

GEORGE W. TRUETT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

JONAH: A MISSEOLOGICAL & BIBLICAL REFLECTION

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In an ancient event recognized by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the God of the Universe promised Abraham to make of him a nation that would be “a blessing to all families of the earth”. (Genesis 12:3) For the vast majority of the Old Testament, the Jews considered this blessing to come through the formation of an attractional nation: with just laws, mercy, and a heart for the poor.¹ This Israel welcomes “God Fearers”, or outsiders who respected YHWH², and has beautiful stories such as the book of Ruth about bringing a foreigner into the people of God. These are great witnesses from the ancient Jews, but a careful reader does not have to dig too deeply into the text to find that the Jews understood their blessing to make them ethnically superior to other nations; one needs simply to read Ezra’s command to destroy any family made with an outsider to see that they considered their ethnic purity to be more important than any external missionary thinking in their culture (Ezra 10:3). It was in the midst of this attractional, yet protective nationalistic culture that a reader will encounter the Old Testament prophet Jonah. Jonah stands unique in the Old Testament as one of a very few characters commanded to active external mission to a foreign people. The book of Jonah serves as a foundational text on mission for the modern Christian church,³ and there is much a contemporary believer can learn from this ancient book. As a missiological text, Jonah serves to teach us about the external missionary nature of God, human resistance, and the ultimate sovereignty of God in the world.

¹ Jonathan Lewis, “Two Forces.” *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. 4th ed. Edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009. 80.

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014) 4th ed. 25.

³ Johannes Verkuyl, “The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate.” *Perspectives: A Reader*, 45.

As the Old Testament revelation draws to a close, the book of Jonah is unequivocally important in displaying the external missionary nature of God; first through the actions of Jonah in the ancient times, and second through the work of Jesus, the “One greater than Jonah” (Matthew 4:21). Set in the weak and floundering Northern Kingdom of Israel, God calls the reluctant Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, 550 miles from the Northern Kingdom capital of Samaria.⁴ Withholding the ancient story of Abraham finding the righteous men of Sodom, no prophet had ever been called to preach repentance far from their people. In fact, the author of the text implies that Jonah did not trust God’s presence to extend beyond the land of Israel, as he attempts to flee “to Tarshish, [away] from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:3). For Jonah, this journey is not solely a realization of God’s desire for external missions in the world, it is in some ways a realization that God indeed inhabits foreign lands at all. As the reluctant Jonah finally sees the people of Nineveh repent before the Lord, God reveals the missionary purpose behind it all in the closing words of the book: “should [God] not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left?” (Jnh 4:11). In this direct revelation from God, the ancient Israeli hearer would encounter the grace of God beyond their own context for the first time, finally bringing into focus a view of the God who cares deeply for the nations, and sends the elect to them. The text of Jonah not only shares this call with an Old Testament audience, but a New Testament audience as well. As Jesus was ministering to a large crowd after sharing the Lord’s Prayer, Luke records the Savior proclaiming that He was a sign to the nations, calling for worldwide repentance as Jonah had years before (Luke 11:29-30). Jesus did not associate

⁴ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1985), 1462.

Himself with Jonah randomly; no this association purposely pointed His listeners to the reality that His repentance was for the Jew and the foreigner⁵. The book of Jonah serves as a cornerstone of the believer's understanding of God's external missionary nature, in both the Old and New Testament. The truth of God's nature in this book is so recognizable and memorable, that Jonah often serves as missionary guide for Christians, even thousands of years after it was written³.

