

# HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love  
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

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MUCH MORE THAN A BIG FISH TALE:  
God's Reluctant Prophet to the Unchosen

THE BOOK OF JONAH

**National Gay and Lesbian**  
**Task Force**



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by David R. Weiss

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Dedicated to

**Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.**

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as  
Executive Director and National Field Organizer  
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers  
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),  
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the  
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

# Introduction to Reader's Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader's Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn't require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader's theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader's Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader's Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God's abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader's Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God's surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader's Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants' intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the "cultural sensitivities" that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word "Jewish" isn't quite accurate; historically, we'd need to say "Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons" as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God's surprising welcome, it's an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it's very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news”—*it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss  
Easter 2013

# Introduction

This script invites you to explore the story of Jonah from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key biblical tale. These roles are: (1) Jonah, the prophet, (2) Men on the boat, (3) King of Nineveh, (4) Author, (5) 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah — a prophetic voice contemporary to the book of Jonah, (6-7) two Narrators. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the Men on the Boat and King can be read by one person, or the Author role can be shared by two persons.

The largest role here is the Author, followed by the roles for Jonah, 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah, and the two Narrators. The Men on the Boat and the King are the smallest roles, each having only two to three lines. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than ten sentences at a time and most speeches are only four to five sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

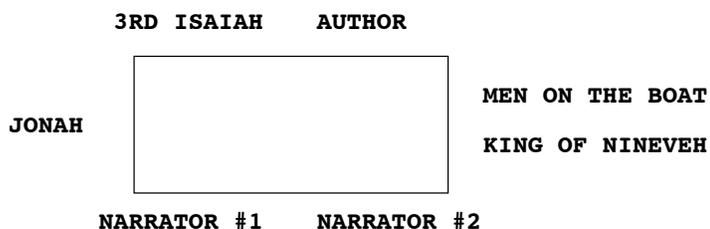
The Narrators will guide you through the story of Jonah, summarizing the plot line and helping transition from one scene to the next. The Narrators likely haven't seen any of this material before either, so these persons aren't the "experts," their role is simply to keep things moving along. You'll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to take notes along the way, but follow the script until you're invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn't a play where the goal is "perfect performance;" rather, it's a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of the story of Jonah.

Like many of the biblical narratives themselves, this script features only male characters. I deliberated whether to create and insert a female character here, but in this case it felt too editorially intrusive. This is a story that plays out between male characters. As in all the scripts, people of any gender should feel free to take on male roles. ~DW

**Note:** Getting "inside" the Book of Jonah is tricky. There's a complex relationship between the events described in the tale, the overall message of the story, and the historical context of its actual writing. It's too important a tale to set aside just because of this complexity — but impossible to understand without addressing these things. The characters explain this in the Theater itself, but there is also a chart at the end of the script that allows participants to see this complexity laid out on a timeline. The chart might be distributed and referred to as necessary.

**Suggestion:** *It may help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrators sit at one end of the group, with Jonah to one side and the Men on the Boat and the King of Nineveh to the other side. 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah and the Author might sit opposite the Narrators. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



*Note: While the book of Jonah is only four chapters long, it's too long to incorporate in its entirety into this Reader's Theater, so the characters summarize the action and lift up the key points. Everyone will be able to follow things, even if they haven't read the whole book, but it would be helpful to encourage participants to read the entire book of Jonah beforehand. (By generous permission of the publisher, the Book of Jonah appears in its entirety as an appendix to this Reader's Theater.)*

**READER'S THEATER SCRIPT****NARRATOR (1):**

Our task is to revisit each of the scenes in the Book of Jonah and reflect on them from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

**JONAH:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Jonah**, the only Hebrew (Jewish) prophet sent by God, not to his own people, but to Assyrians, people who were not only not Hebrews but who were perceived as enemies.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Third Isaiah**, the author of the final chapters (56-66) of the Book of Isaiah. Although not a participant in the scene here, his words belong in this conversation, so his voice has been introduced into this Reader's Theater.

**AUTHOR:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Author**, the unknown writer who created the Book of Jonah. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

**MEN ON THE BOAT:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Men on the Boat**, speaking for the professional sailors who happened to be the crew on the boat Jonah used in his attempt to run away from God.

