

CONFLICT BETWEEN JUSTICE AND MERCY: A STUDY OF THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF JONAH

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Abstract

The Book of Jonah reflects two opposing Schools of thought within Jewry in the Post-exilic period: the Particularists and the Universalists. While the Particularists sought to cut themselves off from other nations, the Universalists favoured openness towards other nations. The Book is a criticism of the narrow-minded Jew, who locked in their nationalism, believed that Yahweh was the God of the Jews only. This truth is presented in a brilliantly satirized manner. The author sets forth Jonah, the chief character of the Book, as the type of the narrow-minded, exclusive Jew, who not only despises all non-Jews, but conceives of Yahweh as the God of the Jews only, and as a God who has no care for the rest of his creation. The Book is a bold declaration that God is the God of all peoples. God's mercy applies not only to the Jews but also to other nations.

Keywords: Repentance, Overturn, Justice, Mercy, Forgiveness, Intolerance.

Introduction

The story of Jonah falls within the literary category of a story about the prophet; the difference is that it is a story with a didactic aim. The Book is a stern rebuke of a narrow exclusiveness that characterized the Israelites of the postexilic era. Jonah represents a narrow-minded, exclusivist Jew of the post-exilic era who had no desire to see the Assyrians saved. The book of Jonah has two main characters: Jonah and God, embodying two principles: justice and mercy. Jonah is a proponent of the principle that the sinner should be punished; but God advocates a position that the repentant sinner may obtain mercy. The story of Jonah brings these competing claims face to face in the dramatic face-off between punishment and mercy. Jonah represents a narrow-minded intolerance Jew who wants his enemies punished; God, on the other hand, is ready to forgive the repentant sinner. The divine justice and mercy are not opposed. Sometimes, God demonstrates his justice by showing mercy to the repentant sinner. The book stresses the universal fatherhood of God. It also reveals that God's sovereignty is universal and his mercy extends to all peoples. The book of Jonah stresses that God's salvation is universalistic in scope; the author stands against the theology of exclusivism and particularism so much demonstrated in Jonah. This article seeks to address this fact by an exegetico-theological study of the book of Jonah.

The Setting of the Book

The chief character of the book is introduced in 1:1 as *Jonah* (Hebrew: *Yonah*), son of Amittai, who is described in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet from Gath-hepher which is in the region of Galilee. Unlike most prophetic literatures, the book of Jonah has no superscription locating it within any important historical event in Israel's or Judah's life. The dating of the book is dependent on the understanding of the text as a whole. Two dates are possible. 2 Kings 14:23-25 indicates that

Jonah, son of Amittai, lived during the time of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). This passage indicates that Jonah had predicted that Jeroboam II would re-conquer from Syria territories which were previously held by Syria. Authors, like West (1971), McKenzie (2002) and Craghan (1982) date the book to the Post-Exilic period when Judah's chief concerns was self-preservation. Craghan is of the view that the book was likely a reaction to the nationalistic policies of Ezra and Nehemiah (ca. 450-400 B.C.). On this basis, Craghan dates the book to the Persian period (539-332 B.C.), i.e., between late 5th century and the early 4th century B.C. The book of Jonah was addressed to the Jews who had just returned from the Babylonian exile and were confronted with the problem of restoration of their national identity. One of the concerns of the post-exilic Israel centered on self-identity and self-preservation. The author addresses this question in a satirized manner, using the figure of Jonah. Even if the author of Jonah is not a prophet, his message is prophetic in the true sense of the word.

Literary Genre of the Book of Jonah

The book makes very skillful use of a variety of stylistic means in its construction: repetitions, contrasts, chiasmus, etc. (Rendtorff, 1991). Unlike other prophetic books, the book tells a story about a presumed prophet (though never so called) rather than relating oracles spoken by the prophet. The book consists not of a collection of prophetic utterances but a single prose narrative concerning an otherwise obscure prophet (West, 1971). The book contains only one oracle consisting of only eight words (Jonah 3:4b, NRS). Except for the Psalm in 2:2-9, the book is written in a flowing prose. This poem, which is a Psalm of thanksgiving, is widely regarded as a later interpolation judging by its total lack of connection with the rest of the text (cf. Rendtorff, 1991; De Menezes, 2005). Most authors accept that the book is a literary unit, except for the Psalm in 2:2-9.

