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Exegesis Research Paper

I. Text/Passage: Book of Jonah 4:1-11

II. Observations:

A. Who is mentioned in this passage? Are they referred to by name, by relationship, or in some other way? Is there any description given for each one? If so, what words are used to describe them?

The LORD and Jonah are mentioned in this passage. The names of the Lord and Jonah are mentioned directly. The LORD is described as “you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4: 2c).” “Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry (Jonah 4:1)” at God’s forgiveness to the wicked Nineveh. He even pleads to die after God gave him a plant lesson to demonstrate His sovereignty and compassion to His creation.

B. What is happening in the passage?

This story is about God, who has mercy and compassion for all He has made (Gn. 22:18a).¹ The creator of the world holds and exercises all the rights and privileges in His creation. He intended to bless all nations on earth through His election of Israel.

Jonah was displeased by God’s compassion toward Nineveh but has forgotten one essential commandment, “love your neighbor.” Everything on earth was created by God, and He is looking for the turning of people’s hearts from sin. Jonah, on the other hand, is still trapped in

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book, A Guided Tour*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2002), 232.

the traditional Israelis' viewpoint that Israel is Yahweh's chosen people while Ninevites are Gentile, the wicked, and the enemy. Although Jonah said, "salvation comes from the LORD" (Jon. 2:9b), he believed salvation is only for the elected people, Israelites, not for the gentile, Ninevites. "The story is so critical of Jonah's hypocrisy, ending with a description of his almost childish stubbornness against the point that God makes via the plant's lesson."²

C. Is there any dialogue between the participants? Can one of the speakers be identified as the main speaker in the passage? If so, who is the main speaker?

There are two dialogues between Yahweh and Jonah. It appears that Jonah is the main speaker in these dialogues who initiative two complaints against God. In fact, God is the main speaker who reveals His compassion and love to Jonah. God uses the plant lesson to show His divine mercy, not only to the Jews but also to all He has created.

D. What is being discussed? Are there any commands, promises, warnings, words of encouragement, instructions, etc.? If so, what are they?

Jonah starts his first dialogue with a complaint prayer about the mercy of God on Nineveh. It was also the main reason he ran away from God when he was called to preach the Nineveh from the beginning. "Ironically, the prayer complaint is provoked by the same mercy that inspired Jonah's earlier praise."³ Then Yahweh responds to Jonah's complaint with an object lesson demonstrating His sovereignty and compassion to His creation. "God is a God of grace; of whom it is hopeless-indeed hypocritical-to expect a display of grace only to his own people. It was God's grace that Jonah resented so violently-except when he was the recipient."⁴ Obviously, Jonah does not understand God's mercy; therefore, he dismally requests death in his second dialogue "it would be better for me to

² Douglas Stuart, "Jonah, Book Of," ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon J. McConville, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 462.

³ Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Daniel I. Block (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 154.

⁴ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 454.

die than to live (Jonah 4:8b).” Yahweh responds to Jonah’s death request by revealing that He not only loves the chosen people, Israel but also loves all forms of lives that He created, including the wicked Ninevites and even animals.

“Jonah reminds its audience that God is willing to adjust His plans for a nation according to that nation’s attitudes and actions before Him, a concept expressed propositionally in Jeremiah 18:7-8.”⁵ The mercy of God contrasts with Jonah’s indifference to the lives of Nineveh. From Genesis to modern times, God’s redemption plan has not been changed by anyone or anything, even though Jonah does not want to participate in it.

- E. Were you able to tell when and where the events and/or discussions in this passage occurred? If so, when and where did these things occur? What places, if any, are mentioned in the passage?

One of the dialogues is inside Nineveh after God relented his judgment to Nineveh. The other dialogue is outside and east of Nineveh after Jonah was given an object lesson of divine mercy by God.

- F. Is there anything else that was unfamiliar to you or that you needed to look up, such as a particular name, the definition of one of the words used, etc.?

Jonah 4:4b (NIV) “Have you any right to be angry?” Why did the NIV translate the word as “right”? According to Strong’s Concordance, the word right/yatab צַדִּיק means to be good, well, glad, or pleasing. The word instantly reminds me of Cain’s story. In Genesis 4:7, the LORD told the angry Cain after his offering does not favor by the LORD, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” Likewise, sin will be crouching Jonah if he still insists on his self-righteousness. Hopefully, Jonah and readers can abandon his/their prejudice(s) and understand God’s compassion and redemption plan.

⁵ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 457.

