

THE THEOLOGY OF JONAH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A Paper

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for OLDTS 3323 A

by

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April 5, 2007

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The book of Jonah is small in terms of its length, but it is great in terms of the impact it has.¹ Jonah teaches explicit theological principles which are consistently applicable throughout the Old Testament, and in turn, applicable to people throughout the ages. The purpose of this paper is to theologically examine the book of Jonah in order to explicate the impact of basic theological tenants of Christianity, examine specificities of who God is, and describe characteristic actions of God shown in Jonah and it's relation to the rest of the Old Testament.

Basic Theological Tenants

The book of Jonah clearly shows basic theological tenants throughout its forty-eight verses. These basic tenants of theology relate to the entire Old Testament.² Specific theological tenants shown throughout Jonah include prayer, God's goodness, death, praise, mercy, obedience, faith, worship, and forgiveness.

Prayer

Jonah's reference toward the Lord's holy temple in 2:5 does not necessarily refer to a literal visit, but it may be a figurative expression of his intention to pray. This took

¹ Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos-Jonah*, The New American Commentary [NAC], vol. 19b, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 203.

² The relation of the basic tenants of theology with the Old Testament will be proven in the following paragraphs.

place despite Jonah's wondering if the Lord would ever actually hear his prayer.³ Prayer is a theological tenant which is shown throughout the Old Testament in passages such as Rebekah's prayer for understanding in Genesis 25:22-25; Moses' prayer for Israel in Exodus 32:30-35; and Job's prayer of fidelity to God in Job 1:20. Jonah's example of the necessity for prayer is shown as a theological tenant in 2:5. Jonah's prayer was not simply to a god. His prayer was to the one and only good God.

Good

Jonah 3:10 teaches that God is good when the English Standard Version⁴ says, "God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it." This theological stance of the goodness of God is shown elsewhere in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 32:3-4 refers to the fact that God can not do or be evil, and is therefore good. Due to this, ה [' 2 r " h ' in the Hebrew text of Jonah 3:10 is translated as *disaster* instead of *evil*.⁵ Although God is good, the fact that he allows death to take place does not take away from his goodness.

Death

The theological reality of death is shown in Jonah 2:7. The phrase in Jonah 2:7, "to the roots of the mountains I sank down" echoes the painful event of Jonah descending into his grave. The verb serves as an important link between the Psalm and the

³ Terence Fretheim, *Jonah*, Message of Jonah (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 102.

⁴ ESV is throughout unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, trans. M.E.J. Richardson [HALOT] (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001), s.v. "ה [r."

surrounding area. The “bases of the mountains” and “bars of the underworld” are both expressions which have a background relating to death. The phrase, “the earth barred me in forever” has been the cause of a great deal of discussion.⁶ It is not certain what the word “bars” is referring to. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, such as in Job 38:10, is found an idea of bolts and doors of the ocean. There it seems the bolts of the sea are the walls of the sea basin.⁷ These multiple references to death in Jonah and Job prove the existence of the reality of death and how God expresses the reality of death in the Old Testament. Not only is there a reality of death in the Old Testament, but praise to the Lord is also explicated throughout the Old Testament.

Praise

The final exclamation of praise within Jonah 2:10, “salvation belongs to the Lord,” honors the Lord in at least two ways. Firstly, it extols his work as Savior.⁸ Secondly, it implicitly extols the Lord’s position as *sole* savior.⁹ This example of praising the Lord is an example of what Psalm 113:1 commands, “Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD!” This same praise shown in Jonah 2:10 and Psalm 113:1 was also shown in 2 Chronicles 20:21 when Jehosaphat led a group of people in front of an army to praise the Lord by saying, “Give thanks to the

⁶ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. Leslie C. Allen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 217.

⁷ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Jonah*, *Commentary on the Old Testament [COT]*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 402.

⁸ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, *Word Biblical Commentary [WBC]*, vol. 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 478.

⁹ *Ibid.*

LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever." Despite the sinful nature of man, God is merciful and allows his creation to praise him.

