

Jonah 4:1-11: Pedagogy on the Justice and Mercy of God

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Introduction

That God is a God of Justice and Mercy is a well-established fact in the Old Testament. Many passages of the OT attest to this. The Book of Jonah, which is found among the prophetic books, contains no oracles at all, except the report of Jonah's words to Nineveh in Jonah 3:5.¹ This book is unique among the books of the biblical prophets. It is a short book of four chapters containing stories about the prophet.² The only prophetic message Jonah delivers is 'od 'ar^eba'im yom w^enin^eveh neh^epaket "still forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4). This book comprises of several individual scenes; three scenes, in which an obstinate prophet resists Yahweh (1:1-3; 1:17-3:3; 4:1-11), two other scenes in which the prophet encounters pagans and is shamed by their behavior (1:4-16; 3:4-10).³

The book lacks a superscription but announces the prophet in the first verse, identifying him as Jonah, son of Amittai. Jonah means "dove", which suggests the notion of "flight" and "passivity".⁴ This is evident in the two first chapters of the book about the prophet. This name corroborates with the biblical stance that there was a prophet by that name, who, according to 2 Kgs 14:25, ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746).⁵ Whether this is the same person or not is another issue, but the mention of the same name and surname suggests that we are relating with the same prophet even though there seems to be inconsistencies with the dating. Anthony Ceresko has rightly observed that there was a deliberate attempt to relegate historical scholarship since the goal of the author of the book of Jonah was primarily to show the mercy and justice of God.⁶ No other personal information about Jonah was given in the book that bears his name. Responding to the particular situation of the Israel of his day, the author gave an insight into developments in the role that prophecy came to have after the monarchial period. So, he dealt with the very mystery of God's mercy.⁷ In the story, gentiles—the sailors and the people of Nineveh—are models of repentance and worship, while the designated prophet of Yahweh is disobedient and unrepentant.

Jonah is as an anti-hero in the book: his deeds are in no way commendable. Jonah is in a word, disobedient. When God commanded him to head east to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, he fled west towards Tarshish. The author made it clear that Jonah's intention was to go "away from the presence of the Lord" (1:3). The reason he fled became clear at the end of the story: Jonah

¹ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 466.

² Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 382.

³ Werner H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction* (Mumbai, India: St. Paul Press, 2002), 331.

⁴ A. J. Hauser, *JBL* 104 (1985), 21-37.

⁵ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls*, p. 382.

⁶ Anthony R. Ceresko, "Jonah" in Raymond E. Brown et al, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Burns and Oates, 1995), 580.

⁷ Ceresko, "Jonah", 581.

did not want Nineveh to repent because he earnestly wanted God to destroy Israel's national enemies.⁸

The presentation is in six sections. The first section examines the authorship and date of the book of Jonah. In the second section, the structure of the book is presented. The third section studies the book of Jonah, particularly Jonah 4:1-11 in the context of the OT. The fourth section presents the analysis of the pericopé (Jonah 4:1-11). The fifth section then highlights the relationship between the pericopé and NT, specifically Luke 15:11-30 and Matt 12:38-40 (cf. Luke 11:29-32). In the sixth section, implications of the significant themes of the pericopé for today are surveyed.

1. Authorship and Date

Undoubtedly, if the historical links of Jonah son of Amittai of 2 Kgs 14:25 and thus to the 8th century had been separated, it therefore means that: (a) we have another Jonah; and (b) a later date of composition, probably 5th century.⁹ Consequently, several arguments have been put forward to call into question whether the Jonah of the Book is the same man named in 2 Kgs 14. First, a passage in the book of Jonah indicates that "Nineveh was an exceedingly large city" (3:3). Leclerc observed that some commentators think this reference to the city in the past tense indicates that the city was in ruin when the book was written. Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC, placing the composition at least after that date. Other scholars argue that there are words and grammatical forms that reflect influence from Aramaic, which was not current in the eighth century but was the common language in the Persian period.

