

THE BOOK OF JONAH:
REVEALING THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

by

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ABSTRACT
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The central purpose of the Book of Jonah is to reveal the attributes of God. In the historical account of Jonah, the Lord brings glory to himself by using elements, animals, and even the choices of men to accomplish his perfect will. While God does not require the efforts of man to call the elect to himself, he uses his imperfect vessels so his sovereignty, immutability, goodness, and righteousness can be better magnified. In this way, the Book of Jonah reveals the attributes of God as the Lord brings his salvation to a sinful and rebellious people.

As the reader focuses in on God's attributes in the Book of Jonah, the short narrative is seen for what it truly is. Jonah is a book which shows the reader how God is deeply involved in the details of lives of his creation. Jonah aids the reader in seen the substance and purpose of God's actions. As his sovereignty, immutability, goodness, righteousness are revealed his grace and mercy toward his elect is made evident. God's attributes, as revealed in Jonah, allow the reader to more clearly comprehend the passion God has for his creation and for his own glory.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Jonah is one of the most studied books of Scripture, and this has resulted in thousands of years of theological discussion surrounding the book. Throughout the history of the Christian church this seemingly simple work has caused radically diverse views on countless theological issues and subplots. Jonah's historicity, place in cannon, translation matters, and major theological themes have caused many likeminded Christians to hold opposing interpretations on the text. Unfortunately, some have asserted views on Jonah, which are difficult to support using the original Hebrew text, outside research, or Christian prudence. Scholars, both within and without the Christian church, have studied Jonah for a variety of reasons. The Book of Jonah is one of the most analyzed biblical texts in history. Starting with the early church fathers and continuing to today, views on Jonah have resulted in an inordinate amount of written and spoken discourse.

The Book of Jonah is, in many ways, unique among the Minor Prophets and arguably the rest of Scripture. While the book is named after the Israelite Prophet Jonah, it is God who is proven to be the central character of the text. While the story surrounding Jonah certainly provides valuable instruction and direction for the Christian reader, it is, however, God who is shown to be the occasion for the account. From the first words of the text to the rare concluding question, the attributes of God are drawn out and made clear to better emphasize his majesty.

Secular historians, literary scholars, thousands of years of biblical researchers, and even tenants of other faiths hold views on the value of the Book of Jonah. The fish, the prophet, the worm and the Assyrians all play valuable supporting roles in explaining the attributes of God. The Book of Jonah succinctly and artfully tells the story of a good, sovereign, and immutable Creator who uses all of creation to administer his righteous will to call his elect people to himself. God's glory is on display through the events in Jonah to show his boundless mercy and grace to humanity.

The literary and historical aspects of the Book of Jonah tell an intriguing narrative. Indeed, the prophet and his surroundings provide wonderful examples from which the reader can learn. However, it is the exclusive attributes of God which are revealed as the central function for the Book of Jonah. The writings and teachings of our church fathers, outside sources, and the inerrant text of both the OT and NT show a short, but powerful, book that communicates much to the reader concerning the unmatched qualities of God.

With that said, the present thesis will argue that the central purpose of the Book of Jonah is to reveal the attributes of God. In the historical account of Jonah, the sovereign Lord brings glory to himself by using elements, animals, and even the choices of men to accomplish his perfect will. While God does not require the efforts of man to call the elect to himself, he chooses to sovereignly use human beings and creation itself to display his infinite justice, mercy, love, and goodness towards it. In this way, the Book of Jonah reveals the attributes of God as the Lord brings his salvation to a sinful and rebellious people.

Literature Review

The Book of Jonah has been discussed and debated since long before the birth of Jesus. An untold number of sermons, books, and articles have been produced on topics surrounding the wayward prophet. Throughout its nearly 3,000 years of analyses the significance, criticism, and focus regarding Jonah have changed. Certainly, early Jewish and Christian theologians saw Jonah differently. In addition, time and sectarian divisions caused evolving suppositions of Jonah. The fluidity of Christian theological understanding of the Book of Jonah has created wide gaps, even among likeminded theologians. In recent years, Jonah has seen an explosion of critical and favorable attention. Substantive work, while differing through the centuries, has been dedicated to the Book of Jonah.