**KING:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **King of Nineveh**, the ruler of Assyria whose palace was in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

**NARRATOR (2):**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (2)**. In this role I will summarize the plot from the Book

of Jonah. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

**NARRATOR (1):**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator (1)**. In this role I will also summarize the plot from the Book of Jonah, help us transition from scene to scene, and occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

**NARRATOR (2):**

Okay, we'll begin with a few background comments on the Book of Jonah. Then we'll turn to the story itself.

**AUTHOR:**

Like most of the books of the Bible, the Book of Jonah does not identify its author, which is a shame because I wouldn't mind a little credit for having crafted such a biting satire with such a gracious message. That's history for you. Everyone knows Jonah – even though he's just a fictional character in my book – but nobody knows me! I didn't bother to date my book either. I mean, I wrote it for the people living alongside me. Who thought that a couple thousand years later folks like you would be reading it? Anyway, most scholars think I wrote sometime after the Exile, maybe between 500 and 300 BCE. Whatever the exact date, the tale of Jonah speaks directly to Israel's life after the Exile, as they wrestled with whether God's love could include people beyond Israel.

**NARRATOR (1):**

Let me jump in to clarify how we'll be dating things. "BCE" means "Before the Common Era;" it's the same timeline as "BC," which meant "Before Christ," but BCE is used by scholars today to recognize that not everyone regards Jesus as *Christ*. Still, Jesus' birth *is* what marks the beginning of the "Common Era," so when you hear BCE it simply means the number of years before the Common Era began, which is also the number of years before the birth of Jesus.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

Okay, to make matters even more complicated, I'm also an "unknown" author. I'm the voice behind the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah.

Virtually all scholars acknowledge that most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah has roots in the prophet Isaiah, who was active from 740-687 BCE. That's right *before* and right *after* Israel's Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire. But the material in chapters 40-55 comes from a different voice and reflects a different time. Often referred to as "Second Isaiah," this un-named prophet was active around the time that the Babylonian Exile was ending, some 150 years later than the original Isaiah. And many scholars hear yet another voice in chapters 56-66, a *third* prophet who sees himself continuing the legacy of Isaiah, but who is now speaking to Israel's reality *after* they've returned from the Exile, perhaps just a generation or two after Second Isaiah. *That third voice is me.*

*[Participants might pause and locate Third Isaiah on the Timeline Chart – and keep the Chart close by as the next five speakers fill out the history and context for the story.]*

**AUTHOR:**

I know this can all seem kind of complicated and a bit hard to follow; after all this isn't your history, it's *ours*. But bear with us, because the history sets the context for understanding my story about Jonah. The setting for my *tale* is around 750 BCE just a couple decades *before* the Exile – that's when the story takes place. But the setting for my *writing* – and for the people *hearing* the story – is a generation or more *after* the Exile. And in *that* setting my story is less about "Jonah and the miracle of a big fish" than about "Jonah and the miracle of a big God." Knowing the backdrop brings the message into focus.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

So before we turn to the tale, keep this in mind. In 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom, comprising almost all of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrian Empire and scattered to the four winds. This national disaster is the source of "the lost tribes of Israel:" after 722 BCE these ten tribes were effectively lost to history. About 130 years later, between 597 and 587 BCE another regional superpower, Babylon, conquered Assyria and swallowed up the last remnant of Israel, then known as the Kingdom of Judah. These last Israelites – members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin – were deported to Babylon, where they lived in exile for about fifty years.

**AUTHOR:**

Then, around 539 BCE, a third regional superpower arose, the Persian Empire led by Cyrus, and they conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus decided to let the Israelites, who had been living in exile in Babylon, return to their homeland. Many of them did, and over the next hundred years one of the driving theological questions for the people of Israel became, "What went wrong... why did the Exile happen?" One of the reasons most often given was that Israel had been "too friendly" with its neighbors, and the resulting intermarriages had led to their being attracted to foreign gods.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

One response was an emphasis on ethnic purity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate how first a priest (Ezra) and then a governor (Nehemiah) declared that God was opposed to all intermarriage. But this wasn't the only view. There were other biblical voices – like mine, and the authors of both Ruth and Jonah – who understood God in ways that ran counter to Ezra and Nehemiah.

**AUTHOR:**

So I offered my story about Jonah to the imagination of Israel in the midst of this debate about how to treat foreigners – which was also a debate about how God regards foreigners. Most scholars consider my story to be *historical fiction*, sometimes it's even referred to as *satire* or *parody* for its over-the-top style. I take that as a compliment. But that doesn't mean it was any less "inspired" than other imaginative tales like, say, Jesus' parables. Just like the parables, the truth of my tale doesn't rest on the history it tells but on the insight it offers, the message about God that it bears. Now, let's turn to the tale itself.