There is a correspondence between Chapters 1 and 3 as well as Chapters 2 and 4. In chapter 1, Jonah received the message to go and proclaim God's word to Nineveh which he ignored and instead headed to the opposite direction to Tarshish (Jon 1:1-2). The call is repeated in chapter 3 which he obeyed (Jon 3:2-3). Similarly, in chapter 2, we hear of a prayer and dialogue between Jonah and God, which is contrasted with the dialogue between the prophet and God in Chapter 4 (De Menezes, 2005). Scholars are divided with regard to the literary genre of the book. While some regard the book as a historical narrative, others consider it an allegory or parable, and all three views have found support.

a. The Book as a Historical Narrative

Some opinions contend that the book of Jonah is a work of fiction and that Jonah never actually lived. However, the biblical evidence portrays Jonah as an actual historical figure. In 2 Kgs 14:25, Jonah son of Amittai is said to have prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II (786-746 BC). Jonah is said to have foretold the wide extent of Jeroboam II's conquests and the expansion of Israel's territory under him. Secondly, in the Gospel, Jesus cites Jonah as a historical figure who preached to the Ninevites (Matt 12:39; 16:4; Lk 11:29, 30). Jesus

speaks of Jonah's sojourn for three days and three nights in the "belly of the fish" as a prefiguring of his own state between crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus seems to regard the mass repentance of the Ninevites as a historical fact. Jesus presents the exemplary conversion of the Ninevites (Matt 12:41; Lk. 11:29-32) as a lesson for the Jews of his time who have heard the Gospel but have remained recalcitrant in sin.

One major difficulty in accepting the story of Jonah as historical is the hint that Jonah remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights unharmed and that Jonah even made a psalm of thanksgiving from the belly of the fish. Such a story makes the book seem more like a legend. Scientifically, it is difficult to imagine that a human being remained in the belly of the fish for 72 hours unharmed. However, it is important to state here that the book of Jonah is relating a religious story, not science. It is a matter of religion and faith that Jonah survived unscathed in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, and that at some point during this time, Jonah sang a song of thanksgiving from the belly of the fish. It is also a matter of religion that the tempest subsided immediately after Jonah was thrown into the sea. However, the story of the gourd tree that suddenly grew up to give Jonah shade and suddenly got destroyed by a worm, sound more of a fairy tale (Neil, 1962).

b. The Book as an Allegory

Until the 18th and 19th centuries, Jonah was regarded almost exclusively as historical account. However, in the 20th century, a number of other theories have been put forth. While some consider the book as an allegory, others see it as a didactic story or a parable or a legend. Scholars, like Sasson (1990) and Craghan (1982), regard the book of Jonah as an allegory of Israel's postexilic tribulation. Allegory is an extended metaphor where the individual elements of the account have a hidden or figurative meaning. Those who regard the book as an allegory hold that the series of incidents related in the book are parallel to the series of happenings in the life of Israel as a nation. According to this interpretation, Jonah stands for Israel. Jonah's flight is parallel to Israel's failure to fulfill its spiritual mission to the nations. The "great fish" stands for Babylon which swallowed up Israel in the captivity, and, spitting out Jonah represents the restoration of Israel to their homeland after the captivity (McGowan, 1968).

c. The Book as a Parable

Some scholars regard the book as a parable (*māšāl*) with a didactic aim. Von Rad (1975:289) not as a historical account but as "a story with a strong didactic content." Murray (2002) refers to the book as "a parable of mercy." Probably the author uses a historical personage to pass his message. Jonah typifies the narrow-minded, exclusivistic Jew with no love for other nations outside the borders of Israel. The book states boldly that God's love is for all nations. Jonah may be seen as the model of justice compared to Yahweh as the model of mercy (Trible, 1996). It is likely that the material contained in the book is derived from popular

legends for which the author supplied the deeper theological meaning. The extreme intolerance of Jonah, which contrasts sharply with the charitableness of the gentile sailors (chap 1), and the deep contrition of the Ninevites adds a strong element of satire (Cartledge, 1990). Sellin-Fohrer (1965) opines that the book is a didactic tract in a schematic and repetitive style, influenced by wisdom literature.