As early as the 1st century Christian theologians have been prominently discussing Jonah and the impact it has on the Christian church and our understanding of Yahweh. Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome produced two of the earliest surviving manuscripts which discuss Jonah and his journey to Nineveh. In addition, Jewish authors were discussing Jonah hundreds of years before Ignatius and Clement. For millennium, Jonah has fostered a wide range of textual criticism, reliability of substance, and intent of the inspired author.

In the first millennia, much of the earliest Christian writing done on Jonah were in the form of letters and patristic commentaries. A large percentage of the work done on Jonah by the early church fathers was dedicated to addressing the issue of the miraculous nature of the Book of Jonah. The fanciful nature of the story of Jonah created doubt in Christians and pagans alike. The early writers responded to miraculous claims of a man surviving being swallowed by a fish, the improbability of an entire city converting, and the strange details

surrounding the worm and the fast-growing plant. Augustine addressed the following question via letter:

In the next place, what are we to believe concerning Jonah, who is said to have been three days in a whale's belly? The thing is utterly improbable and incredible, that a man swallowed with his clothes on should have existed in the inside of a fish. If, however, the story is figurative, be pleased to explain it. Again, what is meant by the story that a gourd sprang up above the head of Jonah after he was vomited by the fish? What was the cause of this gourd's growth?¹

A large effort was spent in the earliest literature focusing in on the sovereignty of God and the miracles contained in the Book of Jonah. In addition, the miracles caused the critics of Jonah represent Jonah as an allegorical tale. The early authors were forced to defend the historicity of Jonah.

In the centuries leading up to the Reformation many Christian authors began looking at the Book of Jonah in a more substantive light. The middle ages are when the Christian church began to experience a great increase of theologians who saw Jonah as a book which had much to say about the qualities and attributes of God. Thomas Aquinas said:

Further, God's foretelling of the punishment of the damned belongs to the prophecy of commination. Now the prophecy of commination is not always fulfilled: as appears from what was said of the destruction of Nineve (Jonas 3); and yet it was not destroyed as foretold by the prophet, who also was troubled for that very reason (4:1). Therefore it would seem that much more will the threat of eternal punishment be commuted by God's mercy for a more lenient punishment, when this will be able to give sorrow to none but joy to all.²

Jonah was seen not simply as a tale of a prophet, fish, and worm, but as a rich writing which provided great insight into understanding the Creator of the Universe.

¹ Augustine of Hippo, "Letters of St. Augustin," in *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin with a Sketch of His Life and Work*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. G. Cunningham, vol. 1, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886), 423.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washburn, 1942), Supplementum. Q99. A3.

As the Protestant Reformation began to unfold the Reformers, focusing on sola scriptura, contributed to a great acceleration of the literal interpretation about the Book of Jonah. As the inerrancy of Scripture became more central, scholars moved away from seeing Jonah as a historical tale and toward a historical account.

As with the rest of Scripture, the inerrancy of Jonah is pivotal in establishing a foundation for Christian doctrine. Martin Luther stated, “But this story of the prophet Jonah is so great that it is almost unbelievable, yes it even sounds like a lie, and more full of nonsense than any poet’s fable. If it were not in the Bible, I’d consider it a silly lie.”³ The fanciful nature of Jonah would be absurd if it were not for being included in cannon.

The Reformers also dedicated much to the topic of God relenting or changing his mind about Nineveh (3:9–10). If the inerrancy of Scripture tells the Christian the Bible is true, the issue of a consistent God had to be addressed. John Calvin wrote:

It is certain that God was freely pacified towards the Ninevites, as he freely restores his favour daily to us. Jonah then did not mean that satisfactions availed before God, as though the Ninevites made compensations for their former sins. The words mean no such thing; but he shows it as a fact which followed, that God was pacified, because the Ninevites repented.⁴

The immutability of God is an imperative aspect of salvation. The Reformers understood God was reliable and never changing and wanted to make that clear in their works.

The Puritan writers spent much time looking at the character of Jonah and what he told the audience about Christian life. Many of the theologians of this period saw the sins of Jonah present in all men and desired to know what the story told us about ourselves. John Bunyan said. “For the nature of sin, as sin, is not only to be vile, but to hide its vileness from

³ R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2007), 12.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Jonah, Micah, Nahum*, vol. 3. trans. John Owen. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 114.

the soul. Hence many think they do well when they sin. Jonah thought he did well to be angry with God.”⁵ Living a life focused on God’s will was not Jonah’s highpoint, but Christians can learn both positives and negatives from the prophet’s character and actions.