**NARRATOR (2):**

In the first scene we hear that the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, telling him "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh right now. Raise a cry against it! Tell them that I know all about their crimes." (Jonah 1:2 *TIB*)

**AUTHOR:**

There! If you're an Israelite well-versed in your own history you know right away when this tale takes place. You're not? Okay, I'll clue you in. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 14:25 a single verse mentions a prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, who directed King Jeroboam to restore the boundaries of Israel around 750 BCE. It's the only biblical reference outside my story to a historical person named Jonah. Now remember, I'm not writing history myself – this is an *imaginative* tale. But I want my hearers to know that this story takes place some 300 years before they're hearing it, just as Assyria is getting ready to overwhelm – indeed obliterate – the very boundaries that Jeroboam had just restored. And Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria. So God is asking Jonah to go warn Israel's *worst* enemy lest God destroy them.

“He [King Jeroboam] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of Arabah, in accordance with the word of YHWH, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant, Jonas ben-Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.”  
(2nd Kings 14:25 *TIB*)

**JONAH:**

So now maybe you understand what comes next. For generations I've been called reluctant, rebellious, recalcitrant. *But this is Israel's worst enemy.* Nineveh is the capital city of the nation poised to utterly destroy us. Other prophets are sent to warn the people of Israel; I'm the *only* prophet sent to an *unchosen* people. What would you have done?

**NARRATOR (1):**

Well, what Jonah does is indeed “go” – but as fast and far as he can in the *other* direction. He boards a ship heading due west while Nineveh lies due east. But then a great storm came up, so fierce that it threatened to sink the ship. The sailors feared for their lives, throwing all the cargo overboard and imploring their various gods to save them. Meanwhile Jonah was fast asleep in the hold of the ship while all this was going on.

**AUTHOR:**

I mentioned my “over-the-top” style early. It begins right here. Almost like a cartoon scene, I write that God “unleashed a violent wind” and that “the storm threatened to break up the ship” (Jonah 1:4 *TIB*) – in Hebrew the word portrays the boat itself crying out as if to

say, "Hey, guys, find another ship, I'm going to pieces!" And in the midst of this storm that no one could ignore, Jonah ... is fast asleep?! Who does he think he is, sleeping through a storm on a boat – Jesus Christ? Well, these are early clues to my hearers that whatever point I'm trying to make in my story, I'm *not* trying to be taken literally.

"Then a fierce gale arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat so much that it was almost swamped. But Jesus was in the stern through it all, sound asleep on a cushion."  
(Mark 4:37-38a *TIB*)

#### **MEN ON THE BOAT:**

But some parts of the story are all too real, like the description of us throwing cargo overboard and pleading with our gods. Sailing has never been for the faint of heart. And there were plenty of storms that could smash a ship to pieces. And in such a storm we would've tossed the cargo overboard to try and save the ship. And we would've prayed to every god we knew, hoping that one of us might call out to a god who happened to be listening.

#### **NARRATOR (2):**

Soon enough the captain of the vessel finds Jonah asleep. He rouses Jonah and tells him to start praying, too, in case maybe *his* god "will spare a thought for us." (Jonah 1:6 *TIB*) Meanwhile, the sailors, who often interpreted a stormy sea as the sign of an angry god, cast lots – they threw dice – to determine who had angered the gods. Of course, the lot falls to Jonah. So they question him to learn what he's done to make his god so angry.

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

Understand that up until this point in history – not just the story's *setting* in 750 BCE, but the story's *telling*, after the Exile (450 BCE) – *everyone*, including Israelites, took it for granted that there were many gods. Monotheism, the belief there that is only one God, is just beginning to appear, even in Israel. In fact, it's partly the notion of monotheism that raises the question this story asks: if there's only one God, does that God care only about Israel, or might that God care about *all* people?

**MEN ON THE BOAT:**

In any case, when the captain brings Jonah up on deck and we discover that he's the cause of all of this, our fear gets tinged with anger. He's endangered all of us by using *our* boat to run away from *his* god. So we asked him what he could do to calm his god so that hopefully his god would calm the sea.