The Text of Jonah

There are four major scenes, corresponding roughly to the four chapters of the book of Jonah as they are divided in the English Bible (the Hebrew differs). These are: Jonah's flight from God in a boat (Chap 1); God's rescue of Jonah by means of a great fish (Chap 2); Jonah's preaching in Nineveh (Chap 3); and Jonah's final conflict with God after God had spared Nineveh (Chap 4). These four episodes are easily distinguished by their different settings.

Episode 1: Jonah's Commission and his Flight from his Mission

Chapter 1:1-2 introduces the chief character of the book, Jonah, the son of Amittai. This chapter describes God's commission to Jonah to go and preach repentance to the Ninevites (1:1-2), and how, for reasons not disclosed until the fourth chapter, Jonah was unwilling to fulfill his mandate and sought to evade his mission by boarding a ship at Joppa seaport that was sailing to Tarshish (1:3f). Tarshish (located on the southwestern coast of Spain) was the farthest western limit known to the ancient Israelites. Although Jonah was instructed to go eastward to Nineveh, he boarded a ship heading westward to Tarshish (in the opposite direction). Jonah's flight was not just a pleasure cruise, he was not only fleeing from his mission, he was attempting to flee from God as well, something that he soon found impossible to do. The story of Jonah is a story of a reluctant prophet. Jonah's reluctance, motivated by an intense hatred of Nineveh, is rooted in his ethnocentrism.

God caused a great storm (*rûah-gedôlâh*) to arise which threatened to wreck the ship (1:4). In the face of imminent danger, the sailors became frightened and each one cried to his god for deliverance and threw their cargo overboard to lighten the weight of the ship (1:5). As the storm raged, Jonah went down to the hold of the ship and lay there fast asleep, and is discovered by the Captain, who was shocked to find that he was not saying his prayers like the rest. The pagan sailors became the model of prayer while the prophet was the example of religious apathy (Craghan, 1982). The author is careful to point out that God is the one who instigated the storm and that God is in control of the outcome of the event. When the storm continued unabated, the sailors cast lots to find out who was responsible for their ordeal, and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah disclosed his identity and declared himself to be the worshipper of Yahweh, albeit a disobedient one. He admitted that it was because of his attempt to evade the mission laid upon him by Yahweh that the tempest had come upon them. He revealed that the solution lay in casting him into the sea. The sailor made the last desperate effort to row the ship back to land, but the storm became ever more turbulent. With a prayer to

God to save them and to hold them guiltless of the death of Jonah, the sailors threw Jonah into the sea and at once the storm subsided.

Episode 2: God rescues Jonah

The second episode (Chap 2) illustrates how impotent Jonah was as he stood against God and his purposes. Chapter 1:17 describes how God rescued Jonah from certain death by causing a great or large fish (*dāḡ gādōl*) to swallow him and deliver him safely onto the shore. The Hebrew original has *dāḡ gādōl* “a large fish” whereas the Septuagint has *ketous* (sea monster). By stressing that Yahweh “appointed” the fish for a specific role in the story; the author wants the reader to recognize the fish as an instrument of God’s purposes. Although the fish is an element of exaggeration in the story, it symbolizes God’s sovereign liberty (Craghan, 1982). God can use any instrument to fulfill his saving purposes.