G. Is there anything that is repeated, that is emphasized, or that stood out to you as being unusual?

Three repeated phrases and words are important here:

1. God provided: God is the creator of the universe; therefore, he has the sovereignty to save, provide, or destroy.
2. Jonah's anger: "Is it right for you to be angry?" God use objection lesson to demonstrate His sovereignty and compassion to His creation. **However**, Jonah's preoccupation with Israel as God's chosen people blind him to see the full picture of God's universal salvation plan, even the wicked Nineveh. Therefore, Jonah's self-righteousness caused him to be angry at God's forgiveness and compassion to the Nineveh.
3. Jonah's request for death: Ironically, Jonah wishes to die than to live, while people in Nineveh wanted to live than to die. Yahweh is a God with compassion and justice who forgave Jonah, a defiant prophet, and the Ninevites, wicked people.

III. Interpretation:

- A. Social Context: (What is the social context of the people in the passage? What did they believe about God, themselves, and each other? How did they interact with each of these mentioned? What did they think about and how did they interact with their families, villages/cities, neighbors, etc.?)

The identity of the recipients is not explicitly stated in the text.

However, firstly, the book shares some preunderstandings, such as Jonah is a prophet, the sailors at Joppa are Gentiles⁶, and Jonah's rival attitude against

⁶ Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds., *NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 1515. Most sea trade at this time was carried out by the Phoenicians and Egyptians, lead us to infer that the sailors on the ship would not have been Israelites.

the Nineveh. In Jonah 1:9, Jonah claimed himself a Hebrew and worshiped the LORD. The LORD in the Old Testament refers to Yahweh, the God of Israel (2 Kings 14:25). Secondly, the descriptive action “went down to” Joppa, which was one of the vital sea trade posts close to Israel’s Southern tip.⁷ Therefore, the Book of Jonah was most likely written to Jewish people who lived in Israel.

The Israelites consider themselves the elected people of God, while the Assyrian empire was a threat to their country. “In the Bible, Nineveh was regarded as the seat of the greatest enemy of the kingdom of Israel and Judah, and most biblical references are to its fall.”⁸ Jonah was identified as a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25 in the reign of Jeroboam II (795-753 BCE).⁹ Like many Israelites in his day, Jonah is an ardent nationalist, pro-Israel, anti-foreign, and particularly anti-Assyrian.¹⁰

- B. Literary Context: (Where does this passage occur in the book? The beginning, middle, the end? What has come before it? What comes after it? You can insert an outline of the book, and/or a brief summary of what is mentioned before this passage and what is mentioned after it. Also, how does what we find in this passage relate to what has come before and what comes after?)

This passage is the final chapter of the Book; it is also the climax of the Book. From the beginning of the book, Yahweh instructed Jonah to preach in Nineveh. He disobeyed Yahweh’s instructions and tried to run away from God. In the two pre-peak episodes (1:4a-17b and 3:3c-10), Jonah interacts with the sailors and the Ninevites. He witnesses God’s mercy and

⁷ Harry Thomas Frank, ed., *Atlas of the Bible Lands*, Revised ed. (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond Incorporation, 1997), 15.

⁸ A. Kirk Grayson, *The Book of Jonah*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., eds., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1118.

⁹ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 456.

¹⁰ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 456.

deliverance toward himself and the Ninevites. In this passage, Jonah interacts with God, who revealed His divine mercy and invited Jonah to embrace His mercy rather than resist.¹¹

Outline of the book:

- 1:1-2 Yahweh called Jonah to preach to Nineveh, east of Israel.
- 1:3 Jonah tried to run away from Yahweh to prevent God to relent his judgment on Ninevites.
- 1: 4 Yahweh sent a storm when Jonah disobeyed.
- 1:4-16 Yahweh intensified the storm so that even the sailors had to pray for their own life.
- 1: 17 Yahweh provided a big fish to rescue Jonah from drowning.
- 2:1-10 Jonah prayed inside the big fish with a thanksgiving psalm to Yahweh for his deliverance.
- 3:1-2 Yahweh sent Jonah a second time.
- 3: 3-8 Jonah went and preached Yahweh's message. Ninevites and their animals show signs of repentant immediately.
- 3: 9-10 Yahweh withholds his judgment.
- 4: 1-3 Jonah's complaints against Yahweh's relented of Nineveh's destruction.
- 4: 4 Yahweh asked Jonah the question, "Have you any right to be angry?"

¹¹ Youngblood, *Jonah: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, 154.

4: 5-8 Yahweh then provides a plant, a worm, and the scorching east wind to teach Jonah a lesson about caring for others, even his enemies.