Mercy

Jonah was given a second chance by the Lord to fulfill his command in Jonah 3:1. The Lord did not have to give Jonah this second chance, but he did. God is merciful, but if he does not give a person a second chance, this does not negate the mercy which he has. There are several examples of God not giving people second chances. Examples of this are found in Genesis 3, Numbers 20:12, and 1 Kings 13:26.¹⁰

Despite the differences in God giving second opportunities to correct what once was a wrong decision, God showed his mercy from the beginning of the Old Testament. God showed his mercy to his creation beginning with Adam and Eve. Despite their direct disobedience to the Lord in Genesis 3:6, the Lord continued to allow them to grace his presence. This experience in Genesis 3 is similar to Jonah 3 in that both teach of the theological truth of the mercy of God. Since God allows mankind to worship him despite the Adamic nature of sin, the Lord seeks obedience from his followers.

Obedience

Jonah 3:3 is a point in the book of Jonah where Jonah was obeying the Lord. Examiners of the Old Testament may learn a positive example of following the will of the Lord as a result of this particular verse. This is the point in the story where Jonah finally obeyed the Lord by traveling to Nineveh. In the following, concluding chapter of Jonah, there is a test of obedience. The obedience took place when Jonah finally

¹⁰ NAC, 255.

submitted to what God called Jonah to do: preach to the Ninevites.¹¹

Jonah knew that God would forgive the people in Jonah 4:2. This was a test of the obedience of the Ninevites. This results from Exodus 34:6-7 as Aaron had misled the people and God spoke of making a nation out of them. This was not pertaining to the sort of God lacking knowledge of what was happening in Jonah's life or the Ninevites' lives. Furthermore, Jeremiah 18:1-10 speaks with direct specificity of a nation sinning against him.

Obedience may also be learned from examining the disobedience of others. Another example of disobedience in the Old Testament is with Cain in Genesis 4. The Hebrew word, *ynEʃp . Līmī* used in Genesis 4:16 is used to describe Cain's broken relationship with the Lord.¹² It is also intended to describe his rebellion against the Lord and the Lord's displeasure with him.¹³ The obedience and disobedience against the Lord contribute to the theological study of praising God. In order to praise God one must have faith in him.

Faith

Jonah 3:5 explicates faith in the Lord when it says, "And the people of Nineveh believed God." Although the Hebrew can be literally translated, "and the men of Nineveh believed in God," this phrase does not carry the same significance as the modern

¹¹ David Albert Farmer, "Jonah: 3-4," *Interpretation* 54 no. 1 (January, 2000): 64.

¹² HALOT, s.v. "nml"

¹³ NAC, 227.

understanding of “in God,” denoting a conversion to faith.¹⁴ Despite it not necessarily denoting conversion, it does denote faith in the belief of God and who he is. This example of faith in Jonah 3:5 relates elsewhere in the Old Testament such as Job 39:12 when it says, “Do you have faith in him that he will return your grain and gather it to your threshing floor?” Job had faith in the Lord despite losing many things and people who were close to him. The faith represented by the people of Nineveh and Job resulted in worshiping God.

Worship

Jonah 3:8 reveals an example of pure worship before the Lord. This is specifically shown in this verse when it says, “let them call out mightily to God.” In the Hebrew text the adverb, *h̄q " + z > x ' B .*, is translated literally into English as, “with strength.”¹⁵ This perhaps “serves as a device by which to gauge the depth of a worshiper’s conviction.”¹⁶ This possible gauge of a worshiper’s depth shows evidence of the existence of worship in the book of Jonah. Worship in the book of Jonah relates to the rest of the Old Testament in that the latter portion of Deuteronomy 26:10 where it says, “worship before the LORD your God.” The proclamation of worship by Jonah to Nineveh obeys the command of Deuteronomy 26:10. In order to have fellowship with the Holy Spirit to worship, a person must seek forgiveness of their sins, and then proceed to worship the Lord. Worship is a basic theological tenant to glorify God which, in turn,

¹⁴ John H. Walton, “The Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5-7 and the Purpose of the Book of Jonah,” *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 53.

¹⁵ NAC, 267.

¹⁶ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah*, Anchor Bible Dictionary [ABD], vol. 24b (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 258.

causes Christians to learn more about God.¹⁷

Basic theological tenants such as prayer, goodness, death, praise, mercy, obedience, faith, and worship are all present within Jonah. The relationships of these basic theological tenants exist throughout the Old Testament, and also assist in comprehending who God is.