Chapter two begins with a hint that “Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish” (2:1). Jonah’s prayer turns out to be a Psalm of Thanksgiving (2:2-9). The Psalm begins with a compact description of the Psalmist’s distress and an act of acknowledgment of Yahweh as his rescuer (Murphy & Carm. 1971). The conclusion of the Psalm is an ironical touch. Here Jonah sings: “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” (2:9). The poem is a contrast to the prose of the rest of the account. Authors, like Craghan (1982) and Sellin-Fohrer (1965) are of the view that the Thanksgiving Psalm in 2:2-9 does not belong to the original book of Jonah but is a later interpolation by a redactor. This view is informed by the fact that the vocabulary and style of the psalm are different from that of the rest of the account. A Psalm of Thanksgiving does not fit into the situation of Jonah who, in the belly of a fish, should be begging for God’s mercy and deliverance rather than give a psalm of thanksgiving for a deliverance already received. Verses 6-7 do not deal with the stay in the belly of the fish; a thanksgiving for a deliverance already experienced is completely out of place in Jonah’s situation.

The setting in chapter 2 shows God’s control over the sea and its monsters, elements that are often portrayed as representative of the forces of chaos and the absence of God. By having Jonah speak to God from the belly of the fish, the author makes it clear that Jonah can find no place on earth to escape God (cf. Ps 139). Yahweh chooses to deliver Jonah from imminent death. In 1:17a, the Lord appointed a large fish to swallow Jonah, in 2:10, the Lord “spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.” As soon as the fish vomited Jonah out, Yahweh renewed his command to go to Nineveh, and Jonah set out immediately.

Episode 3: Jonah Carries out his Mission to Nineveh (3:1-4)

Chapter three (third episode) begins with a hint that Jonah received his commission a second time (Jonah 3:1-2). Jonah seemed to have undergone some sort of superficial conversion in the belly of the fish. When the divine commission came a second time, Jonah responded and went to Nineveh. The

divine word is phrased as an imperative, “arise” (*qûm*) and “go” (*lêk*) to Nineveh ... and “proclaim to it the message that I tell you” (3:2). This time Jonah complied with the divine directive: “and Jonah arose and went” (*wayyāqom Jônah wayyēlek*) to Nineveh. From verse 3d, the passage shifts attention from Jonah to Nineveh (3:3d). The author describes the city of Nineveh as “the great city” (*hā’îr haggedôlāh*). God’s reference to Nineveh as a great city implies that the greatness of Nineveh impresses even God (i.e., great before God). Although no longer in existence, the city of Nineveh would have been enormous in comparison with the cities of Israel at the time. The enormous size of the city is expressed by the hint that it takes “a walk of three days” to cross it (3:3). The phrase, “three days,” is a popular image used to describe a gigantic city (Schedl. 1972). The description of Nineveh as an enormously large city that required three days to cross it illustrates a key technique in the whole book – exaggeration.

“Great” or “large” (*gādôl*) is one of the authors favourite words. It occurs fourteen times in the book. Nineveh is a “great” or “large” city (*hā’îr haggedôlāh*, 1:2: 3:2; 3:3; 4:11). Yahweh hurled a “great wind” (*rûah-gedôlāh*) upon the sea and the tempest that resulted was “great” (1:4 [twice], 12). The sailors feared with a “great” fear (*yir’āh gedôlāh* 1:10, 16). After the sailors had thrown Jonah into the sea, Yahweh sent a “great fish” (*dāg gādôl*) to swallow him (2:1). The repentance of the Ninevites extended from the “great” to the small (3:5), and it was proclaimed throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles (his “great” ones, 3:7). When God showed mercy to the Ninevites, Jonah’s displeasure was “great” (4:1), but his delight in the gourd plant was also “great” (4:6). The frequent use of the word “great” emphasizes the exaggeration in the book. Nineveh is not only “great”, it is “exceedingly great” or “large city” (*’îr-gedôlāh*, literally, “great even for God,” 3:3) (Nowell, 2001). The exaggerations only make the point more forceful (De Menezes, 2005).

