Old Testament Exegetical Commentary: Jonah

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Old Testament Orientation 11

by

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# *Introduction to the historical settings*

Historical records related to Jonah’s life reveals that it took place in the times of Jeroboam II, who ruled from 793 to 753 B.C. He served as the King of Northern Kingdom for the longest tenure. Just before taking control of throne, there was tension which existed between Syria and Israel. At this time Syria’s power was expanding throughout the Middle East, but God used Jeroboam II to cripple their military campaign in Israel and restore their conquered territory. First, God used him to reinstate “the boundary of Israel with Lebo-hamath till the Sea of the Arabah[[1]](#footnote-1)”. At second, God used him to reestablish the boundaries of “Damascus and Hamath to Judah in Israel”. Now, what is noteworthy about these two facts is that Jeroboam II did not set about the task of restoring the borders of Israel as an act of his own wish. Rather, God prompted him to do so. One more circumstance that should be distinguished when considering the timeline of Jonah’s prophetic ministry to Nineveh, is that, Assyria did not dominate the Middle East until Tiglath-pileser III, who reigned between 744 and 727 B.C.). He seized control of the throne from Ashur-nirari V. Therefore, it is highly possible that Jonah’s missionary journey to Nineveh took place somewhere between the Jeroboam II’s reign and the inauguration of Tiglath-pileser III as the king of Assyria. So, this put Jonah’s prophetic ministry to Nineveh somewhere between 793 and 745 B.C., thus, making him contemporaries with Micah, Isaiah, Amos and Hosea.

# *Outline of the book*

1. Jonah discards the demand of God to be a missionary (1:1-17)[[2]](#footnote-2)
   1. Jonah receives a call from God to address the people about repentance to Ninevites, but Jonnah escapes from Commissioner and leaves his divine mission (1:1-3)
   2. The Lord exhibit His dominion over creation: The perfect storm for a reluctant prophet and his shipmates (1:4-17)
2. The Lord gets the attention of the sailors (1:4-5)[[3]](#footnote-3)
3. The sailors interrogate Jonah (1:6-8)
4. Jonah confesses the truth (1:9-10)
5. Jonah provides a solution to the sailor’s problem (1:11-13)
6. The sailors offer a sacrifice to the Lord (1:14-16)
   1. Jonah becomes acquainted with a great fish from the Lord (1:17)
7. Jonah screams to Lord in prayer and repentance (2:1-10)[[4]](#footnote-4)
   1. Jonah rehearses his woe (2:1-6)
   2. Jonah praises the Lord as the Savior (2:7-9)
   3. The giant fish releases Jonah at the Lord’s command (2:10)
8. Jonah excepts God’s call to be a missionary (3:1-10)[[5]](#footnote-5)
   1. Jonah reaches to Nineveh and conveys the Lord’s message (3:1-5)
   2. The Ninevites apologized and bowed to the God from Jonah’s message (3:6-9)
   3. The Lord has compassion on the Ninevites (3:10)
9. Jonah is displeased with God, but the Lord overcomes his anger with sympathy (4:1-11)
   1. Jonah responds to the Lord’s compassion toward the Ninevites with contempt (4:1­-4)
   2. God demonstrates Jonah a valued message (4:5-11)

# *Interpretive Commentary*

## **Chapter 1. Jonah discards the demand of God to be a missionary (1:1-17)[[6]](#footnote-6)**

The main focus of chapter one centers on calling, disobedience, and knowing about the Lord – Yahweh calls Jonah, Jonah disobeys the Lord, but the sailors come to know the Lord through Jonah’s disobedience (1:2-3, 16). The main character in chapter one is Yahweh, not Jonah, nor the sailors. Jonah and the sailors are simply responding to God as the protagonist. God calls Jonah. Jonah tries to flee from God. God sovereignly obstructs Jonah’s plan and sailors come to know the Lord in the process.

