“And Many Beasts” (Jonah 4:11): The Function and Status of Animals in the Book of Jonah

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Abstract

This article examines the special role and function of animals in the book of Jonah. Throughout the book, all elements of creation (natural forces, flora and fauna) serve as emissaries of the Lord. Among animals, this applies specifically to the “great fish” and the worm. Their subjection to God’s will contrasts with the behavior of His human messenger, Jonah, who runs away and tries to evade his mission. At the end of the book animals are viewed as part of the penitent community and an object for divine forgiveness, alongside the human citizens of Nineveh. In fact, the book’s concluding words are “many beasts,” who also merit God’s mercy. I believe there may be a link between the role of animals in the story as divine emissaries and their special status as members of the community and as worthy of divine compassion.
Many have questioned whether the book of Jonah is historical. The supposed legendary character of some of the events (e.g., the episode involving the great fish) has caused them to suggest alternatives to the traditional view that the book is historical, biographical narrative. Unlike most other prophetic parts of the OT, this book is a narrative account of a single prophetic mission. Its treatment of that mission is thus similar to the accounts of the ministries of Elijah and Elisha found in 1,2 Kings, and to certain narrative sections of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. As is often the case in Biblical narratives, the author has compressed much into a small space; 40 verses tell the entire story (eight additional verses of poetry are devoted to Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving). But it’s a book of books. That means if you want to know the Bible better, you’ll need to get acquainted with the 66 documents it comprises. I’ve written a one-sentence overview of every book of the Bible. They're listed in the order they show up in the Protestant Bible. If you want more, I've linked to quick, 3-minute guides to every book of the Bible, too. This is a lot to take in, so if you want to start with baby steps, check out this list of the shortest books of the Bible. Old Testament books of the Bible. (The Old Testament books were written long before Jesus was born.) 1. Genesis. Genesis answers two big questions: “How did God’s relationship with the world begin?” and “Where did the nation of Israel come from?” Author: Tr