In the modern era, there has been a proliferation of books dedicated to the story of Jonah and prominent references in commentaries. In early years, the divide could roughly be broken into two camps: theological liberals saw Jonah as fiction and theological conservatives viewed Jonah as historical. In more recent times, that line has been blurred. It is common to view the book as didactic fiction or allegorical. Rofé calls Jonah a prophetic parable⁶, while Eissfeldt says it is legend.⁷ And, Peter Kreeft says that, “some stories are literary fictions—for example, the parables, perhaps Jonah, probably Job.”⁸ Walter Elwell disagrees when he says, “There seems to be no convincing reason for rejecting the historicity of the Book of Jonah on the basis of the arguments generally given.”⁹ The abundance of modern writings on the Book of Jonah believe the debate over fact or fiction is important.

The Book of Jonah contains sufficient substantive theology to warrant large amounts of critical analyses. But, when it is factored in that Jonah is mentioned eight times in the Gospels, more than any other Minor Prophet, it can be understood why Jonah has played such a significant role in Christian scholarship.

⁵ John Bunyan, *The Acceptable Sacrifice* (Seaside, OR: Rough Draft Printing, 2013), 52.

⁶ Alexander Rofé, “Classes in the Prophetic Stories” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1974), 143–164.

⁷ O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell’s, 1965), pp. 403–406.

⁸ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 212.
Journal of Biblical Literature

⁹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1206.

CHAPTER 2

HERMENUTICS

Of the twelve Minor Prophets, Jonah is the most unusual. The prophet Jonah has been described as a caricature of a Jewish prophet,¹⁰ and Jonah's portrayal as a prophetic anti-hero is somewhat comical. God's fulfillment of his promises is portrayed through Jonah's humorous attempt to flee the omnipresent God. Then after Jonah flees in disobedience, God saves his servant by sending a big fish to save him, and then vomit him to God's desired destination. In Nineveh, the animals wear sackcloth, and outside the city of Nineveh, Jonah is perplexed by work of a worm. At times the book of Jonah looks more like a Warner Brothers cartoon than it does a prophetic book of Scripture.

The Book of Jonah is more about what God does and does not do than it is about what Jonah will and will not do. If read with an appropriate focus on God, the character of Jonah is not the focus of the tale. Instead it is God's sovereignty, mercy and justice which is on display. This does not mean the character and actions of Jonah should be ignored. Instead, Jonah and his motivations shed light on God's glory in the daily lives of his creation.

Scholarly debate surrounds the book of Jonah as to whether it should be viewed as historical or allegorical. In the past, the division was clear; theological liberals believed Jonah was an allegory because of all the supernatural references (e.g., the fish, the worm, the

¹⁰ Gottfried Vanoni, *Das Buch Jona: Literar-und formkritische Untersuchung* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1978), 151.

city repenting, etc.), while theological conservatives viewed Jonah as historical, due to literal Scripture interpretation.

In support of the allegorical interpretation, scholars have noted that irony is a common feature of satire. Satire is characterized by the preponderance of the absurd, fantastic, or distorted elements of ridicule and parody. A man-eating fish who vomits Jonah onto the land, animals sporting sackcloth, and plants which appear and disappear within a day, all signal the possibility the book of Jonah is intended to be read as satire. If this were the case, the reader would also expect elements of irony to be present throughout the book.¹¹

The contemporary scholastic divide is not so clearly defined as it once was. Conservative commentators are starting to move into the allegorical camp. It is not that conservatives no longer believe in God's supernatural power. Instead, many conservative theologians now view Jonah as a parable because of the literary nature of the story. Conservatives note the book's poetic nature, its fanciful exaggeration, and its use of literary artistry as indicating the Book of Jonah is likely a parable.

The present thesis does not follow this trend but contends that Jonah should be read as a historical account. However, it is important to mention that the end point is the same whether the Book of Jonah is historical or allegorical: The book is about God and his glory. Yahweh is a great and merciful God, and he loves to dispense his mercy and justice on whom he chooses. In addition, the book is about God's disciples and their practice of placing their personal desires ahead of God's sovereign will. These two central points of the book are present regardless of the hermeneutical approach employed.