Specificities of Who God Is

An attempt to describe God may prove to be difficult due to the enigmatic tendencies of attempting to capture who he is while humans lack the ability to come close to fully capturing who he is. Despite this difficulty, the book of Jonah describes several basic theological specificities of who God is which coincide with the basic theological tenants of God. One specific quality of God is his sovereignty.

The Sovereignty of God

Jonah 4:8 describes the sovereignty of God when it says, “God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint.” The word *hnm* in Jonah 4:8 is not used flippantly. It shows the Lord’s intention to demonstrate His control and sovereignty over creation.¹⁸ The sovereignty of God is complete power over everything in existence, and every situation which has the propensity to take place.¹⁹

¹⁷ James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1995), 202.

¹⁸ NAC, 279.

¹⁹ Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth and Thomson Learning, 2002), 122.

The complete power of God, sovereignty, is also seen in Exodus 14:21 when God used His power to work through Moses to part the red sea. Another example of the sovereignty of God in the Old Testament is found in Exodus 20:2-17 when the Lord spoke to Moses through a burning bush. Jonah 4:8; Exodus 14:21; and Exodus 20:2-17 are all examples of the sovereignty of God in the Old Testament. With God's sovereignty also comes His wrath.

The Wrath of God

In Jonah 1:11 the wrath of God is evident when it says, "For the sea grew more and more tempestuous." At most, the sailors may think they know what Baal, for example, would require in such a situation; but this situation stems from the Lord's punishment of a person.²⁰ God's wrath is often equated with the end times spoken in Revelation,²¹ but it is also evident throughout the Old Testament. God's wrath is present in Zechariah 11:17 when the wrath of God is inflicted upon those who worship idols. Zechariah 11:17 says, "Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!" This is a clear depiction of the wrath of God in the Old Testament to coincide with the existence of God's wrath in Jonah 1:11. Although the comprehension of why God would inflict his wrath upon people or things may be difficult to comprehend, it is ultimately due to His will.

²⁰ WBC, 462.

²¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1999), 1227.

The Will of God

God's will is the ultimate reason for all things which happen.²² Jonah 1:16 portrays an example of the will of God when it says, "they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows." God has a plan for His followers, and the ultimate reasoning for that is for God to be glorified. Both the act of making a sacrifice and the act of making a vow are both acts of following God's will of glorifying him.

The book of Jonah relates elsewhere in the Old Testament regarding the subject of God's will. Deuteronomy 12:26 says, "and you shall go to the place that the LORD will choose." Moses knew God would choose a single place. Because of this, it is probable that the sailors in the book of Jonah had a single place: Jerusalem. The place where Solomon built the temple was Mount Moriah, and this was a place where sacrifices could be truly offered.²³ When seeking God's will the timing which God uses is in need of study.

The Timing of God

Jonah 1:17²⁴ says, "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." The specific declaration of time mentioned in Jonah 1:17 proves that God uses timing for a reason. There are other examples in the Old Testament of God using time tables. One example is found in Esther 4:15-5:1 where Esther asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa and in the former portion of Esther 4:16 she said, "hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day." The book of Jonah relates to the rest of

²² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 211.

²³ WBC, 465.

²⁴ The Hebrew text creates a break with this verse to be Jonah 2:1 as opposed to a majority of

the Old Testament in that God uses his timing to achieve his will. Other examples of God's timing throughout the Old Testament are found in Joshua 9:16-17; 1 Kings 12:5, 13; and 1 Samuel 30:11-13. Specificities of who God is and basic theological tenants of God is are both crucial in determining how the book of Jonah relates to the Old Testament. Additionally, there are characteristic actions of God which contribute to proving how Jonah relates to the rest of the Old Testament in a theological sense.

Characteristic Actions of God

Some characteristic actions of God revealed in Jonah which theologically relate to the rest of the Old Testament include God revealing himself, God sending people, the thought process of God, and God's reactions to those who run from him. The revelation of God is a distinct characteristic of who he is.

God Revealing Himself

Jonah 1:1 is a passage where God chose to speak to Jonah when the beginning portion of the verse says, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah." The Lord revealed himself in Scripture to different people in various ways. God revealed himself through a dream in Genesis 37. God revealed himself through a "still, small voice" in 1 Kings 19:9-13. God also revealed himself through sensational means such as whirlwinds or earthquakes in Job 38.