There are several passages in Jonah that quote or refer to other biblical passages—another hint that its appropriation of phrases from other psalms appears to be an insertion into the text. The presence of prayers in biblical stories (as in Tobit, Daniel and Esther for example) is common in later books. Hence, it must be noted, however, that many of these lines of argumentation—the use of the perfect tense, Aramaic influence, quotations from other biblical books—have been challenged strenuously. Though, there is no universal agreement about the date of the book's composition, many scholars locate this book in the postexilic period,¹⁰ sometime in the 4th century BC. Others contend that knowing the date is irrelevant to the interpretation of the story.¹¹ Proposals for more specific dates include 6th century BC or mid -5th century BC.¹²

2. The Structure of the Book

Not minding the fact that this Book has just four chapters, scholars have proposed different structural schemes for it based on one's perception and understanding of the book. However, most of them accept division of these short story line chapters into subunits. We shall adopt the outline given by Anthony R. Ceresko. According to Ceresko, the Book of Jonah is divided into two main units with two subunits as follows:

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|-----------------------------|------------|
| 1. First Mission | (1:1-2:11) |
| a. Jonah and the Sailors | (1:1-16) |
| i. Jonah's Flight | (1:1-3) |
| ii. The Storm | (1:4-16) |
| b. Jonah and the Great Fish | (2:1-11) |

⁸ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls*, 383-384.

⁹ Ceresko, "Jonah" p. 581.

¹⁰ Sebastian Kizhakkayil, *The Word of God: Content and Message*, Mumbai 2008, p. 81.

¹¹ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls* pp. 382-83.

¹² Ceresko, "Jonah" in p. 581.

- 2. Second Mission (3:1-4:11)
 - a. The Conversion of Nineveh (3:1-10)
 - i. The Action of the Prophet (3:1-4)
 - ii. The Reaction of the City (3:5-10)
 - b. God's Attempt to Convert Jonah (4:1-11)¹³

The author made some important points about prophecy and the nature of God without losing his sense of humor while creating his outrageous tale and its several separate plots. Its main literary style is that of irony. Jonah does everything a good prophet should not, from fleeing to refusing to speak, to complaining that God does not fulfill all the threats of doom that he made Jonah preach. This is set up in a number of parallels, so that the prayer in chapter 2 parallels exactly the dialogue found in chapter 4, although one is praise, the other complaint. The prophet takes action in chapters 1 and 3, but in one, he refuses to act, and in the other, he does perform what God commands. The four chapters could be seen thus:

Chapter 1: the prophet is *disobedient* and refuses God,
 Chapter 2: so he *praises* God in the fish for his mercy;
 Chapter 3: the prophet *obeys* the word of God and preaches,
 Chapter 4: so he *complains* that God offers any mercy at all.

Even within single chapters, the literary style is very cleverly arranged to move in one direction and then go in reverse.¹⁴

3. Jonah 4:1-11 in the Old Testament Context

In connection with Leclerc's suggestion, which we had submitted earlier, the psalm of Jonah in chapter 2 repeats many phrases, images, and expressions found in other psalms. There are also strong equivalents between the storm at sea in chapter 1 and the storm that overtakes ships of Tarshish in Ezek 27:25-36. Jonah's hopelessness and wish to die in chapter 4 recall those of Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:4-9. The theme of the reluctant prophet recalls Moses (Exodus 3:10-4:17) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10). But Jonah's case is taken to the extreme. After being commissioned by God, Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord. Perhaps the most important tradition is the confession of God's mercy (Jon 4:2) that is proclaimed in Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Joel 2:13; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; and 145:8. But Jonah cited this tradition with disapproval, hoping, rather, to forestall God's mercy so that Nineveh might be destroyed. He, therefore, turned the prophetic role of intercession on its head. The role of the prophet is to stand in the breach, to pray to God, hoping to avert God's destroying wrath by appealing to God's mercy. Jonah did just the opposite.¹⁵

Exod 34:6 - and he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness".

Moses interceded for the Israelites in the wilderness (Num 14:18): "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion".

The people confessed their sins and Nehemiah prayed (Neh 9:17b): "But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them".