**AUTHOR:**

I like Jonah. He's my best-known character after all. But you have to understand that sometimes I make him do things – ironically – to make my point. So at this point in the story, Jonah, who you'll discover at the end of the story already knows that God's fundamental character is compassion, tells the men, "Take me and throw me into the sea." (Jonah 1:12 *TIB*)

**MEN ON THE BOAT:**

We didn't know anything about Jonah's god, but we weren't sure that killing him would make things better. So instead we rowed as hard as we could to reach land. We didn't want Jonah's blood on us or on our boat. Only when we realized that we had no choice, did we cry out, "Please, O YHWH, we pray, don't let us perish for taking this person's life. Don't hold us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O YHWH, acted as you have thought right." (Jonah 1:14 *TIB*) And then we threw him into the sea.

**NARRATOR (1):**

Immediately the sea calmed, which filled the sailors with even greater fear. They made a sacrifice to God then and there. And each one made the sort of vows humans make when their lives have just been saved from a great calamity: that is, they promised many things they would forget by the next time they reached port. But God never wanted Jonah's life, so God didn't allow Jonah to drown. Instead, as the story tells it, "Then YHWH sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and he remained in the fish's belly for three days and three nights." (Jonah 2:1 *TIB*)

**AUTHOR:**

I have a love-hate relationship with that line. It's simple, elegant, and it helps the story turn an essential corner, but it's otherwise

entirely beside the point. It has no real significance at all! Yet this is the one line that everyone from Sunday School kids to grownups knows: Jonah got swallowed by a fish. *Really? Could a fish really swallow a man? What sort of fish is big enough for that? Or was it a whale? And for three days? Really? For literally seventy-two hours, or was I being symbolic? How did he breathe? How did he hold up in the stomach acid?* I suppose I'm glad I didn't have him scooped up by a submarine driven by extraterrestrials! But for all the attention this gets – and for as much as it keeps people from noticing my real point – I wish I'd had him grab a piece of the cargo just tossed into the sea and let him cling to that through the night while he prayed.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

As someone else who dared to proclaim the wideness of God's love to a people who preferred to keep it more comfortably narrow, I have to say that we humans are often eager to distract ourselves with the most far-fetched notions in order to avoid encountering the ones that really challenge us.

**NARRATOR (2):**

Then, from the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed. His prayer, much like a psalm of personal lament, begins with a cry of distress, reaches a depth of sheer hopelessness, and then credits his rescue to God. He pledges, "I will fulfill the vow I made," and concludes with a triumphant cry, – uttered while still in the fish's belly – "Deliverance comes from YHWH!" (Jonah 2:10 *TIB*) And then God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto dry land.

**AUTHOR:**

Not a pretty image, I know. But it's a good prayer. And if the story had ended here, Jonah would come across almost like a hero of the faith. But remember what the Narrator said a few moments ago, about the vows we're all quick to make when our lives have just been saved from a great calamity, promising things we forget just as quickly? Well, Jonah's vow is a bit like that.

**NARRATOR (1):**

But not at first. Because this time God again spoke to Jonah, telling him to go preach a warning to the city of Nineveh. And this time Jonah went. When he reached the city he found that it was enormous – three days walk from one end to the other. And this was his message: “Only forty days more, and Nineveh is going to be destroyed!” (Jonah 3:4)

**JONAH:**

In the capitol city of my enemies, I walked through the streets like a fearless man. Forty days – count ‘em off – forty days and this city will be destroyed. Believe me, this was at least a message I could put my heart into.

**NARRATOR (2):**

And the people repented, hoping that perhaps God would relent and spare their lives. And God...

**AUTHOR:**

Wait a second! This is some of my best stuff. In case anybody had been starting to take things too seriously after the psalm and all, I’m reminding you here again that this is *parody*. This is *not* the way it ever happens. Only in this story. Only to make my point. So tell them..

**KING:**

Well, we, the people of Nineveh, didn’t just “believe,” we proclaimed a fast. And everyone in our great city, from nobles to peasants, put on sackcloth.

**AUTHOR:**

It *never* happens like this. Read the prophets. They can’t pay the people to believe. But here *everyone* believes. *Everyone* fasts. *Everyone* wears sackcloth. And it gets even better. Go on...

**KING:**

When word of Jonah’s message reached me, the king, I took off my robe, replaced it with sackcloth, and sat in ashes to show my complete humility. But I didn’t stop there. In order to make sure that our city’s response was complete, I issued a royal decree. I made fasting

the law of the land. I declared that not even animals could be fed. And that no one – human or animal – would drink. I even ordered that our livestock be covered in sackcloth to join us in showing our repentance.