¹¹ David Marcus, "From Balaam to Jonah," 9–10. Millar Burrows identifies Jonah with satire ("The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 80–107.

With that said, six reasons for why the book should be read as a historical account include: 1) Both the OT and NT confirm Jonah was a prophet; 2) Jonah 1:1 is like other prophetic introductions; 3) 2 Kings 14:25 says Jonah's father was Amittai and Jonah was from Gath-hepher, north of Joppa; 4) Jesus said he was a sign like Jonah (Luke 11:29–32); 5) Jesus said Jonah was in the fish (Mat. 12:38–42); 6) Nearly all geographical references in the book (apart from the uncertain location of Tarshish) have been historical verified.

Significantly, the title character of the book represents Israel (as well as modern disciples of Jesus) in the following ways: 1) Jonah echoes the defiance in Israel and today's Christian; 2) Jonah's fleeing shows the shame of disobedience in Israel's and Christian disciples; 3) Preaching to Nineveh represents Israel and modern Christianity's neglect in global evangelism; 4) Jonah places himself ahead of God's glory as do Israel and modern Christians. It is helpful to read this thesis with these four points in mind.

Scripture

The facts behind Jonah, when compared to other Minor Prophets, have a disproportionally high rate of reference throughout the rest of Scripture. Jonah himself is mentioned 29 times in 25 verses of the English Bible, and 11 of them are found in other biblical books. In the OT, Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, referencing Jonah's father as Amittai and Jonah himself being from Gath-hepher (a town north of Joppa). This verse mentions Jonah by name and his title as a prophet. While brief, it indicates that Jonah was a successful prophet who faithfully delivered a true word of the Lord to King Jeroboam II (ca. 793–753 B.C.). Since many predate 2 Kings 14 before the book of Jonah, some scholars speculate that the author of the book named his prophet after the Jonah of 2 Kings 14 to make

him appear historical.¹² The Hebrew translation for Jonah's father as Amittai (אִמִּיטַי) means "truthful" or "loyal." This reference in 2 Kings 14:25 of Amittai as Jonah's father is restated in the first verse of the Book of Jonah. Nothing else is known of Jonah's father.

The NT mentions Jonah by name 10 times (Mat. 12:39, 40, 41, 16:4, 17, Luk. 11:29, 30, 32). In fact, every time his name occurs in the NT it is spoken by Jesus. Jesus references Jonah's tale as a prophecy pointing to his own resurrection (Mat. 12:40), and Jesus mentions Jonah's interaction with Nineveh as a historical fact (Luk. 11:29).

Jesus affirms Jonah's title as prophet (Mat. 12:39) and confirms Jonah preached to Nineveh (Mat. 12:41, Luk. 11:32). The Lord Jesus explains Jonah was a prophetic sign (Mat. 16:4, Luk. 11:29, 30) and describes how God's plan for Nineveh to repent was successful, as the people of Nineveh are with Yahweh and will judge future generations (Mat. 12:41, Luk. 11:32). According to Jesus, both Jonah and Nineveh were real and historical figures. By Jesus' own words the tale of Jonah is factual and not simply wisdom literature.

The most salient fact pointing to true existence of Jonah is he was referenced by Christ. Beyond the simple mentioning of Jonah, Jesus uses the prophet as a reference to the prophecy that Christ himself will be raised after three days. If Jonah's account was not understood as historical, Christ's prophecy would be viewed with greater skepticism.

Also, Nineveh is mentioned 20 times in 19 verses in Scripture. There are 11 references to Nineveh outside of the Book of Jonah (Gen. 10:11, 12; 2Kings 19:36; Isa. 37:37; Nah. 1:1, 2:8, 3:7; Zeph. 2:13; Mat. 12:41; Luk. 11:30, 32). The historical existence of Nineveh has been confirmed in secular writings and throughout the Abrahamic religions. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which was a hated enemy of Israel. It was located

¹² E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 40.

northeast of Israel and was a numerically and geographically large city (see 1:2, 3:2, 4:11, where Yahweh says Nineveh as “great”).¹³ In 612 BC, Nineveh disappeared completely after it fell to the Medes and the Babylonians, and since the Book of Jonah was written well after that time, it was always obvious to the implied audience of the book, that Nineveh would not flourish long after Jonah’s departure.¹⁴