¹³ Ceresko, "Jonah", 581.

¹⁴ Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, 467-468.

¹⁵ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls*, 386-387.

Psalms 86:15 - But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. Jonah knew all the answers about God. He just did not have a heart like God's".

Joel 2:13 - "...Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing".

4. Analysis of Jonah 4:1-11

Jonah 4:1 - "But this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry".

The *waw* at the beginning of the sentence is employed to contrast Jonah 4:1-11 with the preceding section. It creates a contrast between God's compassion (3:10) and Jonah's displeasure between God's turning from His anger (3:9-10) and Jonah's turning to anger.

Jonah 4:2 - "He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and Merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing'".

In this verse, the reason why Jonah fled to Tarshish (Jon 1:3) was unfolded. He knew so much about God. The Hebrew verb *ya'da* means experiential knowledge as opposed to abstract knowledge. Jonah has not only learnt about God, he has actually experienced God. He "feared that his preaching would have the positive effect that it did, in fact, have (3:5), and he wanted nothing to do with the possible extension of divine mercy to these hateful people". This phrase occurs either in the same or similar form in Exod 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13. It is suggested that these occurrences "function almost like a creed and most likely have their origin in a cultic context".¹⁶ All those references are related to God's love for His covenant people ... "abounding in love" *hesed*. For Jonah, it is good when God deals mercifully with the chosen people, but he does not think that other nations deserve God's merciful love. He was so unmerciful even when he has been shown so much mercy. In this verse (Jon 4:2), there is an "important affirmation of the priority of God's mercy and love in dealing with his creatures. His mercy and love may, in the end, override every other consideration",¹⁷ including his justice.

Jonah 4:3 - "And now, o Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live".

Why did Jonah want God to take his *nephesh* (life)? He wanted to dissociate himself from a God, who presumes to act in this manner. "His bewilderment in the face of such a display of divine "justice" drives him to doubt the meaning of his own service to such a God; he can no longer bear to live under the burden of his frustration".¹⁸ Other prophets, Jeremiah (32:16-25) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:4) faced a similar frustration because of their prophetic call. However, Jonah's motif for desiring death is different from that of Jeremiah and Elijah. Jeremiah and Elijah complained that their prophetic activity was *fruitless* because the Israelites were disobedient to their words, Jonah wants to die because his mission was *successful*, and because of God.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ceresko, "Jonah", 583.

¹⁷ Ceresko, "Jonah", 583

¹⁸ Ceresko, "Jonah", 583.

¹⁹ Erik Eynikel, "Jonah", *The International Bible Commentary*, Collegeville 1998, 1150.

Jonah 4:4 - But the Lord said “do you do well (good) to be angry?”

In v.1, it was said that Jonah became angry. Literally, “he became hot and he was hot at God” for not acting the way Jonah felt he should act. And Jonah sulked. He did not even reply to God.

Jonah 4:5 - “Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city”.

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Jonah left the city and built a crude shelter, perhaps from tree branches, and sat down. This recalls Elijah sitting under a broom tree (cf. 1 Kgs 19:4). Apparently, from there Jonah had a clear view of the city. Why he waited to see what would happen to the city is difficult to understand. Perhaps he felt that God would answer his plea and act justly on the city. Unable to imagine God not carrying out His justice on people who deserved it, Jonah was determined to wait till Nineveh was in fact judged. Jonah was myopic and narrow-minded. He did not want to go to Nineveh, to begin with, because he knew God would have mercy on his enemies. He did not want their repentance; he wanted their destruction. So he went outside the city to sulk.

Jonah 4:6 - “The Lord appointed a bush tree, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush”.

Then the Lord God provided a *qiqayon* (castor oil) plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. The God, who produced the wind that caused the storm that came upon the ship in Ch.1 ... the God, who produced the great fish that swallowed Jonah, then commanded the fish to spit Jonah up, this God, who is in control of all nature, provided a plant and made it grow up as shade for Jonah. Well, Jonah was delighted. He was relieved that once again, God has rescued him from a terrible situation. However, this situation did not last long.