**AUTHOR:**

See, it's like a cartoon again. It's way over the top. I'm shouting out as loud as possible between the lines: "Not meant to be taken literally. Something more is going on here. Wait for the punch line, it's coming!"

**KING:**

Finally, I commanded everyone – nobles and slaves alike, young and old, cattle and goats, dogs and cats – I declared that everyone should call on God with all their might. And I pronounced, "You must all renounce your sinful ways and the evil things you did. Who knows, maybe God will have a change of mind and relent! Perhaps God's burning wrath will be withdrawn so that we don't perish." (Jonah 3:8-9 *TIB*)

**AUTHOR:**

Any of the genuine historical prophets in Israel would trade places with Jonah in a heartbeat. People actually listening to your message? All of them? The king, too? This is *rich*. I hope you're enjoying this scene as much as I am.

**JONAH:**

Me? I feel like a fool. I mean I *saw* this coming. I didn't want to bring this message to those people precisely because of this possibility. They're not supposed to repent! *They're not God's chosen people!* God could care less about the Ninevites. In fact, the angels have a hellfire and brimstone package all set, marked "special delivery" and addressed to Nineveh.

**NARRATOR (1):**

But, God did see how the Ninevites repented, and God did relent. And the calamity that God had announced for Nineveh, God chose *not* to do it.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

This is big stuff here. Does God ever waffle on decisions? What would it mean if God changed God's own mind? In fact, the Hebrew word is the same word that describes the Ninevite's reaction: God *repented*. What could be so powerful to change God's mind? Was it merely the actions of the people? Do fasting and sackcloth and cries of repentance really have the power to manipulate God?

**AUTHOR:**

Nah. Here's part one of my big insight into God. You might call it my "revelation." I'm daring to suggest that there *is* something more powerful than God's justice and that something is *God's mercy*. God backs down not because of *what* the people do, but because of *who* God is.

**NARRATOR (2):**

But God's decision to spare Nineveh left Jonah angry. His vow in the belly of the fish seems forgotten now. Instead he prayed to God in his anger, saying, "Please YHWH! Isn't this exactly what I said would happen, when I was still in my own country? That's why I left and fled to Tarshish: I knew..." (Jonah 4:1-2 *TIB*)

**JONAH:**

"I knew that you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, relenting from violence." (Jonah 4:2 *TIB*) Every child of Israel knows that. It's from Exodus 34:6. These words are repeated or alluded to more often than any other verse in our Scriptures. They come from the passage where Moses is up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The Lord moves past Moses and offers these words as God's own self-description. This is *just who God is*.

**AUTHOR:**

I don't describe the weather on the day of Jonah's great pout, but let's say it was a clear sunny day. There's not a storm in sight. But as far as Jonah's concerned, he's standing on

"I am God, YHWH, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and faithfulness."  
(Exodus 34:6 *TIB*)

the deck of a ship heaving in the waves. And he wants to be thrown overboard once again.

**NARRATOR (1):**

Jonah concluded his lament by saying, "Now, YHWH, please take my life! I'd rather be dead than keep on living!" (Jonah 4:3 *TIB*)

**AUTHOR:**

Why? Why does he want to die? Everything in the story that doesn't make sense is telling you to *look beneath the surface for the real message*. And it starts here. *Jonah would rather be dead than have to share God's compassionate character with the unchosen Assyrians*. If he can't keep God's tenderness, patience, and faithfulness to his own people, then not even the belly of a fish will get him far enough away.

**3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:**

No one wants to identify with Jonah at this point in the story. He's being petty and self-centered to a ridiculous extreme. But he's a symbol here for Israel after the Exile – or at least a symbol for the impulse in Israel that wants to say God is for Israelites only. Indeed, *he's a symbol for all of us, whenever we try to narrow God's love down to the people we're comfortable loving*.

**AUTHOR:**

And because we're so busy laughing at *his* foolishness, the message that we need to hear just might sneak through past our own defenses. Great comedians know this. Whether their routines deal with the absurdities of everyday life or the edgier social issues that make us nervous, if they can get you *laughing* at them, you might suddenly discover that you're laughing at your own foolishness as well. That's what I'm hoping happens here.

