

Prof. Julianne Cox

Jonah 4:1-11

NT615: Biblical Exegesis: OA

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Spring 2023

***Main Idea:***

My pericope for this assignment is Jonah 4:1-11. We will look at its historical meaning, the connection to the Bible, the theology, and its application past and present. Our focus will be on the purpose of this passage. What was and is God trying to teach us?

***History:***

The main characters in my pericope are God, Jonah, and the city of Nineveh. After the adventure that brought Jonah to the Ninevites, to warn them of God's impending judgment, Jonah retreated to a secluded spot to watch and see if the Lord destroys the city. Here God interacts with him to show Jonah His purpose for all people and how Jonah should respond. Through dialogue, the author shows Jonah's despair and God's compassion for His creation.

The book of Jonah is a narrative. It was either written by Jonah himself, or someone close to him. Jonah is an Israelite. He is a prophet from Israel during the time of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C). (Chad Brand, Eric Alan Mitchell, Steve Bond, Ray Clendenen, Trent Butler 2015, 921)

Jonah, much like many of the biblical patriarchs, has major flaws and is no hero. (Allen 1976, 175) He is a stubborn and rebellious man who refuses to obey God, trying to run away instead of delivering God's message. Yet he is completely at ease with God, sleeping during the storm, knowing that he is the cause of the storm but not afraid enough to come clean right away. He had disdain for the Ninevites. Jonah would rather flee rather than continue as God's prophet to Nineveh. (Chad Brand, Eric Alan Mitchell, Steve Bond, Ray Clendenen, Trent Butler 2015, 921)

The Ninevites were Assyrian. They were powerful in the Middle East during the time before Jonah. Nineveh was a major Assyrian city. They worshipped Ashur and several other gods and goddesses. The Assyrians were vicious, brutal, and cruel to those they conquered. They were in a weakened state when Jonah was commanded to go and preach repentance to them. (Chad Brand, Eric Alan Mitchell, Steve Bond, Ray Clendenen, Trent Butler 2015, 921)

Bolin paints a picture of Nineveh being “wealthy” and “powerful” a “great city of long ago, full of gross excess and exotic opulence.” (Bolin 1995, 109,115)

***What did the text mean to the biblical audience?*** (Grasp the text in their town.)

The author had a purpose for this part of the narrative. This pericope summarizes the whole book of Jonah. The audience, the Hebrews of that time, would understand the history of how God has destroyed cities and peoples before because of how great their sin was.

The Ninevites are Assyrians and brutal enemies of the Israelites. Jonah as an Israelite prophet was to show God’s great compassion for His creation by preaching to the Ninevites. There is a lot at stake if Jonah disobeyed. The destruction of that city. Whether for or against the city’s destruction, this would help the listeners in understanding the importance of Jonah’s calling.

The biblical audience would understand why Jonah wanted to see the Ninevites destroyed based on the near history of how ruthless the Assyrians were to the Hebrews. Any Jewish listener would have an expectancy of justice and destruction from God (Chad Brand, Eric Alan Mitchell, Steve Bond, Ray Clendenen, Trent Butler 2015, 922)

The original biblical audience would have sided with Jonah's anger, having had knowledge of and lived through the cruelty of the Assyrian empire, they would have rather seen God destroy the city of Nineveh. Habib would add that because they were foreigners, it would add to Jonah's view that they did not deserve God's mercy. (Habib 2014, 72) The Israelites who heard this message would have had a hard time with God's great compassion for such ruthless, sinful foreign people and instead would want to see justice just as Jonah did while sitting in a distance watching and waiting for God to act.

Ryu echoes what the biblical audience of that time may have felt. He would have us believe the anger and silence of Jonah were justified when considering the history of Nineveh and the Jews. He argues that based on power, the weak Jews versus strong oppressive Nineveh, should God not have shown justice instead of grace? (Ryu 2009, 195) Considering the past of the Jewish nation, the listeners would not be wrong in expecting God to destroy the foreign nation.

Guillaume would probably agree. He suggests that since God destroys Nineveh later in history that there is more to the book of Jonah than God's grace. (Guillaume 2006, 246)

There is some truth to these arguments. God did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for similar reasons. I would argue that justice is not God's message in this story and the difference is found not only in God's compassion for the Ninevites but also in His treatment of Jonah. We see God's grace when the Ninevites repented, but we also see it in His dealing with a stubborn-hearted Jonah who also received grace after repentance.

The audience would also relate to why the Ninevites would want to repent. God was going to destroy the whole city. We can see this connection in the historical and cultural backgrounds that they would be familiar with, found in scripture. We see this several times when God destroyed many; the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Egyptians, and the Hebrews that

disobeyed God on many different occasions after leaving Egypt. Here we find God's impending punishment, once again of violence and moral failure. (Allen 1976, 223) The biblical audience would be familiar with the fear of God's hand against them because of sin.

Allen is correct that for the listener, "The author is less concerned with a bare recital of historical facts than with his Jewish audience and their reception of an important truth, which would revolutionize both their understanding of the nature of God and their attitude toward pagans." (Allen 1976, 177) The message was one of compassion for all of God's people. Bolin writes, "Even these cruel Assyrians were objects of Yahweh's care" (Bolin 1995, 115) The message did not end there, the Israelites were to be of like attitude toward others as well.

The mention of plants and animals in the last chapter plays a role in what God wants for the listener who would identify with Jonah. Tzvi touches on this when he questions the relationship between plants and the Ninevites and why the animals are mentioned in the last verse. He explains the focus of this passage is not an explanation of God's actions but "is part of a dialogue and is the climax of an attempt to educate or transform the main character in the narrative, Jonah." (Abusch 2013, 148) To the listener, this was a message of not only God's compassion, and grace in the face of repentance but also one of how the Israelites should respond with the same grace and even rejoice at the repentance of their enemies.