The book of Jonah not only demonstrates God's external mission to the nations, but serves as a vivid depiction of the stubborn and inherently resistant nature of humans. Jonah's nationalistic hate of the Gentiles and continued unwillingness to share the message of God serves to convict a modern reader as they project their own shortcomings and reluctance onto the Prophet. First, Jonah's ethnocentric defiance of God's command serves to remind the reader of their own prejudice and self-centered sin⁶. When Jonah finally preaches to Ninevites, he does not even mention the grace or redemption of God, nor does he imply that they should repent (Jnh 3:4). When the people of Nineveh show sorrow before the Lord and are spared wrath, Jonah becomes angry at God for having grace on this non-Jewish people (Jnh 4:2). This event should jar the audience; Jonah has admitted that he did not want God's grace to extend to a non-Jew. A close reader should ask themselves at this point which people they tend to exclude from the grace of God. Beyond this nagging question, the book of Jonah also shows humanity's petty anger in the face of a transcendent God. As the book comes to a close, God allows a plant to grow and shade the pouting Prophet from the sweltering heat. In the morning, God allows the plant to wither, and the same suicidal self-pity overcomes Jonah that readers saw displayed when Jonah

⁵ Verkuyl, "Biblical Foundation for Mission Mandate" *Perspectives: A Reader*, 48

⁶ Verkuyl, "Biblical Foundation for Mission Mandate" *Perspectives: A Reader*, 47

was angry about the salvation of Nineveh. The audience repeatedly witnesses the Prophet threaten his own suicide in petty anger that God's will is not his. Even as the reader engages in disbelief over Jonah's trivial defiance, the text serves to hold a mirror up to the soul of the audience⁷. Jonah's anger at his own limitations is not unique to this character; it is universal in humanity. When a reader encounters Jonah, they see a runaway, a whiny child, a reluctant prophet, and a defiant God-follower; when a reader encounters Jonah, they see themselves. The hope of the book of Jonah is that God works in spite of Jonah's weakness, and by extension, can work in spite of the reader's inadequacy as well.

Perhaps the ultimate missological application for the book of Jonah is the all sufficiency of God's sovereignty displayed through the whole of the text. God's power and control is displayed vibrantly through the salvation of Nineveh and Jonah himself. First, God moved a city of over 100,000 people to collectively repent at the end of an uninspired, short, damning sermon from Jonah (Jnh 3:6-10). The people were not saved because of Jonah's blunt message of salvation, but the Prophet knows that they were saved because God is "abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster" (Jnh 4:2). Nineveh was saved solely because God chose to save them. God had grace enough for a large city outside of the promised land, and that is cause for celebration. Of all the salvations in the book of Jonah though, one would be negligent to overlook perhaps the most gracious salvation in the text: Jonah's. As a prophet of the Living God, Jonah ran from the Lord. Instead of facing God in the storm, Jonah begged simply to be thrown overboard. Even after thanking God in an eloquent song for his salvation, the Prophet still complains and whines that God has saved evil people, and wishes to die when God allows him to get burned by the sun. In the middle of all this complaining, all this whining and running,

⁷ Colin Smith. *Jonah*. Gospel Transformation Bible. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013. 1193

God finds Jonah, provides for him, and remains in constant communication with him (Jnh 4:10-11). God's sovereign hand of salvation over Jonah doesn't end after the fish spits him safely onto shore, it continues throughout the narrative⁸. This sovereign, salvific work of the Lord reminds the reader that God's message will be spread on this earth, in God's own way and timing. The book of Jonah presents several humanly impossible situations that God redirects with ease, reminding a close reader that ultimate sovereignty belongs to God, and God alone.

The book of Jonah is a rich, captivating primer for the missional follower of YHWH³. The book takes the ancient Jewish perspective of attractional mission, and adds an exciting element of God's external missionary nature to the story. This revelation of missions is a meaningful enough segment of the Old Testament to even become an illustration used by Jesus in two of the Gospels. From this understanding of an intrinsically missionary God, one can go on to see humanity's persistent defiance and self-centered denial of this call. A reader can be convicted from this painful realization, and finish the book as they see God's sovereign, missional hand of salvation running through the text as a common theme, both for the Jew and the Gentiles. Jonah is a powerful Old Testament witness to the importance of mission, and should color any New Testament believer's understanding of the God who calls people to share the Gospel with one another, across the world.

⁸ Verkuyl, "Biblical Foundation for Mission Mandate" *Perspectives: A Reader*, 46

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