

Who Knows?
The Gospel according to the King of Nineveh in Joel

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Abstract

The iconic ancient Neo-Assyrian rulers have a sustained afterlife in ancient visual royal propaganda of later empires as well as literary representation in the scriptures. Both the enduring symbols of the Assyrian rulers' pride and their larger-than-life self-images provide ironic connotations for Joel's message to Zion. Joel 2:13–14 repurposes the message of the king of Nineveh and the angry prophet embedded in the satirical Jonah narrative (Jonah 3:9; 4:2; cf. Exod 32:12, 14; 34:6). The hopeful message of the king of Nineveh is epitomized in his question "Who knows?" Joel leverages this unlikely resource into a message of hope for Zion in their own time of distress.

Introduction

Joel repurposes the question "Who knows?" from the king of Nineveh to call the congregation of Zion to repent. Joel excels at ironic repurposing. If the king of Nineveh seems an unlikely gospel preacher, his setting makes his message even more unlikely. Joel borrows the message of the Ninevite monarch from the satirical narrative of Jonah.

To get at the difficulties of Joel's message—borrowed from the king of Nineveh and an angry prophet of Yahweh—requires three considerations. First, the ancient reuse of royal ideology from Assyria can help show what sets apart Joel's ironic repurposing of the king of Nineveh. Second, Joel's tendencies to ironically repurpose messages from the prophetic traditions of Israel and Judah shows a hermeneutical pattern for the way he handles the message of the king of Nineveh. Third, Joel ironically repurposes and thoroughly integrates the question of the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:9) and the language of the prophet Jonah (4:2) into his message calling the congregation of Zion to repent before Yahweh (Joel 2:13–14).¹

¹ The third section of this paper are built on the evidence compiled in Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 375–77, 404–7.

Repurposing Prophets in Joel

Italics and bold signify verbal parallels in Hebrew and broken underlining signifies marking:

But *on Mount Zion* will be deliverance. It **will be holy**. The house of Jacob will possess those who dispossessed them. (Obad 17)

Everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved. For *on Mount Zion* and in Jerusalem *there will be deliverance, as Yahweh has said*, even among the survivors whom Yahweh calls. (Joel 2:32[3:5])

Then you will know that I, Yahweh your God, dwell in **Zion**, my holy hill. Jerusalem **will be holy**, and strangers will never again pass through it. (3:17[4:17])

Italics and bold signify verbal parallels in Hebrew and broken underlining signifies the recognition formula shared with Joel 2:27).

He said: “*Yahweh roars from Zion and sends out his voice from Jerusalem*. The pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers.” (Amos 1:2)

But on Mount **Zion** will be deliverance. It **will be holy**. The house of Jacob will possess those who dispossessed them. (Obad 17)

Yahweh roars from Zion and sends out his voice from Jerusalem. The earth and the heavens will shake. But Yahweh is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. Then you will know that I, Yahweh your God, dwell in **Zion**, my holy hill. Jerusalem **will be holy**, and strangers will never again pass through it. (Joel 3:16–17[4:16–17])

Bold marks verbal parallels in Hebrew:

I will never again hide my face from them, for **I will pour out my spirit** on the people of Israel, declares the Lord Yahweh. (Ezek 39:29)

And afterward, **I will pour out my spirit** on all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on male and female servants, in those days, **I will pour out my spirit**. (Joel 2:28–29[3:1–2])

Emphases mark verbal parallels in Hebrew:

They will beat their swords into plowshares **and** their spears (חַנִּית) **into pruning hooks**. (Isa 2:4/Mic 4:3b)

Beat your plowshares into swords **and** your **pruning hooks** into spears (רֶמֶחַ). Let the weak say, “I am strong!” (Joel 3:10[4:10])

Repurposing Jonah's King of Nineveh in Joel

Emphases signify verbal parallels in Hebrew:

[Moses said:] “**Turn from your fierce anger and relent** concerning the punishment of your people.” ... Then Yahweh relented concerning the disaster that he had threatened upon his people. ... Yahweh passed before him and proclaimed: “Yahweh, Yahweh a God of compassion and grace, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty and faithfulness.” (Exod 32:12b, 14; 34:6)

When the message [of Jonah] reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne and removed his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in the ashes.⁷ He issued a proclamation: “By decree of the king and his nobles: ‘No human or animal, no cattle or flock shall taste anything. They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water.’⁸ Humans and animals shall put on sackcloth. They shall cry out strenuously to God. Let them turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.⁹ **Who knows?** God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we do not perish.” When God saw what they did, that they turned from their evil ways, then God relented concerning the disaster that he had threatened upon them and he did not do it...

He [Jonah] prayed to Yahweh, “O Yahweh, is not this what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish. For I know that you are a God of grace and compassion, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty, and who relents from punishment.” (Jonah 3:6–10; 4:2)

“Even now,” says Yahweh, “turn to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”¹³ Tear your heart and not your clothing. Turn to Yahweh your God for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty, and who relents from punishment.¹⁴ **Who knows?** He may turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering to Yahweh your God. (Joel 2:12–14)

First, the evidence goes beyond shared prayer language. The verbatim parallels include both direct discourse (see second point below) and the frame narratives of Exodus and Jonah. Consider the shared frame narratives in isolation:

וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ

“Then Yahweh relented concerning the disaster that he had threatened upon his people.” (Exod 32:14)

וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת־לָהֶם

“Then God relented concerning the disaster that he had threatened upon them.” (Jonah 3:10)

Second, in addition to the frame narrative the king of Nineveh and the prophet Jonah respectively reuse verbatim the prayer of Moses and the revelation of Yahweh, respectively. Notice the shared language in isolation:

שוב מחרון אפך והנחם

[Moses] “**Turn from your fierce anger and relent.**” (Exod 32:12b)

ישוב ונחם האלהים ושב מחרון אפך

[King of Nineveh] “God **may turn and relent** and turn **from his fierce anger.**” (Jonah 3:9)

יהוה יהוה אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב־חסד ואמת

[Yahweh] “Yahweh, Yahweh a God of compassion and grace, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty and faithfulness.” (Exod 34:6)

אתה אל־חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב־חסד ונחם על־הרעה

[Jonah] “You are a God of grace and compassion, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty, and who relents from punishment.” (Jonah 4:2)

Third, the verbatim parallels from remote parts of Jonah in Joel include elements not shared with Exodus or any of the other biblical uses of the attribute formula. Note the verbal parallels in isolation:

מי־יודע ישוב ונחם האלהים ושב מחרון אפך ולא נאבד

[King of Nineveh] “**Who knows?** God **may turn and relent and turn from his wrath** so that we do not perish.” (Jonah 3:9)

כי ידעתי כי אתה אל־חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב־חסד ונחם על־הרעה

[Jonah] “For I know that you are a God of grace and compassion, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty, and who relents from punishment.” (4:2)

הוא ארך אפים ורב־חסד ונחם על־הרעה: מי תודע ישוב ונחם

[Joel] “He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty, and who relents from punishment.¹⁴ **Who knows?** He **may turn and relent.**” (Joel 2:13b–14a)

The catchword “know” provides the point at which Joel connects together an interpretive blend of the king’s question and the prophet’s complaint (see broken underlining above). Notice how the term “know” conjoins these ironic statements to give voice to Joel’s call for repentance (as above underlining signifies verbal parallels in Hebrew between Jonah and Joel, bold signifies verbal parallels in Hebrew between the king of Nineveh and Joel, and broken underlining signifies a catchword shared by all three).

Turn to Yahweh your God for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in covenantal loyalty, and who relents from punishment.¹⁴ **Who knows?** He **may turn and relent.** (Joel 2:14)