



Quaker Universalist Voice

Notes on Joana 1–4 Translation

by J.M. Spears

Special Words:

CARE (Joana 4:1- and 11) is used here to mean to have concern, to grieve, and to have pity. In Joana 4:11, CARE includes the concept of “to spare”. Sometimes, people use the word “compassion” to mean this kind of caring. Concern is related to the meanings of “merciful” and “gracious”.

DECIDING STONES (Joana 1:7) were specially marked stones used to make decisions, like drawing straws, tossing coins, or throwing dice. When the story of Joana was written, people believed that God (or the gods) controlled all events, including the way the deciding stones fell.

FAST (Joana 3:5) means to not eat any food for a period of time to help a person in their spiritual life. Fasting is done when a person feels strong emotion or grief. In the Bible, people fast when someone they love has died or is very ill. People fast when they are very sorry, when something terrible has happened, and during the times of special prayers.

GRACIOUS (Joana 4:2) is the way God acts in giving free and undeserved love. Gracious is related to the meanings of “care” and “merciful”.

HEBREW (Joana 1:9) is a word used to mean the people who were part of Israel, those people who worshiped Yahweh.

MERCIFUL (Joana 4:2) is a quality like motherly love. The root of the Hebrew word *raham* is “womb”. It is an inner feeling of love that is expressed outwardly by helping others. Merciful love is affection and caring similar to that of a mother for her child. See also the meaning of “gracious” and “care”.

SACK CLOTH (Joana 3:5, 6, and 8) was a dark piece of cloth made of goat’s or camel’s hair that was worn as a symbol of deep sadness. The same Hebrew word sometimes means “grain sack”.

TRUTH (Joana 1:1) meant reliable, constant, established, sure, steady, unchanging, and worthy of trust. God is a god of truth, one upon whom the people of God can rely. In the scripture, the opposite of truth is NOT falsehood, but fickleness, changing on a whim, or inconstant.

Context Notes:

Questions are raised about every Biblical translation. Old assumptions about the text of Joana and its meaning are challenged. Here are some questions about the story of Joana that are sure to be raised by this translation:

Is *Joana* a typographical or spelling error? No. *Joana* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word. It has been transliterated into German as *Jona* and into Latin as *Joanae*. *Joana* is pronounced the same as the earlier English spelling *Jonah*.

In English, another vowel is needed to make the “o” long. One common way to make a vowel long is with another silent vowel. In the spelling of *Joana*, the middle “a” make the “o” long. *Jonah*, with the same “ah” ending as the female imaged *Sarah* is only one way of the several ways to transliterate the Hebrew word and one that uses odd and older spelling conventions. For children, *Joana* is a more familiar use of English spelling than *Jonah*.

The Hebrew word *Joana* is, grammatically, a feminine word meaning “dove”, a traditional symbol for Israel (See Psalm 74:1 and Hosea 11:11). However, as discussed, grammatical gender does not justify sexual imagery.

Spelling the name of the story character as *Joana* is a way to help all children to see themselves in the story of *Joana*. This spelling of *Joana* is to help children see that *Joana* is a story about all people, male, as traditionally the name *Jonah* implies, and female, which for some people, this more modern spelling may imply.

The struggles of *Joanna* are the human struggles common to us all. We all struggle, trying to be free from the call of God and from concern for our neighbors. We all want God to act as we choose, not as God chooses. By accurately translating the story of *Joana*, the story can be understood by children as our common human struggle. The transliteration, *Joana*, reflects this inclusiveness and uses modern English spelling conventions.

Where’s the psalm?

Most scholars agree that the portion of the book of *Joana* as it appears was written sometime during the late fifth or early fourth century B.C E. (Before the common Era, which started at Jesus’s birth). They also agree that the psalm of thanksgiving used as a prayer in *Joana* 2:2-9 was inserted at least a century later into this previously written *Joana* story.

The psalm is not needed to complete or benefit the *Joana* story or its theological message. The inserted psalm is a distraction from the story of *Joana* for all readers, and most certainly for children. The psalm stands separately on its own.

Joana is a story about a compassionate God loving and caring for our perceived enemy, in spite of our human feelings of dislike, fear, and revulsion for our enemy. It is also a story about the human condition of wanting to care only about ourselves in isolation from those we do not like, trust, or know. To be heard, particularly by children this story should be presented without the inserted psalm.

Is *Joana* a parable or allegory? Is it irony or satire?