Jonah 4:7-8 - “But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live’”.

But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm (once again, God arranged all these events), which chewed up the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind (there God is again, orchestrating events), and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live”. Jonah was delighted when God made the plant to provide relief for him. But when that was taken away ... when God did not act the way Jonah thought he should act, Jonah became angry.

Jonah 4:9 - “But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die”.

At this point, God came back full-circle to the big issue he wanted Jonah to deal with namely, his anger at God’s merciful love for Nineveh.

Jonah 4:10 - “Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night’”.

The Lord drove home his point in a powerful way. You have been concerned about this castor oil plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight (Jon 4:10). God constrained Jonah to reflect about what has happened. If Jonah was so angry because the plant, for which he did not labor, died so quickly, he should then be able to understand how God, the creator of humans, would feel at the destruction or perishing of any of his creatures. It is as if God was saying to Jonah, “the way you feel about the withering of the *qiqayon* plant, is how I feel for the destruction of the Ninevites. Just as you longed to continue enjoying the shade of that tree, I rejoice at the conversion, salvation and life of the Ninevites”.

Jonah 4:11 - “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals”?

This last verse is a key to understanding the whole story, and particularly, the pericopé (Jon 4:1-11). It provides a summary of God’s intention for the Ninevites and at the same time educates Jonah concerning his (God’s) *modus operandi*. God is God and human beings should allow him to remain the God that he is. It is not for humans to dictate for him how to deal with other creatures. Human logic is totally different from the logic of God. God does not discriminate in dispensing his merciful love to all his creatures as he wishes and when he wishes.

5. Jonah 4:1-11 and the New Testament

The story of Jonah has a close relationship with two particular passages in the NT. The first NT passage is the story of the prodigal son and his elder brother (Luke 15:11-32). The second passage is the passage of the “sign of Jonah” (Matt 12:38-42 cf. Luke 11:29-32). While in the first story there is no explicit mention of Jonah, the second talks explicitly about the “sign of Jonah”.

5.1 Matt 12:38-42 (cf. Luke 11:29-32)

The elder brother in this parable is like Jonah, who was not happy to see a sinner forgiven. He wanted justice to be done against his “sinful” but repentant brother. In the same manner, Jonah wanted God’s wrath to pour down against the Ninevites. He is angry that the father has shown mercy. Just like Jonah outside Nineveh, the elder brother sulks outside the father's house. They do not like the free mercy of God. In both stories, God’s justice is tampered with his mercy to the point that the elder brother, just like Jonah, was angry. What they have in common, is “anger at the conversion and forgiveness of sinners”.

Matthew (12:38-42) notes that while Jesus was teaching, some Scribes and Pharisees came to him and said “teacher, we wish to see a sign from you”. Jesus’ response was: “an evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah...” Jonah’s stay in the belly of the fish is compared to the stay of the Son of Man in the heart of the earth. Jesus went further to contrast the people of his time with the people of Nineveh. The Ninevites repented when the prophet spoke the prophetic words to them, but those of “this generation” refused to heed even when someone (Jesus) greater than the prophets (symbolized by Jonah) preached to them. In line with the message of the book of Jonah and the story of the prodigal son, “this generation” can be likened to Jonah, who typifies the elder brother. Those who were “outside” were brought “inside” while those who were “inside”

remained “outside”. Jonah remained outside the city of repented and forgiven Nineveh just as the elder brother remained outside the feast organized in honor of his repented and forgiven brother.

6. Implications of the Pedagogy on the Justice and Mercy of God

The theological significance and themes found in the Book of Jonah are basically reflections of the divine justice and mercy not only on the chosen people but also other nations including Israel’s enemies. These messages of Jonah still find their bearing and importance in our world today.