Jonah’s Message to the Ninevites (3:4b)

Jonah’s oracle to the Ninevites is contained in 3:4b. Earlier Nineveh has been described as a large city, requiring three days to cross it (3:3). Verse 4a says that Jonah only made a day’s walk into the city and proclaimed his oracle. Unlike the prophetic books that abound in judgment oracles and oracles of admonition, reproach and doom, Jonah’s single oracle is given in 3:4b: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (*’ôd ’arbā’îm yôm wenînwēh nehpaqet*). The brevity of Jonah’s sermon highlights his reluctance to proclaim God’s word of repentance to the Ninevites. It is notable that nowhere in the story has Yahweh given Jonah this particular message to speak. Moreover, Jonah never claimed divine authority for his ambiguous pronouncement. There is no standard prophetic formula such as “thus says the Lord” authenticating the pronouncement as we find in most prophetic oracles. Unlike conventional oracles (e.g., Amos 1:3-2:16), Jonah’s one-statement oracle does not give reasons for the announcement. The word *nehpaqet*, which is a niphthal participle form of the verb *hāpak* means either “will be overturned” or “will be overthrown.” Jonah does not tell the Ninevites why they will be overturned. The adverbial particle *’ôd*, translated in

the NIV as “more”, and in the RSV as “yet,” leaves open the exact timing of the judgment over Nineveh that Jonah had proclaimed. The particle *‘ôd* may mean “within” or “at the end of.” The idiom “forty days” (*‘arbā’îm yôm*) often signifies a long, though unspecified, time of trial and testing. Jonah’s message proved effective as verses 5ff indicate. Though Jonah had only covered one third of the city, his message produced a total conversion, engulfing the entire populace. Jonah 3:5-10 describes the response of the Ninevites to Jonah’s oracle. Three incidents organize the section:

a. Nineveh’s Repentance (3:5-10).

The Ninevites’ spontaneous repentance in response to Jonah’s message stands in striking contrast to Israel’s obstinacy despite all the preaching by various prophets. Having heard Jonah’s message, the Ninevites believed in God. The author does not say why. Jonah’s ambiguous pronouncement does not even mention God. The object of their belief is not Yahweh but *Elohim*, a generic term for “god.” The response of the Ninevites to Jonah’s message proves that Jonah’s message was very effective. They turned to God and proclaimed (*qārā’*) a fast, and put-on sackcloth (*saqqîm*) as an act of penitence, “from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (3:5). There is a play on the verb, “call” (*qārā’*) which recurs six times in the story (1:2; 3:2; 1:6; 1:14; 2:3; 3:4). Just as Jonah “cried” (*qārā’*) i.e., proclaimed YHWH’s word to the Ninevites, so they responded to Jonah’s oracle by proclaiming (*qārā’*) a fast” as an act of penance. The dimension of their response is inclusive: they all, “from the greatest to the least” (*miggeḏôlām we‘ad-qeṭannām*) put on sackcloth (3:5). As v.5 shows, Nineveh has indeed begun to “overturn.”

b. The response of Nineveh’s King (3:6-9).

News of the deeds of the Ninevites reached the king. The people have set the agenda; their ruler now follows their lead. A chiasm of four movements constitutes the king’s individual response. First, he “rose from his throne,” then he “removed his robe,” “covered himself with sackcloth,” and “sat in ashes.” These movements provide a striking response of the king of Nineveh. He has “overturned” (*hāpak*) in dwelling, dress, and dignity. After humbling himself, the king issued an edict ordering a national penance. The wording in 3:7-9 is carefully crafted. The corpus consists of six instructions. Three are negative instructions: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything ... not feed, not drink water (v.7); and three are positive instructions to the Ninevites: they shall be covered with sackcloth, shall cry to God and shall turn from their evil ways (v.8).

The verb, “turn” (*šûb*), in v. 9 plays on the verb “overturn” (*hāpak*) in v. 4. Jonah had anticipated that Nineveh will be overturned or overthrown (*hāpak*), but the Ninevites turned (*šûb*) to God in repentance and God “repented” (*nāham*) or changed his mind about the disaster he had threatened. The verb *šûb* occurs twice in v.9, and is parallel to the verb *nāham* (*repent*). The NRSV translates

nāham as “change his mind.” The people are called to turn (*šûb*) from their evil ways in the hope that God will turn (*yāšûb*) and repent (*niḥam*), and turn (*šûb*) away from “his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

