

Essay#2: ANE Context

This essay focuses on the concept of the Great Symbiosis as discussed in chapter 6 from Walton's book *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*. ANE peoples believed in gods that had functions and roles to maintain cosmic and social order. State gods were designated to sustain cities, but because the ANE gods were not omnipresent, communities and families also worshiped local family deities they could see and touch. People depended on the gods to grant them good crops, health, and favor and the gods depended on the people to provide for their needs as well. This codependent relationship is called the *Great Symbiosis*.

This system was viewed as the best was to appease the gods, though it was a system of chance as the gods did not make known to people what they specifically desired, only that they had needs. This perception of the uncertainty of the gods' needs was different from the revelation YHWH provided the Israelites. The Israelites had Torah while their neighbors had sacrifice by trial and error "So ritual procedures were not the result of revelation in anything like the sense that is found in the Pentateuch ... While it is true that divinatory procedures were considered to result in divine revelation ... high levels of insecurity and anxiety plagued the system." (pp. 99)

ANE gods were fickle and easily offended so when famine, pestilence, and other calamity struck communities and individuals it was assumed that the gods were angry and needed to be appeased. On the state level the practice of the "substitute king ritual", where the king temporarily stepped away from the throne and allowed a person to take his place as a sacrifice, "... was not intended to fool the gods but to give them a ready victim on whom to carry out their intentions. It would never be known in this case what the gods had been angry about. It only

gave them a target to inflict their anger on, which would result in their appeasement.” (pp. 101)

On an individual level, suffering people would pray to any and every god, confessing possible sins they committed in negligence to turn away the wrath of the gods. It is with this background applied to the Book of Jonah that it takes on deeper contextual meaning.

Jonah chapter 1 depicts the prophet receiving a word from the LORD to preach to the Ninevites to repent or face judgement. Jonah flees from his calling and boards a ship going to Tarshish. Jonah 1:4-5 tells the reader the consequence of the prophet’s action “But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break. *Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god.*” Throughout the commotion Jonah is asleep below the ship which prompts the captain to chastise 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.*” (Jonah 1:6, NRSV)

In these 3 verses we see the Great Symbiosis play out. The mariners cry out to their gods to appease them in hope they will not perish. The mariners will even resort to divination in verse 7 by casting lots to figure out who is the cause of the storm. When the lots fall on Jonah, pay attention to the questions the mariners ask asking 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?”

The first question is direct “*Tell us why this calamity has come upon us.*” It seems like a reasonable question as the lots pointed to Jonah. The mariners are seeking *revelation* from Jonah. The other questions are asked to get further information about Jonah’s god and perhaps what *he* has done to offend him. After Jonah reveals who he is and that he worships YHWH, the God of Heaven and the creator of land and sea, the mariners ask him “What shall we do to you, that the

sea may quiet down for us?” (Jonah 1:11, NRSV) It is probable the mariners adhered to just retribution and felt they needed to do something “This is the plight of those who live in a world without revelation. In the end, for all of their conscientious ritual, they did not know what deity wanted—they could only adhere to traditions and ride out the storm.” (Walton, pp. 109)

Good thing for the mariners is that Jonah is aware he is the cause and tells them to throw him overboard and the storm will cease (Jonah 1:13) The mariners hesitantly comply, but not before ensuring further retribution from an angry god did not fall on them “Then 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.*’” (Jonah 1:14) After Jonah is thrown overboard and spends 3 days praying to YHWH while in the belly of the great fish, YHWH saves Jonah from inside the fish and recommissions him to proclaim repentance to the Ninevites.

Chapter 3 shows Jonah making a day’s journey entering the large city of Nineveh, crying out “‘Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown.’” (Jonah 3:4, NRSV) This simple prophetic warning was enough to cause the people to repent and even prompt the king to take measurable action. Why should a king care about an unknown prophet speaking on behalf of a god he knows nothing about? As has been discussed earlier in this paper and in other chapters of Walton’s book, the peoples of ANE culture believed in many gods who needed to be appeased. The king would recognize Jonah had traveled a substantial distance to give prophecy and it would be foolish to dismiss him. As Walton clarifies in chapter 13 of his book

We know that for the kings of the ancient Near East, the highest value was the legitimization of their reign ... Integrally related to this value was the concept of divine sponsorship, which in its turn was dependent on the king’s demonstration of wisdom. The king demonstrated his wisdom by showing insight in judgements and, in general, by the way in which he administered justice.” (Walton, pp. 276)

The king of Nineveh does exactly this in Jonah 3:7-8 “Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals 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 hand ...*’” The king’s decree to turn from evil is a clear demonstration of him executing justice and fulfilling his kingly obligations.

The most telling verse of the Great Symbiosis is Jonah 3:9 when the king says “*Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.*” Again, we see that the king, a product of the Great Symbiosis and Just Retribution, is uncertain if his and his peoples’ actions will cause Jonah’s God to relent. All the king can do is hope to appease God.

YHWH indeed accepts the repentance of the Ninevites, sparing their lives to the chagrin of Jonah. In chapter 4, Jonah states his displeasure with how YHWH showed mercy to the Ninevites. Perhaps from his perspective Just Retribution was not administered on a wicked people. Jonah believed the Ninevites deserved punishment, but he also knew that his God is “... a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4:2, NRSV) It is YHWH’s attributes that contrast those of the other ANE gods “... it is evident that the ancients believed that rather than being unjust, the gods simply were not very forthcoming about what constituted offense.” (Walton, pp. 67) The ANE gods were ambivalent, while YHWH was inherently consistent and made his expectations known. Ultimately, YHWH has the final say in the matter of Just Retribution when he concludes by saying

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)