6.1 God’s Sovereignty and hesed over all

The book of Jonah, among other themes, demonstrates the universal love of God even for the Gentiles. He saved the sailors from sinking; he forewarned the people of Nineveh of their sins; upon repentance he forgave them. However, some commentators have noted that the universality of God’s mercy, expressed in Jonah, is similar to perspectives found in some other post-exilic books. Recall how Third Isaiah invited foreigners and eunuchs to join God’s holy people and to minister before the Lord (Isa 56:1-8). Joel prophesied a day when God’s spirit would be poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28). Some contend that these trends were directed against the exclusivist reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah that would not make room for foreigners and insisted on proper bloodlines and lineage. It is certainly true that there are similarities between Jonah and Third Isaiah and Joel; but it cannot be demonstrated that Jonah was written with Ezra and Nehemiah in mind.²⁰

6.2 Justice/Punishment and Mercy

It seems to Jonah that he deserved punishment from God, thus he volunteered to be thrown into the sea so that the sailors may be saved. But then, in that supposedly punishment, God saved his life and gives him another chance to obey his command – preach to Nineveh. In a sense, the story’s two main characters—Jonah and God—stand for competing theological principles. Jonah is the proponent of the proposition that the wicked must be punished; God advocates the position that the repentant may obtain mercy. Both positions are true and both have been at work throughout Israel’s long history. The story of Jonah brings two competing theological claims face to face. In this dramatic face-off between punishment and mercy, Jonah’s accusation against God turns out to be the winning position: God indeed is merciful and ready to relent from punishing. It is the same for us today: God looks forward to see us repent from our sins and turn back to him. Even though no sin shall go unpunished, yet, God has assured to take out all our guilt.

Basically, what makes the story of Jonah so touching is that the wicked, who repent and who are treated mercifully by God, are Israel’s worst enemies. Understandably, the last thing Jonah wanted was for his enemies to repent and be spared. He knew this about God: “you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (4:2). Jonah did not want God to treat Israel’s enemies in this way. Yet, God judges people by their actions: when God saw what they (the people of Nineveh) did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” (Jon 3:10).

6.3 Repentance and Forgiveness

²⁰ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls*, 386.

The Assyrians terrorized Israel and Judah from the days of Shalmanesser III (858-824 BC) to the fall of their empire (612 BC). They humiliated Jehu, who subdued Pekah, and finally destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. It was the Assyrians who attacked Judah and destroyed forty-six of its cities, and laid siege to Jerusalem. If any kingdom deserved to experience the full force of God's wrath, surely it was Assyria. Little wonder Jonah recoiled at God's command to go to Assyria's capital, Nineveh! We can recall the prophet Nahum's invectives against Nineveh and his delight in its destruction. So, God could have destroyed Nineveh safe for his forgiveness. He gave the people opportunity to amend their evil ways. Likewise to all of us, he grants second chance to be remorseful. In this way, the story of Jonah also reveals that God's sovereignty is indeed universal, reaching out and embracing even historic enemies of God's people. But God's mercy is not given indiscriminately. God's mercy is given in response to true repentance irrespective of tribe and tongue.

Conclusion

Jonah does everything a good prophet should not, from fleeing to refusing to speak, to complaining that God does not fulfill all the threats of doom that he made Jonah preach. God showed mercy to Jonah by giving him the *qiqayon* plant to shade him. He also showed him justice by causing the plant to wither while he was still enjoying its shade and protection.

God is the sovereign over all peoples. His is the earth and its fullness, the world and all its peoples (cf. Ps 24,1). He is not the God of Israel alone or of any other nation. So also is his love and mercy for all peoples and all creatures. God is free to act in whatever way that he wills with any of his creatures.

His mercy supersedes his justice. Hence, the story in the book of Jonah is a warning and a call to many "Jonahs" and "elder brothers" of our world today to get out of their myopic, narrow-minded, racial, religious fanatical world view to embrace the universal and universalistic view. No creature of God shall be written off. We should always give room for repentance. It is a call to shift from the love of justice to the justice of mercy and love. It entails a positive attitude even towards those we may consider our greatest enemies. As a good pedagogue, God gradually drew Jonah to learn to be merciful as his heavenly father is merciful. While Jonah proposes that the wicked must be punished, God advocates that the repentant may obtain mercy.