Yes. Various commentaries have suggested all of these labels. Today, *Joana* is seen as a teaching story, as a parable.

However, some aspects of *Joana* can be seen as allegory. The experiences of *Joana* can be read to represent the mission and failure of the Hebrews. Throughout history, those people who have seen themselves as the chosen people of God have had the tendency to apply their revelation of God's love only to themselves. *Joanna's* sulking can be read as the uncompromising hatred the Hebrews had for gentiles. The author was portraying the Hebrews as hoping for the apocalyptic judgment of God to fall upon their enemies and as being unwilling to recognize the purpose of God to save the whole world, not just themselves. The author of *Joana* shows that God's love is universal, including the children of perceived enemies and even their animals.

As we read *Joana*, we can see irony as the light sarcasm in which words have opposite meanings. This technique is used as satire to point out the folly of *Joana* in believing that God would act in accord with human desires and wishes.

As with all of the Bible, God is the main character of this story. However, it appears here that the author wants the reader to focus attention on the rebellious attitude of *Joana*. The author's concern for *Joana's* attitude is shown by contrasting God's attitude and *Joanna's* attitude in order to satirize *Joana's* attitude.

The author begins the story by saying that *Joana* is the child of *Amittai*, which means reliable truth and faithfulness. But, from the beginning, *Joana* proves to be faithless and unreliable.

God tells *Joana* to get up and go to Nineveh. *Joana* promptly gets up and hurries down in the direction opposite from Nineveh. Throughout the story, *Joana* does not go up as God commands, but goes down at every opportunity. Only under great duress does *Joana* go up, only after the fish vomits, "up-chucks", *Joana*!

Joana states belief in a God who creates and controls the sea. *Joana* tells the sailors, "I fear Yahweh, god of the sky, who made the sea and the dry land." Yet it is to the sea that *Joana* goes in an attempt to escape from God.

Everything about Nineveh is exaggerated. The size of Nineveh is exaggerated. The evil of Nineveh is exaggerated. The numbers of people and cattle are exaggerated. By using this form of satire, the author wants to show the overwhelming success that the reluctant Joana had when following God's command to "cry...whatever I tell you." This action resulted in the repentance of all of the inhabitants of Nineveh.

By using this satire and irony, the author wants the readers to understand that the people of Nineveh, who did not even worship Yahweh and who were the symbol of massive evil, had a better understanding of God's grace than did Joana, a symbol for the people of God. We read that in Nineveh, even the cattle fasted and wore sack cloth as a sign of repentance.

The author of *Joana* appears to emphasize the irony of a theology that makes no difference in the way a person acts or lives. The author puts liturgical clichés of a commonly accepted theology in the mouth of Joana. We read one example in Joana 1:9 mentioned above.

In Joana 4:2, we read another example of this kind of irony. Joana tells God, "You are a mighty God. You are gracious and merciful. You are slow to anger. You are abounding in loyalty. And you are one who turns away from sending terrible punishment." This statement was well known and was undoubtedly used by those in the author's audience. It appears in almost the same form in six other places in the Testament (Ex. 34:6, Ps. 86:15, Ps. 103:8, Ps. 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Neh. 9:17. See also Ps. 11:4, Ps. 112:4, Neh. 9:31, and Chron. 30:9). Joana speaks these words, but does not appear to want them to be true.

Joana believes in a God of justice. Joana can not conceive that a God of justice would show mercy to evil Nineveh. Joana seems to have not even considered the pending destruction of 120,000 innocent children.

Can children who hear this translation understand Joana?

Yes. Most children between the ages of 6 and 23 will already identify some people as their "enemies." These children do not want their God to show love to these "enemies," but to punish them. Children want to receive forgiveness, but, like Joana, often feel that severe punishment is appropriate for others who they perceive as doing great wrongs.

The concept of God's universal love, and God's right to judge and forgive without asking our opinion first, is a theology we all have difficulty accepting. Children can understand the concepts, but, like us, it will be a lifetime of struggle to live and act out that understanding.

Joana may have been written as a national foreign policy statement in order to counter a policy of exclusiveness, narrow nationalism, and religious intolerance. It requires a mature faith to understand the full message of Joana. It is not easy

to understand that, as individuals and as a people of God, we are called to spread the good news of God's love. Children will first see Joana as a story about personal relationships. Thinking about it both on a personal level and on a national level will come as the children mature. This translation will permit the children's growth in understanding.

Resources:

- *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962)
- E. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (1981)