***Jonah receives a call from God to address the people about repentance to Ninevites, but Jonnah escapes from Commissioner and leaves his divine mission (1:1-3)[[7]](#footnote-7)***

The first verse begins with a normal [prophetic style, “The word of the Lord came to…” (v. 1). This fact should not be quickly overlooked, because it testifies to the prophet’s call and authenticates him as an agent of God. These words typically introduce the divine communication of Yahweh to his prosecuting attorney. What usually follows next, is the message which the prophet is to preach.

***The Lord exhibit His dominion over creation: The perfect storm for a reluctant prophet and his shipmates (1:4-17)***

In the next thirteen verses, God displays a series of miracles as he beautifully expresses his sovereignty over creation. First, God suddenly hurls a strong wind over the sea resulting in an unexpected storm of great force to appear out of nowhere (v. 4). Second, God miraculously causes the sailor’s lot to fall on Jonah (v. 7). Third, God miraculously comforted the sea from raging when Jonah was terrified over board (v. 15). And lastly, God sovereignly appointed a large fish to swallow his wayward prophet (v. 17)

1. *The Lord gets the attention of the sailors (1:4-5)[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Just when Jonah thought he was free from his divinely appointed mission he went depressed into the stern of the boat and found himself fast restless (v. 5b). Unfortunately, the consequences of Jonah’s rebellion would have catastrophic repercussions. It would eventually affect not only Jonah, but all those around him[[9]](#footnote-9). In an effort to get Jonah’s attention God threw a great storm over the sea

1. *The sailors interrogate Jonah (1:6-8)*

By contrast, it appears that everyone on the ship was afraid for their lives except carefree Jonah. Therefore, the men over the boat came to Jonah, woke him up, and asked him a series of probing questions:

What do you mean, you sleeper? (v. 6)

What you do? (v. 8a)

And where are you coming from? (v. 8b)

Name your country? (v. 8c)

And from what people you belong to? (v. 8d)

How shall we treat you, so that the sea may become down for us? (v. 11).

1. *Jonah confesses the truth (1:9-10)*

In Jonah’s answer to sailor’s questions he finally shares his real identity with the sailors. He confessed, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land[[10]](#footnote-10)” (v. 9).

1. *Jonah provides a solution to the sailor’s problem (1:11-13)*

After finding out the root cause of their problem, the sailors quickly realized that this was only half of their problem. They still stood in need of a solution, because their dilemma grew worse and worse by the minute. Consequently, Jonah was the best candidate for the solution because his God commanded the sea (v. 9).

1. *The sailors offer a sacrifice to the Lord (1:14-16)*

In a final act of desperation, the sailors no longer turned to the prophet of God for a solution, but turned to the God of the prophet. They called the God of Jonnah and pleaded to him for mercy on them and their situation (v. 14).

***Jonah becomes acquainted with a great fish from the Lord (1:17)***

Even though Jonah willfully persisted in his defiance against God and his mission, God still was not done with him yet. If Jonah thought that his plan to flee from God’s mission on the sea was a failure, surely, he thought he would be able to find rest from God’s mission in death. But God’s plans are not Jonah’s plans and God’s thoughts are infinitely higher than Jonah’s thoughts[[11]](#footnote-11) (see Isa. 55:8-9).

## **Chapter 2. Jonah screams to Lord in prayer and repentance (2:1-10)**

The primary focus of chapter two is on the prayer which Jonah offered toward God. Ironically, when sailors ask Jonah to call out to his God he refuses. But now after reaching the brink of death in the height of his calamity Jonah is ready to seek his God in repentance and prayer. An obstinately rebellious Jonah now finds himself bobbing in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea. Surely the wayward prophet must have thought that his life was about to come to an end. However, he would soon find out that God had a different plan. God already had a plan in place by which he would miraculously and unexpectedly save Jonah from sinking. God sovereignly chose a great fish for preserving Jonah so he might dispatch him once again to carry out his divine mission (3:1-2)[[12]](#footnote-12). This is the context in which Jonah reaches an all-time low in his folly and seek the Lord in prayer and repentance (vv. 2-9). What becomes crystal clear in this chapter, is that, in the background of Jonah’s darkest hour light of God’s salvation shines all the more brighter. In these ten verses from the divine perspective, then, God shows that he is not only passionately concerned for the lost, but he is also passionately concerned about the spiritual growth of his prophets. Jonah needs to be humbled for his prideful disobedience and God will tenderly deal with him according to this need. On the other hand, however, from the human perspective, the prophet must now process the redemptive work of God in his life which always leads to godly repentance (2 Cor. 7:10).