***What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?*** (Measure the width of the river to cross)

The Israelites of that time were oppressed by the Assyrians. There was a history of violence and national hate that we do not share but can probably understand considering today's events. We also have the historical knowledge that Nineveh was eventually destroyed anyway.

(Bolin 1995) So, we may not have the same question of justice concerning Nineveh, they were destroyed eventually anyway.

As Christians, we may not look to God for justice by destruction, against wicked nations, as they did. On this side of Christ, we are called to love our enemies. So, we may be less concerned about Nineveh and more critical of Jonah's attitude as a prophet of God. We have a greater understanding of God's grace and compassion, in light of repentance and view Jonah's attitude as ungodly.

***What is the theological principle in this text?*** (Cross the principal bridge.)

The theological principle is found in the question at the end of Jonah, "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left\_ and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11 NIV) It is a restatement of Jonah 4:2 "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." (NIV)

Part of the main message of this pericope is that of God's great love for His creation and His willingness to go to great lengths to bring them back to Him. As well as His great grace to forgive when they repent.

The other part of the message is for the listener to view everyone the way God does. God is also calling His children to be likewise in their love for others. Allen writes, "The postexilic Jews are challenged to rise above their antipathy and see the world through the eyes of their Creator God." And "God's primary providential concern is to preserve life, human and animal, not to destroy." (Allen 1976, 191) We can parallel this to the main message that we hear in The

Parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37, and the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27, NIV)

Habib writes, “Jonah seems to invite the reader or listener to conversion, a conversion that sees God as a God who is merciful toward everyone.” (Habib 2014, 74)

***How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?*** (Consult the biblical map.)

The theological importance of my passage is what we find in Psalm 86:5 “For you, Lord, are kind and ready to forgive, rich in faithful love to all who call on you.” HCSB God desires for His children to call upon Him for forgiveness and gives it abundantly to those who repent.

We also so find similar themes in:

- In Luke 15, the story of the prodigal son, we see how the oldest son like Jonah, is mad that the loving father much like God, showed grace to a sinful child just like the Ninevites.
- Matthew 20:15 shows us the main point of this chapter, that God does what He wants with those who belong to Him because of His grace.
- Isa 1:18 shows us how God covers the sins of those who repent.
- In 1 Kings 19:4 we can compare how both Jonah and Elijah both went on a journey dejected because of their desire for justice in opposition to God’s grace.
- Many more verses show God's abundant grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness when dealing with His repentant children. Ex 34:6, Nu 14:18, Ps 86:5

We can also see God’s just desire to collectively destroy a sinful city.

- Sodom and Gomorrah Gen. 19:25, 29
- The flood Gen 6:11, 13

Based on Jer. 18:7, 8, 11, “and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” (Jer. 18:8, NIV) Leslie writes that “the author strikingly reapplies the accepted passage to a non-Israelite setting and extends God’s characteristic love for Israel to cover pagans.” (Allen 1976, 177)

Jonah himself is an example of God’s grace as we see Jonah disobeying God and fleeing. God shows His great power and grace by sending Jonah a warning with a storm and then rescuing him with a fish. Jonah repents and God saves him from sure death and deposits him on land. Jonah 1-2. After all of that, how is it that Jonah is complaining when God has shown him mercy? We can connect this theme to (Matt. 18:23-35), where a man who had received forgiveness of a great debt, sought justice against someone who owed him a great debt. “Ought you not have shown mercy to your fellow servant as I showed mercy to you?” (Allen 1976, 227)

***How should individual Christians live out this modified theological principle?*** (Grasp the text in our town.).

For us, it shows how we as Gentiles are included in God's great love. He also shows us that God's love doesn't begin and end with the Jews. That God planned to save all nations. “I would argue that the book of Jonah seems to invite the reader or listener to conversion, a conversion that sees God as a God who is merciful toward everyone.” (Habib 2014, 74)

“The Message of the book is that whether God’s people like it or not, God desires all nations to worship Him. God has shown mercy to His people, who did not deserve it; they should desire that mercy be extended to all who repent, and they should rejoice when God shows His grace.” (Chad Brand, Eric Alan Mitchell, Steve Bond, Ray Clendenen, Trent Butler 2015, 922)

I believe this book also points to the need for a better prophet, that will later come in Christ, who will show the world God's love for His creation regardless of nationality.

It is also a blueprint for not rejecting people from hearing the message of repentance based on country, culture, race, economic status, sexual preference, sin committed, etc., etc., etc. People, we may believe, are beyond God's grace. We are to have compassion for all of God's people. We need to be good Samaritans.

Finally, there may be an implied message of God's sense of humor. In all the ways God could have saved Jonah, why have him swallowed by a fish and then spit out right where God wanted him to go? Why did the animals have to fast and wear sackcloth? Allen writes that it was a custom to show how serious they were in repentance. (Allen 1976, 224)

I also find the plant part humorous. For God to use something so simple as a plant to bring Jonah relief, then destroy it shortly after to prove a point to a stubborn man, is hilarious.

***Unanswered questions:***

Why did Jonah end with “and also many animals” (Jonah 4:11). Is this why God uses a fish as His instrument in Jonah? To show that God cares for His animals as well. Is His relationship with animals why a fish was used to possibly punish Jonah if he didn't repent (he would have remained fish food), but ultimately spit Jonah out for his salvation?

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