The poignant question, “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind” in v.9 is found in almost a similar order in Joel 2:14. The question expresses a theological issue around which chapter 3 revolves: contingency and divine sovereignty (Stuart, 1987). The question is an expression of confidence in Yahweh’s mercy if repentance occurs. Jonah can hope for the destruction of Nineveh, but God alone will decide their fate. Genuine repentance on the part of Nineveh can move God to change his mind concerning the disaster he has threatened. As a result of their genuine repentance, the Ninevites gave up their evil practices. The king’s decree captures what Jonah resentfully understood all along: God can forgive anybody who repents, even if they are the inhabitants of a city that had oppressed his people. While chapter 3 began with possibility and uncertainty, it concluded with hope: “so that we do not perish” (3:9).

c. God’s Response to Nineveh’s Repentance (3:10)

Jonah 3:10 presents God’s reaction to Nineveh’s repentance. The verse says: “And God saw what they did (*wayyar’ hā’ēlōhīm ’et-ma’āsēhem*), how they turned from their evil ways,” and “God changed (*nāham*) his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them” and spared the city. The term “turn” (*šûb*) refers not only to the people’s repentance but also to God’s subsequent change of mind. The verb, “turn,” and the expression, “from their evil ways,” suggest that the Ninevites have outwardly done more than deeds of penance. They have changed (*šûb*) inwardly and have overturned (*hāpak*), but not as Jonah had intended. Motivated by their repentance (*šûb*), God “repented” (*nāham*) from the evil (punishment) he has threatened. Chapter three closes with a note that God did not carry out the punishment he had threatened, because the Ninevites have repented. This shows the expanse of God’s mercy; it is not restricted to the borders of Israel; it even extends to Israel’s mortal enemies (Leclerc, 2007).

Episode 4: Jonah’s Anger (Jonah 4:1-4)

Episode 4 presents Jonah’s reaction to Nineveh’s deliverance (Jonah 4). What God has done - showing mercy to the Ninevites - is everything Jonah had feared (Jonah 4:2) and the very thing that the Ninevites hoped. After delivering his message, Jonah left the city and took up a position outside it, sulkily waiting for the destruction of the city (Neil, 1962). This shows that the prophet’s conflict with God is not resolved. Jonah was angry that God has changed his mind towards Nineveh and has decided to forgive and spare Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, the nation that had oppressed Israel. Here, for the first time the real reason for Jonah’s disobedience is made clear: he had foreseen that God would forgive Nineveh if she repented. He is well aware that Yahweh is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing” (Jonah 4:1-2). The description of Yahweh here is identical with that given in Jl 2:13, and both descriptions are evidently derived from Exod 34:6.

This is a confessional formula which appears elsewhere in Num 14:18; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Nah 1:3; Neh 9:17. Jer 18:7-10 is the *locus classicus* of the OT teaching on the nature of God as compassionate: “At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it....”

God judges people by their actions. With reference to Nineveh, Jonah 3:10 says: “God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them.” The prophet felt that the Lord has robbed his life of all meaning by showing mercy to Nineveh instead of a blazing wrath (McGowan, 1968). Jonah’s misery is a result of his narrow-mindedness. What God did, i.e., changing his mind in response to Nineveh’s repentance, is in accordance with what he revealed of himself in Scripture (Exod 34:6). Jonah had anticipated that God might forgive the Ninevites if they repented, and he has been proved right. This was the very reason that Jonah tried to resist going to preach to the Ninevites. But, by citing this ancient formula, Jonah destroyed the grounds of his anger. God responded incisively with a rhetorical question which condemned Jonah’s attitude: “Is it right for you to be angry?” (4:4). Although we never hear Jonah’s response, the reader is left with the obvious conclusion that God’s way of compassion and mercy is the right one, while Jonah is satirized as a narrow-minded Israelite. This question serves a didactic point: Jonah is angry, but without merit.