4: 9-11 Yahweh asked Jonah the final question. The story teaches us Yahweh is full of compassion for all he has made and looks for people's repentance. He is the creator of this universe; therefore, He has the absolute rights and power to forgive Jonah and even their hated Ninevites.

C. Genre: (What type of literature is this, such as a psalm, a proverb, a law text, a narrative, etc.? Does it contain other forms of literature, such as a narrative, a dialogue, a prayer, poetry, a parable, etc.?)

First, the book of Jonah is a narrative. Its author shows his or her narrativity by assuming, affirming and subverting Jonah's story.¹² Secondly, Jonah is a didactic narrative "All biblical narratives are didactic to one degree or another."¹³ Thirdly, it is one of the books of the Minor Prophets, and the passage has dialogues between Yahweh and Jonah. Finally, Jonah is sensational literature: The plant story intends to stimulate the audience's imagination and emotion¹⁴. Therefore, based on the above, my passage's literary form is considered a didactic, prophetic, and sensational narrative.

D. Language: (Is there a special meaning to the original Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic? Compare various translations at this point. Is there a particular word which may have a special meaning?)

¹² Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 164.

¹³ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 458.

¹⁴ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 458.

Douglas is correct that “the word(s) you choose for a given spot in the passage need(s) to fit the overall context well.”¹⁵ Therefore, I searched the NAS Exhaustive Concordance and found out that the word **ra'a': afflict**, אַצַּח has a wide range of meanings. The best-fit meaning for the word **ra'a': afflict**, אַצַּח in Jonah 4:1 is NIV’s translation: “wrong” (see different translations below). The very reason for Jonah’s displeasing with God is his presupposition of God’s grace and compassion should only apply to the Israelites, His chosen people. It seems very wrong for God to show mercy to Nineveh’s wicked people.

Jonah 4:1

But it **displeased** Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. (Jon. 4:1 KJV)

But it greatly **displeased** Jonah and he became angry. (Jon. 4:1 NASB1995)

But this was very **displeasing** to Jonah, and he became angry. (Jon. 4:1 NRSV)

But to Jonah this seemed very **wrong**, and he became angry. (Jon. 4:1 NIV)

This **displeased** Jonah terribly and he became very angry. (Jon. 4:1 NET)

- E. Text Criticism: (Is there a debate in the manuscript tradition about this passage? Footnotes in study Bibles and most academic commentaries will pick this up. Does the text variant alter the meaning or interpretation of the passage? If so, how?)

N/A

- F. History of Redemption: (How does this passage relate to the rest of the Bible? Is it part of the story of Israel prior to the coming of Christ? Does it occur during Christ’s time in the world between his birth and death? Does it occur after the resurrection of Christ and giving of the Holy Spirit? Is it a result of the fall, or part of the fulfillment of the Christ-event?)

¹⁵ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 8.

“All of Scripture together points to a coherent picture of God’s redemptive work in creation and humanity.”¹⁶ After the fall of man, God reveals His plan of redemption to His people progressively. First, God called Abraham out of Ur and made promises to him and his descendants. Secondly, God called Moses to save Israelites from slavery, which foretells the coming of Jesus to save us from the slavery of sin. Due to the limited information nature of progressive revelation, Israelites in the Old Testament did not comprehend God’s saving plan, including all humankind. They compartmentalized the belief that only Israelites are God’s chosen people while all gentiles are not favored by God. Fortunately, God does not stop here; He sent His Son Jesus Christ to fulfill His saving plan in the New Testament. Through the prophets’ teaching and the preaching of the gospel of Jesus, we come to know God’s redemption plan better and better: The gospel is God sacrificed His Son for our sin! God’s love and grace towards humanity are loud and clear.

G. Commentaries: (What are some of the main issues discussed by the commentators concerning this passage? What verse or verses, if any, do they seem to focus on more than others? How do they see what is said here impacting what happens elsewhere in the Old Testament and/or the New Testament?)

The passage mainly explores the relationship between the two aspects of God’s character, kindness and sternness.¹⁷ Jonah 4:2c specifically lists the five attributes of God: “You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” These five attributes of God are well-versed throughout the Old Testament (Ex. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; Joel 2:13). In response to God’s compassion, “Believers are motivated to show mercy, both by the memory of mercy already received and by the anticipation of the fullness of God’s mercy in the future.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 229.

¹⁷ Youngblood, *Jonah: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, 182.

¹⁸ Youngblood, *Jonah: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, 183.