**NARRATOR (2):**

God ends the scene by asking Jonah whether it's right for him to be angry. Jonah sulks off to the edge of the city and finds a place to sit, waiting to see if perhaps God will decide to destroy the city after all. God causes a plant to grow, a bush that rises quickly and offers shade to Jonah's head – and Jonah was pleased with the plant. But then God sends a worm to eat the plant and it withers. And God sends a hot

wind from the east, and a harsh sun, and before long Jonah was faint from the heat. And for the third time in four chapters, he wants to die, saying, I'd rather be dead than keep on living!" (Jonah 4:8 *TIB*)

**AUTHOR:**

Two words, in case you're tempted to mistake these details for the real message: cartoon action. The plant grows super fast, tall enough and in just the right place to shade Jonah's head – in a single day. And then a worm kills the plant, plus a hot wind comes up and the sun beats down. I don't expect you – I *don't want* you to be reading this like history. I want you to be watching for message beneath these fantastic turns in the plot, like you're waiting for the punch line in a joke.

**JONAH:**

In the story, I've had it up to here by now. Sent to my enemies. Tossed overboard in a storm. Swallowed – and vomited up – by a fish. Left in the lurch like a laughingstock when God decides to show mercy right after I announce God's impending justice. And now, in the middle of my grand pout, even this little shade plant betrays me. So when God asks if it's right for me to be angry about the plant, I can't imagine what's coming next. I just practically explode at God, "I have every right to be angry, to the point of death!" (Jonah 4:9 *TIB*)

**NARRATOR (1):**

"God replied, 'You feel sorrow because of a castor plant that cost you no labor, that you did not make grow, that sprouted in a night, and that perished in a night. Is it not right then, for me to feel sorrow about the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?'" (Jonah 4:10-11 *TIB*)

**AUTHOR:**

There's the punch line! If Jonah would do anything to save the silly plant that he had nothing to do with, how can he not see that God would do anything – even if it meant changing God's mind and causing a prophet a little embarrassment – to save an entire city? And the little comment about right hands and left hands – that's not a cute way of calling the Ninevites stupid. It's just a way of saying how

unJewish they are: they don't know which hand to use for this or that ritual duty, something that Jonah (and every Jewish child) had started learning even before he could speak. They're not stupid. They're just emphatically *not* part of God's chosen people.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:

But here, in this story, they are chosen to be the recipients of God's mercy. Imagine how that idea sounded in a time when Ezra and Nehemiah were breaking up every inter-racial marriage and driving all the foreign women – and any of their children – out into the wilderness. It's no wonder that the author of this story set it in a different time and told it as a parody. He used the different setting to protect himself from charges of being a traitor. And he used the humor to catch his hearers off guard, to sneak in a word of truth before their defenses shot up.

### AUTHOR:

True enough. But not everyone was as cautious as I was. 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah was a real prophet – not a fictional character in a parody – and he wrote these powerful words: "Foreigners who would follow YHWH should not say, 'YHWH will surely exclude me from this people.'" *That was exactly what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing to the foreigners in Israel.* But 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah countered directly, "For thus says YHWH: 'The foreigners who join themselves to me, ministering to me, loving the name of YHWH, and worshipping me – all who observe the Sabbath and do not profane it, and cling to my Covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples! Thus says the Sovereign YHWH, who gathers the diaspora [the "scattered ones"] of Israel: *There are others I will gather besides those already gathered.*" (Isaiah 56:3, 6-8 *TIB*)

### 3<sup>rd</sup> ISAIAH:

Let me add one last thing, since I obviously don't mince words. The Author has reminded us continuously that in parody the meaning isn't in the details on the surface, it's in the message underneath. Sometimes people will want to say, "Ah, but the Ninevites were wicked and needed to repent." Then they'll use that to exclude from God's mercy and love anyone whom they deem "unrepentant." But that's a detail on the

surface. The message underneath, at the heart of this story, isn't about deciding who's wicked today or who needs to be warned or who needs to repent. *It's about whose God might still be too small.* And that's a message aimed at all of us in every time and place.

**JONAH:**

Even more than that, it's simply about how big God is. Bigger than any fish in the sea. God swallows whole peoples in God's grace, mercy, and love. And God specializes in "swallowing" the very people we think God shouldn't. That's my fish tale, and I'm sticking to it.

