

Miguel A. de la Torre. *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007. 178 pages. \$20.

The Book of Jonah is one of the most well-known biblical stories not only for Christians but also for non-believers. In his book, *Liberating Jonah*, Miguel A. de la Torre, a Christian ethicist, reads this popular story in an unconventional way. He approaches the story from the liberationist perspective, standing in the shoes of people who are racially and socio-economically marginalized in American society and contends that “Jonah is the story of the marginalized called by God to bring the ‘good news’ of God’s grace to an oppressive empire” (x). Hence, the major issue in the book is racial and ethnic reconciliation between the powerful and the powerless in the United States. What, then, does reconciliation mean? How can the powerless participate in the work of reconciliation? Throughout the book, the author attempts to answer these theological and ethical questions and calls the American people to bring about reconciliation by forging solidarity with those who live in the margins of society.

This book comprises six chapters. The first chapter reads the entire Book of Jonah by means of historical and literal criticisms and informs that Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was the oppressive evil empire to Israel during the 8th century and that Jonah, who was an oppressed Jew under the evil power of Assyria, was a prophet, stubbornly rebellious against God’s commandment and unhappy about God’s mercy granted to his enemies. This interpretation functions as the biblical foundation for ethical discussions in the rest of the book. The second chapter identifies the United States with the evil empire of Assyria and the racially marginalized in American society with Jonah and his people. The author critically reviews American history focusing on its oppressive policies to Native Americans and other racially marginalized people in the United States and prophetically indicts its unjust economic, political, and military policies with regards to developing countries. The third chapter explores such significant theological terms as reconciliation, justice, and salvation and concludes that the subject of reconciliation is not the oppressors but the oppressed. The fourth chapter defines reconciliation as a process of establishing justice and peace by both humanizing the oppressors and healing the victims and provides some ethical guidelines for the process of reconciliation, involving the difficult but crucial issue of forgiveness at individual and communal levels. The fifth chapter examines possible obstacles to the process of reconciliation such as white privilege embedded deeply in social structures, the identity crisis of the marginalized in the dominant culture, the power structures existing within the marginalized communities, and superficial understandings about peace and hope. The author also acknowledges that storytelling is an effective tool to move reconciliation beyond abstract or theoretical discussions toward praxis. The final chapter presents five case studies as practical examples for discussing the issue of racial and ethnic reconciliation in the United States.

The ethical approach used in this book is insightful and the author’s practical suggestions on the praxis for reconciliation are constructive. This book gives a prophetic voice to the American people in general and provides ethical insights for those who care for social justice and reconciliation in particular. Moreover, it is useful in teaching not only Christian ethics but also pastoral theology and homiletics when dealing with the topic of reconciliation in many ways. This book also raises such discussion topics as: How can we define the marginalized when we are aware of the complex mixture of their status components such as race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.? Can reconciliation be achieved by the ethical behavior of humans only or is it

God's business and beyond human limitations? In fact, the story of Jonah portrays God as the initiator of and activist for reconciliation while humans are described as passive agents.

It is also important to recognize that the literary genre of Jonah as a narrative provides us with more than a simple comparison of ideas or some ethical lessons subject to historical and moral strictures.<sup>1</sup> When Jonah is read metaphorically as a fictive and parabolic story developed around a historical figure,<sup>2</sup> it has the capacity to project a new world by reshaping our reality. Along with historical and literal readings, which the author applies when interpreting Jonah in his book, the metaphorical process of reading will help us understand the story of Jonah in a theologically and hermeneutically balanced way.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the comparison of Nineveh to the United States and Jonah to the marginalized in American society; the title of Chapter 5 "Pitfalls Jonah Should Avoid" exemplifies the moral lessons from the text.

<sup>2</sup> See James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).