The Lesson of the Gourd Plant (4:5-11)

Though Jonah had recited a confessional formula whereby Yahweh is gracious and merciful, he still hoped that somehow God would still destroy Nineveh. He went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there and sat under its shade, waiting to see what would become of the city (4:5). When Jonah realized that God had changed his mind towards Nineveh, he prayed that he might die (4:3). God ignored Jonah’s request to die. It was a foolish request voiced out of frustration, and God did not honour it with a response. On the contrary, God decided to teach Jonah an important lesson by means of a gourd tree. Such a lesson will serve to demonstrate God’s freedom. The author captures this exercise of freedom by using the verb “to appoint” (*mānāh*) three times in verses 6, 7, and 8. In v.6, God appointed a gourd plant (*qîqāyôn*), probably a castor oil plant, to grow up over Jonah’s head, giving him shade and shielding him from the searing sun (4:6). Jonah was happy with the plant. But the moment of bliss was short-lived. The plant could only give a full day’s shade, enough for Jonah to appreciate its worth to him during his stubborn vigil. The next day, God appointed a worm to attack the gourd plant, and it withered (4:7). In v.8, the Lord appointed a sultry east wind which is complicated by the hot sun which burned mercilessly upon Jonah’s head. The apparent annihilation of the plant angered Jonah and he reiterated his wish to die (4:9). His action betrayed his inconsistency.

The gourd plant and Jonah's anger at its withering became the occasion of a salutary teaching (Swanston, 1972). God questioned Jonah a second time if he had a right to be angry about the destruction of the plant (4:9). It is evident that the reason for his bitterness in chap 4 is linked to the reason for his rebellion in chap 1. Jonah is blinded by his resentment and did not see the parallel between the Lord's concern for men, whether a drowning prophet or the repenting Ninevites (McGowan, 1968). This rhetorical question is central to the whole book and crucial to the narrator's point in telling the story he has (Stuart, 1987). God's questioning implies that Jonah has no right to foist his anger over the demise of the gourd tree. Jonah is angry over the demise of the gourd tree, but is not bordered about the destruction of Nineveh. The plant cost the prophet nothing. It was a twenty-four-hour creation. Its demise was as sudden as its growth. As Craghan (1982) has said, the plant was a sacrament of God's radical ability to give. God retains the right to give favour, including granting mercy, to whoever he wishes. Jonah has no right to question God's operation in the world. God now sees that Jonah is ripe for his final lesson. The book closes with God chiding Jonah, who showed more concern over something ephemeral (the death of a gourd plant). Should not God show concern over Nineveh, which has more than 120, 000 inhabitants?(Jonah 4:10-11). The message of mercy is the underlying theme of the book.

Conflict between Justice and Mercy

What makes the story of Jonah poignant is that Nineveh was the Capital of Assyria, Israel's worst enemy. It was the Assyrians who destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. It was also the Assyrians who under Sennacherib invaded Judah in ca. 701 B.C. Thus, we may understand the ground of Jonah's bitter hatred of Nineveh. Jonah recoiled at God's command to go to Nineveh, Assyria's Capital, and proclaim a message of repentance. The last thing that Jonah wanted was for his enemies to repent and be spared. He knew that God is "a gracious God and merciful," and "ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2). The story has two main characters: Jonah and God, embodying two principles: justice and mercy. Jonah is a proponent of the principle that the sinner should be punished; but God advocates a position that the repentant sinner may obtain mercy. The story of Jonah brings these competing claims face to face. In the dramatic face-off between punishment and mercy, Jonah's accusation against God turns out to be true: God is merciful and ready to relent from punishment. The story underlines the universality of God's mercy, which is the perspective of many of the post-exilic writings.

The story of Jonah shows that divine justice and mercy are not opposed. Sometimes, God demonstrates his justice by showing mercy to the repentant sinner. This reflects the principle of personal accountability in Ezekiel 18. The people of Nineveh of Jonah's time are not to be judged and condemned for the sins of their forefathers; rather, they have the opportunity to repent for their present sins and to experience God's mercy. In this way, the book reveals that

God's sovereignty is universal and his mercy extends to all peoples, reaching out even to the historic enemies of God's people. God's mercy is given in response to true repentance (Leclerc, 2007).