\* \* \*

*[End of scripted conversation. However, instructions for an informal conversation continue on the next page.]*

**NARRATOR (2):**

Now I invite us one last time, within our roles, to answer an *unscripted* question (however we choose to) based on what you've experienced in this Reader's Theater. Many persons find themselves rendered invisible, kept at the edges (or altogether outside) of our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, people struggling with poverty, those with special needs, and more. *If you could say anything to our churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome persons who may seem so unchosen, so other to us — speaking as Jonah, the Men on the boat, the King of Nineveh, 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah, the Author, or the Narrator, what would you say?*

*[Go around the circle and invite each person to say as much or as little as they wish.]*

*[Note: If more than one small group has been reading a script, this next question is a chance to briefly collect some insights that you'll share with the whole group when you re-gather. Even though each small group will have read the same narrative, each group's experience of it will have been unique, so it's important for to each small group to share their insights with the whole group. Otherwise this is an opportunity for a little longer conversation that will wrap up the experience.]*

**NARRATOR (1):**

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either the story of Jonah or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

1. What insights did you gain from this experience?
1. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
2. Of the characters in this story (Jonah, the Men on the boat, King of Nineveh, 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah, the Author), where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
3. What difference would it make if every church went through this passage like we did?

*[Take just a few minutes to do this, recording a few thoughts to share with the whole group.]*

A final word of thanks is in order. It is both a risk and a gift to step into such close engagement with a biblical text. In these encounters with God's radical love we may well find ourselves challenged and encouraged, but we will hardly find ourselves unchanged. Thank you for taking the risk.

# Timeline

Understanding the relationship between the story told within the Book of Jonah and the historical setting of the writing of the *Book of Jonah* (likely 200-300 years later).

## BCE Timeline

(years before  
the Common Era)

## Events occurring:

- 1100 BCE** Approximate date for the events in the Book of Ruth.
- 1075-1025 BCE** Ruth gives birth to Obed, who becomes father to Jesse, who becomes father to David.
- 1000 BCE** David becomes king in Israel.
- 922 BCE** Civil War splits Israel into two kingdom: Israel in the North; Judah in the South.
- 750 BCE** ***Approximate date for the events in the Book of Jonah.***
- 722 BCE** The Assyrian Empire conquers and scatters the Northern Kingdom of Israel. During this time the original prophet named Isaiah is active.
- 597-587 BCE** The Babylonian Empire conquers Assyria as well as the Southern Kingdom of Judah and carries these last two tribes of Israel into Exile in Babylon.
- 539 BCE** The Persian Empire conquers Babylon and chooses to allow all the Exiles of Judah to return to the area around Jerusalem. During this time a *second* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Second Isaiah.”
- 520-515 BCE** The Exiles (now free) work to rebuild the Temple.
- 535-435 BCE** During this period (about the first 100 years after the Exile ends) the people of Israel are asking the very tough question, “Why did the national disaster of the Exile happen?”  
  
This is the period when Ezra and Nehemiah forbid inter-marriage (and breaks up existing mixed marriages.)

**This is also the era when a *third* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Third Isaiah.”** This prophet challenges the viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah — *this is the character in the Reader’s Theater.*

***And this is the era when many scholars believe that both the Books of Ruth and Jonah were written.*** If true, these authors chose to write vivid tales about characters in Israel’s past in order to convey their understanding of God and relate it to Israel’s life in the present. The Books of Ruth and Jonah, like the message of Third Isaiah, present an image of a much more inclusive God than is seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

*Thus, the biblical writings (Ezra, Nehemiah, Third Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah) produced during this last era (535-435 BCE) give us a glimpse into a time when the people of God were actively wrestling with how best to speak about God in light of enormous changes and challenges in the world around them.*

## The Book of Jonah

### Chapter 1

The word of YHWH came to Jonah ben-Amittai:

“Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh right now. Raise a cry against it! Tell them that I know all about their crimes.”

But Jonah decided to run away from YHWH, and set out for Tarshish instead. He went down to Joppa and found a ship bound for Tarshish. He paid the fare and boarded the ship bound for Tarshish, in order to get away from YHWH.

But YHWH unleashed a violent wind on the sea, and the storm was so great that it threatened to break up the ship. The frightened sailors, every one of them, appealed to their gods. Then they threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Jonah, however, went below, laid down in the hold, and fell fast asleep. The captain found Jonah and said, “How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up! Call on your god! Maybe your god will spare a thought for us, and not leave us to die.”

The crew, meanwhile, said to one another, “Come on, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for bringing this evil on us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell to Jonah. So they said to him, “You have brought all this misfortune on us — tell us, what is your business? Where do you come from? What is your country? What is your nationality?”