***Jonah rehearses his woe (2:1-6)***

In a somewhat poetic fashion, very similar to that of the Psalms, Jonah recounts his calamity. In the first two verses of Jonah’s psalm, he acknowledges the fact that his calamity was the cause of him seeking the lord[[13]](#footnote-13). While the location of his prayer in verse two is the stomach of the fish, he refers to another appeal which was probably uttered when he was first tossed into the Mediterranean Sea. What is important to note here, is that his calamity did not cause him to move further away from God, but rather, it served as the catalyst that caused Jonah to pursue a sweet time of intimate communion with God in prayer (vv. 1-2).

***Jonah praises the Lord as the Savior (2:7-9)***

As a result of Jonah’s salvific experience, he remembered the Lord and how he delivered him from his calamity by means of his prayer (v. 7). That is, Jonah remembered his prayer as it went to his God and recollects that it was the Lord his God, who delivered him from the pit (vv. 6-7). Theologically speaking, while the sovereign plan of God for the believer’s sanctification is already worked out in the mind of God from eternity past (Rom. 8:29; cf. Eph. 1:11), God nonetheless, is pleased to work through the prayers of his people to bring about his desired end in their lives (Jas. 5:16b).

***The giant fish releases Jonah at the Lord’s command (2:10)***

The God of all creation, who is sovereign over every creature he created, tells the non- living fish and it obediently returned Jonah to waterless surface, presumably, somewhere in the vicinity of Nineveh[[14]](#footnote-14). It is a good thing that God is not fickle like Jonah, who picks and chooses when he will offer faithful service to God. By contrast, in this one verse alone God shows himself to be fully committed and unwavering in showing steadfast love to the failure of unfaithful prophets in light of his divine mission. For God could simply leave Jonah inside the stomach of the fish and dispatched another prophet to accomplish his mission, but he did not. Besides, what better person could God choose to be a messenger of his mercy than a person who had just experience the mercy of God[[15]](#footnote-15).

## **Chapter 3. Jonah excepts God’s call to be a missionary (3:1-10)**

The main idea of this chapter centers on preaching, repentance, and compassion – Jonah preaches, the Ninevites repent, and God shows compassion. Chapter three begins with commandments from the Lord coming to Jonah for the second time, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you” (vv. 1-2). God recommissions Jonah a second time and he responds this time with obedience (v. 3)[[16]](#footnote-16). As the consequence of the Jonah’s preaching, the Ninevites repent and the Lord shows them compassion (vv. 4-10)[[17]](#footnote-17). In these ten verses, narrator records positive response to the preaching of God’s Word that can be found anywhere in the Bible. As such, there are many lessons that modern-day pastor can learn about the power of the preaching’s of Bible and from the instance Jonah exhibited.

***Jonah reaches to Nineveh and guides about the Lord’s message (3:1-5)***

While this second call mirrors the first one, there is only one slight alteration to the second that is not present in the first. During first call, God communicated Jonah the reason why he wanted him to go to Nineveh. In the second call, however, God equipped Jonah with the method that he wanted him to use. Hence, God only gave Jonah one strategy for reaching this biblically illiterate people. He was told to preach God’s message exclusively and exactly as he had been instructed (v. 2). What is interesting to note here, in contrast to some of the evangelistic strategies which are propagated by some pastors today is that, God did not tell Jonah to reach the Ninevites by searching for their felt needs and meeting that felt need as a bridge to evangelize the lost. Nor did God instruct Jonah to reach the Ninevites through entertainment or a feel-good self-help message. He simply told him to speak the Word (see also 2 Tim. 4:2; cf. 1 Cor. 2:4-5), which consequently, was a message of God’s imminent judgment in light of his mercy and grace[[18]](#footnote-18).