On the other hand, believers, such as Job and David, who have suffered for an extended period, will question God's justice as the Psalter did: "How long O, Lord? Will you forget me forever? (Psalm 13)." Peter addressed God's justice question by encouraging us: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief (2 Peter 3:9-10a)." God withheld the judgment for the repentance of the Ninevites. However, "God will not bear with sin and judgment indefinitely."¹⁹ No one should oppose God's compassion for the sinners, but God's judgment will come one day.

IV. Application(s):

- A. Summary: (Summarize in one concise statement or sentence what the passage is teaching. What is the main point of this passage? What is the main message to the original audience in their context?)

Jonah's preoccupation with Israel as God's chosen people blind him to see the full picture of God's universal salvation plan, even for the wicked Nineveh.

"The book of Jonah served as a bulwark against the narrow particularism that allowed Jews to believe that they alone were worthy of God's blessing."²⁰ Likewise, Christians in affluence areas prefer to stay cuddly inside their church only. The prosperity gospel even promotes that if I experience all of the blessings (including financial and physical well-being) that God has for me, then I have no needs whatsoever; all are taken care of. They don't care or

¹⁹ Youngblood, *Jonah: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, 183.

²⁰ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 463.

want to spread God's love and gospel to others, especially to those marginal men and forgotten people.

B. Impact on/Importance to Believers, Unbelievers, and Me: (What is the importance/significance of these events to people today? What applications might we make to our own lives, such as what we believe, how we treat others, what we do, etc.? In other words, how should knowing what is in this passage then change us now?)

1. Believers: (What does this passage teach a new Christian, a mature believer, etc. about who God is, what He has done, what He is going to do, etc.? Is there a promise to be relied upon, a truth to be known and trusted, a command to be obeyed, etc.?)

Believers should have mercy to sinners as God does. Jesus taught us about forgiveness: it is the sinner, not the righteous, who may also recognize their need for forgiveness and do something about it (John 3:5-10; Mark 12:41; cf. Luke 15:10). Even the sinners may have mercy on others; as Christ's followers, we should have mercy on others, especially those marginal men and forgotten people (prisoners, beggars, the poor, LGBTQ, etc.)

2. Unbelievers: (What does this passage teach someone who has not yet trusted Christ?)

The passage teaches the unbelievers that God's mercy, grace, compassion, and patience are not only applying to the believers but also the unbelievers. "Should I not be concerned about that great city? (Jonah 4: 11b)." God is patiently waiting for the unbelievers to repent and welcome them to join His Kingdom. "For God so love the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)". It is time to repent like what the Ninevites did.

3. Me: (What does this passage teach me about God, His ways, and His actions in the past, present, and future? How does this instruct and/or challenge me?)

“The person who resents the mercy of God to his or her enemies shows enmity to God’s purposes and discontinuity with God’s thinking”²¹ It is not easy for me to forgive someone who has hurt, annoyed, or rebelled me. When Jesus suffered on the cross, He said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34a).” I should act like Jesus forgiving my enemies and not act like Jonah resisting God’s mercy in receiving sinners to His Kingdom.

C. Preaching/Teaching:

1. What essential elements would you want to include when preaching/teaching this text in your faith community/ministry context?

“The book of Jonah served as a bulwark against the narrow particularism that allowed Jews to that they alone were worthy of God’s blessing.”²² Jonah gladly receives his deliverance and blessing. But he refuses to see the Ninevites receives the deliverance. From Genesis to modern times, God’s redemption plan has not been changed by anyone or anything, even though Jonah does not want to participate in it.

2. Are there be any parts of it that might require special explanation to help your ideal/target audience understand?

“Jonah reminds its audience that God is willing to adjust His plans for a nation according to that nation’s attitudes and actions before Him, a concept expressed propositionally in Jeremiah 18:7-8.”²³ God has mercy, but He also is a God of justice. Remember, “The city that God spare in the book of Jonah, he destroyed in the book of Nahum.”²⁴ Before the final judgment, believers should be diligently working on the repentance of the lost, loving our enemies, and praying for our oppressors. The Scripture warns us, “Judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (James 2:13)

²¹ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 464.

²² Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 463.

²³ Stuart, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, 457.

²⁴ Youngblood, *Jonah: A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*, 183.

3. Are there any parts of it that might be especially challenging or disturbing to some in your ideal/target audience?

My church is located in a middle-class suburban county. Our members love our church but not keen on any outreach program for non-believers or short-term missions. We only financially support overseas missionaries (only one percent of the church's annual contribution). We love to stay cuddly inside our church and our beloved fellowships. We don't care or want to spread God's compassion and gospel to others. So it is a challenge to my audience that they have to spread the gospel to their neighbor, the marginal men, and forgotten people.

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