Jonah said, “I am a Hebrew, and I worship YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”

The sailors were seized with terror at this and said, “What have you done?” They learned that Jonah was trying to escape from YHWH — he told them the whole story.

Then they said, “What are we to do with you, to make

the sea grow calm for us?” For the sea was growing rougher and rougher.

Jonah replied, “Take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will grow calm for you. For I can see it is my fault this violent storm happened to you.”

The sailors rowed vainly in an effort to reach the shore, but the sea grew still rougher for them. Then they called on YHWH and said, “Please, O YHWH, don’t let us perish for taking this person’s life. Don’t hold us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O YHWH, acted as you have thought right.” And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea grew calm once more. At this the sailors were seized with dread of YHWH; they offered a sacrifice to YHWH and made their vows.

### Chapter 2

Then YHWH sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and he remained in the fish’s belly for three days and three nights. From the belly of the fish he prayed to YHWH, his God, and said:

Out of my despair I cried to you  
and you answered me.  
From the belly of Sheol I cried,  
and you heard my voice.  
You threw me into the Deep,  
into the heart of the sea,  
and floods overwhelmed me.  
All your waves, your torrents,  
washed over me.

And I said, “I am banished from your sight!  
Will I ever again look upon your holy Temple?”  
The waters surrounded me right by my throat,  
the Deep enclosed me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.  
I sank down to the roots of the mountains;  
the vaults of the earth closed me in forever.  
But you raised my life  
back up from the pit, YHWH my God!

As my soul was ebbing away,  
 I remembered YHWH, my God,  
 and my prayer came before you  
 in your holy Temple.  
 Those who cling to worthless idols  
 forsake their own well-being.  
 But I will sacrifice to you  
 with a song of thanksgiving.  
 I will fulfill the vow I made.  
 Deliverance comes from YHWH!  
 Then God spoke to the fish,  
 and the fish vomited Jonah onto the shore.

### Chapter 3

The word of YHWH came a second time to Jonah:  
 “Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to  
 them as I told you to do.”

Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to  
 the word of YHWH. Nineveh was a city large beyond  
 compare:

it took three days to cross it. Jonah moved on into  
 the city, making a day’s journey. He proclaimed,  
 “Only forty days more, and Nineveh is going to be  
 destroyed!”

So the people of Nineveh believed God; they  
 proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth, from  
 the greatest to the least. When the news reached  
 the ruler of Nineveh, he rose from his judgment seat,  
 took off his royal robes and dressed in sackcloth, and  
 sat down in ashes. A decree was then proclaimed  
 throughout Nineveh, by decree of the ruler and the  
 ruler’s ministers, as follows:

“Citizens and beasts, herds of flocks, are to taste  
 nothing! You must not eat anything, and you must not  
 drink any water. You must all dress in sackcloth and  
 call on God with all your might; you must all renounce  
 your sinful ways and the evil things you did. Who

knows, maybe God will have a change of mind and  
 relent! Perhaps God’s burning wrath will be withdrawn  
 so that we don’t perish!”

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behavior.  
 And God relented by not inflicting on them the  
 disaster that threatened them.

### Chapter 4

But Jonah grew indignant and fell into a rage. He  
 prayed to YHWH and said, “Please, YHWH! Isn’t this  
 exactly what I said would happen, when I was still in  
 my own country? That’s why I left and fled to Tarshish:

I knew that you were a God of tenderness and  
 compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, relenting  
 from violence. Now, YHWH, please take my life! I’d  
 rather be dead than keep on living!”

Then YHWH said, “What gives you the right to be  
 angry?”

Jonah then left the city and sat down to the east of  
 it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat down  
 under the shade to see what would happen to the  
 city. Then YHWH God sent a castor oil plant to grow  
 up over Jonah to shade his head and soothe his  
 indignation. Jonah was delighted with the castor oil  
 plant. But at dawn the next day, God sent a worm to  
 attack the castor oil plant and it withered. And after  
 the sun had risen, God sent a scorching east wind.  
 The sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he was  
 overcome and begging for death, and said, “I’d rather  
 be dead than keep on living!”

God said to Jonah, “What gives you the right to be  
 upset about the castor plant?”

He replied, “I have every right to be angry, to the point  
 of death!”

God replied, “You feel sorrow because of a castor  
 plant that cost you no labor, that you did not make

grow, that sprouted in a night, and that perished in a night. Is it not right, then, for me to feel sorrow for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?"