Jonah 1:7 teaches that God revealed himself through the casting of lots. Casting of lots in Jonah 1:7 also related to Joshua 7:14-18 as the lots determined the guilt of Achan. Casting of lots was also a way God revealed himself to tell the tribes of Israel

English texts which call refer to it as Jonah 1:17

which land belonged to which tribe in Joshua 18:10. God even revealed himself through lots as he selected Saul as king in 1 Samuel 10:20-22.²⁵ After God revealed himself to people, he often sent those same people to carry out tasks to glorify his kingdom.

God Sending People

Jonah 1:2 teaches that God has a characteristic action of sending people. This is shown when Jonah 1:2 says, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city.” God was sending Jonah to Nineveh to proclaim the truths of God. God sending people relates to other portions of the Old Testament such as when God sent Isaiah in Isaiah 45:22 as it says, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Another example in the Old Testament of God sending a person is when God commanded Elijah to “Arise, go to Zarephath,” in 1 Kings 17:9. God sends people, and makes a decision to do so. The thought process of God is a factor in sending people.

The Thought Process of God

In Jonah 3:10 God reveals that he is responsive to his creation. Jonah 3:10 says, “God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.” This verse does not mean God’s character or his passion changes. Numbers 23:19 contributes to this belief when it says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” Again and again the Old Testament relays the truth that God is responsive to his creation.²⁶

²⁵ NAC, 232.

²⁶ Fretheim, 114.

God responded to his creation in accordance with what he revealed of himself elsewhere in Scripture. Jeremiah 18:7-10 is the “locus classicus” of the OT teaching on the contingency of prophetic warning and revelation.²⁷ God’s thought process of responding to his creation is a distinct characteristic action of God. Coinciding with the thought process of God is recognizing the consequences of running from God.

Consequences of Running from God

God does not allow people to seek escape from his will without consequences. Jonah 1:12 reveals this when it says, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea...for I know that on account of me this great storm *has come* upon you.” The sea is obviously Yahweh’s device for punishment; so if the crew will throw Jonah into the sea, it will do the work Yahweh intended it to do, and the sailors can have peace.²⁸ Martin Luther examined this verse and said, “Jonah does not say the waves and the billows of the sea went over me; but thy waves and thy billows, because he felt in his conscience that the sea with its waves and billows was the servant of God and of His wrath, to punish sin.”²⁹ Deuteronomy 24:16 reiterates the consequences of running from God when it points out that “everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.” Jonah knew God was not out to punish the sailors. Jonah was being sensitive to the sailors.

Jonah 2:4 also contains a statement made by Jonah pertaining to him running from God and having to cope with the consequences of his disobedience when the former portion of the verse says, “So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight.’” This

²⁷ WBC, 495.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ COT, 357.

example of Jonah running from God results in consequences which parallel with Deuteronomy 24:16.

The book of Jonah continually characterized God's actions. God's revelation of himself, his actions of sending people, God's thought process, and the consequences of running from him are all present in the book of Jonah, but also throughout the Old Testament. These characteristic actions of God exemplify who God is in Jonah as well as the entire Old Testament.

Conclusion

As the purpose of this paper has been to explicate the impact of basic theological tenants of Christianity, examine specificities of who God is, and describe characteristic actions of God within Jonah and its relation to the rest of the Old Testament, it is evident that these forty-eight verses about a supposed minor prophet make this book major in terms of the impact it has throughout the rest of the Old Testament. As Jonah is perhaps the most ridiculed book in the Bible³⁰, so does this ridicule ultimately reflect the scrutiny under which the Old Testament undertakes.

Jonah is more than just another book out of the thirty-nine in the Old Testament. Jonah is a reflection of theology represented throughout the Old Testament. Jonah's relation to the Old Testament in terms of theology is present throughout its verses. From Christianity's basic theological tenants, to God's specificities, and even to the characteristic actions of God, Jonah relates all of them to the rest of the Old Testament.

³⁰ O.S. Hawkins, *Jonah: Meeting the God of the Second Chance* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1990), 14.

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