Message of Jonah

The book was written at a time when the Jews who returned from the Babylonian Exiles were still suffering from the effect of the exile. After the exile the Jews had maintained some exclusiveness and tried to cut themselves off from contact with other people. The Jews looked with impatience for God's vengeance on the Gentiles. They regarded themselves as the chosen people and the other people as accursed. The Book reflects the two opposing Schools of thought, the Particularists and the Universalists, within Jewry (Oesterley, 1958). While the Particularists sought to cut themselves off from other nations, the Universalists favoured openness towards other nations.

The Book of Jonah is a criticism of the narrow-minded Jew, who locked in their nationalism, view that Yahweh was only the God of the Jews. The Book is a bold declaration that God is the God of all peoples. This truth is presented in a brilliantly satirized manner. The author sets forth Jonah, the hero of the Book, as the type of the narrow-minded, exclusive Jew, who not only despises all non-Jews, but conceives of Yahweh as the God of the Jews only, and as a God who has no care for the rest of his creation (Oesterley, 1958). Jonah is a religious bigot; he could not bear the thought of God's kindness extended to other people who were not of his own religious group (Murray, 2002). For him, the Assyrians were the enemy. That was why Jonah tried to flee rather than preach repentance to this distasteful people (Igbo, 2020). Jonah's disobedience and despair are not symptoms of a deeper problem: the spirit of intolerance.

The writer opposes the kind of particularism incarnate in Jonah that restricts salvation to Israel and finds the threats to apply unconditionally to other nations (Sellin, 1968). The book stresses that God's mercy is not meant for Israel exclusively, but can be granted to all people. This far-reaching universalism and such unconditional tolerance, as Eissfeldt (1965) observed, were difficult to imagine in the pre-exilic period. It is on this ground that Eissfeldt assigns the Book to the post-exilic period. The narrator demonstrated the fact that God's mercy is universal; it extends to all humans, irrespective of race, nationality, culture, creed or circumstance of life. The author explains with gentle irony how God's mercy extends even to animals of a hated foreign city if they truly repent and turn to Yahweh (Sellin-Fohrer, 1965). This underlines the universalistic outlook of the Book. The main characters of the story are God, Jonah and the pagan sailors. The author contrasts the unforgiving disposition of the Israelite prophet with the open and sympathetic attitude of the other characters of his story – the pagan sailors. These sailors were shocked that Jonah should have disobeyed Yahweh (Jon 1:10). They were equally anxious not to incur Yahweh's anger either by protecting Jonah or by throwing him into the sea.

The author also contrasts between the Ninevites and the Israelites. Jonah's preaching moved the Ninevites to conversion. The pagan Ninevites repented fully and heartily more than Israel had ever done. The Ninevite repentance became an example of unreserved repentance (Stuart, 1987). The irony, as W. J. Harrington writes, is unmistakable: the preaching of the reluctant Jonah met with an immediate and universal response by the Ninevites, whereas the prophets had, over the centuries, preached to the chosen people in vain (Harrington, 1976).

Conclusion

The book of Jonah teaches the important lesson of tolerance. Jonah did not want God's mercy extended to the Ninevites because they are the enemy of God's people. Jonah's attitude is motivated by a spirit of exclusivism. Nineveh could represent those we exclude because they do not share our social and religious roots as depicted in the attitude of Jonah. Humanity shares in a common root as Gen 1 indicates. The teaching of Jonah can be used to bridge social and religious differences among humans. The book stresses the universal expanse of God's mercy. God's love and concern is for all nations. God's word of judgments, even when declared in prophecy, can be averted if genuine repentance occurs. The major literary style of the book is that of irony. Jonah did everything a good prophet should not, from fleeing to refusing to carry out his mission to complaining against God. The hero of the story is not the prophet, but Yahweh, who is glorified through the prophet, or rather, in spite of his ambassador's complete refusal. God's mercy is more powerful than his judgments, and his plan cannot be thwarted even by the negative "righteousness" of his prophet (Boadt, 1984; Von Rad, 1975). In spite of himself, Jonah becomes the most successful missionary of all time. His message was responded to with a total repentance by the Ninevites.

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