the text differently.