

Reflection

Hilda Katz (1909-1997) was a Jewish American artist and poet from Brooklyn, New York. She was known for creating linocut prints and expressionist paintings. Many European Jews fleeing the Holocaust of World War II ended up in her neighborhood. Her art often reflected their collective experience.

This linocut depicts Jonah the moment he was swallowed by the whale. He is topsy-turvy swimming at the back end of the whale while a flood of seawater rushes into the giant mouth at the front end. The powerful energy of the whale swallowing helpless Jonah is the central theme of this painting.

In the natural world, victor and victim are defined by one simple act; the victor eats and the victim is eaten. Jonah's chief complaint to Yahweh was, "If you show mercy to the warlord Assyrians, they will eventually turn around and devour helpless Israel." That is indeed what happened. Though one city in the empire, Nineveh, repented, the empire still destroyed Israel and took her people into captivity. That pattern of the powerful swallowing the helpless has been repeated countless times since then. Assyria, though not helpless, was later swallowed by the Babylonians, who were swallowed by the Persians, who were swallowed the Greeks.

So where is God in all of this? For Hilda Katz and people of faith, the answer is not always so simple. Maybe God is like the ocean, murky and mysterious. His currents of justice and grace ebb and flow in patterns too complex for us to understand. On the other hand, Jesus identified with Jonah in the belly of the fish and he promises to stand with us, in this life and in the next, whenever we are swallowed by a force greater than us.



Jonah and The Whale By Hilda Katz 1950