***The Ninevites apologized and bowed to the God from Jonah’s message (3:6-9)[[19]](#footnote-19)***

When the words of Jonah and the Ninevites’ response had finally extended to the monarch of Nineveh, he humbled himself by four consecutive actions. He *stood up* from his throne, *detached* his robe, *covered* himself with sackcloth, and *sat* in ashes (v. 6). In this great act of humility, the king moves progressively from dethronement to bowing under the authority of the Lord. Consequently, the monarch’s response to the word of the Lord stands in contrast to that of Jonah’s[[20]](#footnote-20). When they both heard the voice of the Lord, they both arose (see 1:3), but instead of coming to the Lord Jonah ran in the opposite direction.

***The Lord has compassion on the Ninevites (3:10)***

This act of genuine humility to the Lord’s messenger and his message did not go unnoticed by the Lord of the message. When the Lord saw how they left the evil ways to him, he withdrew his divine judgement against them (v. 10)[[21]](#footnote-21).

## **Chapter 4. Jonah is displeased with God, but the Lord overcomes his anger with sympathy (4:1-11)**

The main idea of chapter four centers on Yahweh and his compassion in light of Jonah’s misunderstanding and his anger. Set in the framework of a dialogue between Yahweh and his prophet, the Lord reveals his concern for the lost (v. 11). What ultimately brought pleasure to the Lord displeased Jonah. While Jonah could accept the vengeance of Yahweh being poured out his enemies, he could not understand why God would show his enemy mercy (v. 2)[[22]](#footnote-22).

***Jonah responds to the Lord’s compassion toward the Ninevites with contempt (4:1­-4)***

Ironically, the man who had just been shown mercy in chapter two had quickly forgotten the joy of what it meant to return the favor of showing mercy[[23]](#footnote-23). In chapter two, Jonah delighted in the joy of the God of his salvation (2:9), but here Jonah responds to the Lord’s salvation with anger and displeasure. Why is Jonah so displeased with the Lord’s salvation here? What provoked him to respond so negatively? Could it be that Jonah was simply selfish and self-centered? Though one can make a case for this view, it is not entirely convincing. In attempting to answer the question of Jonah’s displeasure one does not need to look any further than the recipient of God’s mercy (i.e., The Ninevites). As stated above, the Ninevites were a force to be reckoned with in ancient Middle Eastern times, not to mention, they were the arch-enemy of Israel.

***God demonstrates Jonah a valued message (4:5-11)[[24]](#footnote-24)***

In the act of unbelief, Jonah went just out from the city limits of Nineveh towards East of its location. Then, he built a booth to wait and see if God’s judgment would fall upon the city (v. 5). Ironically, Jonah was grateful for his own salvation, but in this case, he refuses to be grateful for the salvation of the Ninevites (see 4:2; cf. 2:9). God was already aware of Jonah’s negative disposition; therefore, he decided to teach him a moral lesson about the value of human life. What is interesting to note here, pertaining to the objects that God used to teach this stubborn prophet a valuable lesson, is that, all of them are infinitesimal when compared to the value man in the eyes of God (i.e., plant, worm, and scorching east wind).

# *Conclusion*

It is obvious that God’s question is aimed at correcting the prophet’s lousy disposition concerning the Ninevites and the value of man’s salvation (see 4:2). Therefore, to drive home his point, God contrasted Jonah’s relationship to the plant with his relationship to the Ninevites. Like a prosecuting attorney who has just presented an impermeable argument just to avoid anguish, so also, Jonah has nothing to say in response to God’s poignant question[[25]](#footnote-25). God has just presented an airtight case for showing mercy to the Ninevites and Jonah is utterly speechless.While the book ends without Jonah answering God’s question, his point is made unmistakably clear – God is more concerned about saving mankind than judging them because he personally crafted them after his own image and delights more so in their redemption, not their condemnation.

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