The port city of Joppa is referenced 14 times in 14 verses in Scripture, and 13 of these occurrences are outside of the Book of Jonah (Josh. 19:46; 2 Chron. 2:16; Ezra 3:7; Acts 9:36, 38, 42, 43, 10:5, 8, 23, 32, 11:5, 13). Joppa is most prominently mentioned in Acts 10 where Peter has his food vision in preparation for his interaction with Cornelius. When Solomon built the Jerusalem temple (and when it was rebuilt), wood was brought by ship to Joppa and then carried overland to Jerusalem (2 Chro. 2:15–16; Ezra 3:7). Joppa has been identified as the modern port city of Jaffa in the southern part of Tel Aviv. It is associated with biblical and secular history as well as Greek mythology.

Jonah’s alternative destination of Tarshish is mentioned 28 times in Scripture in 24 verses. Tarshish is referenced 24 times outside of the Book of Jonah (Gen. 10:4; 1 Kings 10:22, 22:48; 1 Chron. 1:7, 7:10; 2 Chron. 9:21, 20:36, 37; Esth. 1:14, Ps. 48:7, 72:10; Isa. 2:16, 23:1, 6, 10, 14, 60:9, 66:19; Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 27:12, 25, 38:13). While many locations have been speculated to be the location of Tarshish, its geography is not known today. Scripture says Tarshish was as a leader in the shipping industry (1 Kings 10:22, 22:48; 1 Chron. 9:21; Ps. 48:7; Isa. 2:16, 23:1, 14, 60:9; Ezek. 27:25) and was known for wealth and commerce (Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 27:12, 38:13). It was a prominent destination city in Scripture.

¹³ James Robson, “Undercurrents in Jonah,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 64 (2013): 201–203.

¹⁴ Carolyn Sharp, “Wrestling the Word: Submission and Resistance as Holy Hermeneutical Acts,” *Anglican Theological Review* 97 (2015): 16–17.

The Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Jewish Targum of Jonathan all reference Tarshish as Carthage, the Mediterranean port city. Other secular and religious sources have identified dozens of places as the location of Tarshish, including Briton, Spain, India, and Zimbabwe.

It is credible to attest Scripture views Jonah as a historical figure. The person of Jonah is prominently mentioned in both the OT and NT. Jonah was perceived by the authors of the NT to be a vital OT character. Jonah is mentioned in the NT more than all the other Minor Prophets combined. Scripture attests Jonah had great theological and historical significants.

Non-Canonical Sources

Jonah is a character who has influenced many cultures outside of the Christian worldview. Historians, anthropologists, and theologians, have hypothesized about non-Biblical connections to the Book of Jonah. Jonah's influence, beyond the disciples of Yahweh, covers thousands of years, countless cultures, and numerous religions.

Primary Sources

In Judaism, the book of Jonah is the Haftarah reading for the Mincha service on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. It is read as a desire to focus God's people on the forgiveness God grants those who turn from evil.

In the deuterocanonical Book of Tobit (Tobias in the Vulgate), Jonah is mentioned twice in the fourteenth chapter. The conclusion of this story finds Tobit's son, Tobias at 127 years of age, rejoicing at the news of Nineveh's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus in apparent fulfillment of Jonah's prophecy against the Assyrian capital. Tobias is part of the Catholic and Orthodox biblical canon. It was originally pronounced canonical by

the Council of Hippo in 393, which has been confirmed several times, including at the Council of Trent in 1546.

Jonah plays a role in Islam. The tenth chapter of the Qur'an contains Surah Yunus (Jonah) with 109 verses, named after the same man. The account of Jonah in the Qur'an has some similarities to the story in the Christian Bible, but the story is substantially different.

An Indian collection of tales called Kathasaritsagara dates to the 11th century B.C., and was written by a Shaivas named Somadeva. One of its stories recounts the tale of Saktideva who was swallowed by a large fish and emerged unscathed.¹⁵ Somadeva's work contained Indian legends, tales, and folk stories, and it was originally written in Sanskrit.

Geographically speaking, there are four different locations reported to be the site of Jonah's grave. According to some, Jonah is buried in the city of his birth, Gath-hepher in Israel. The city still retains its original name. Muslim tradition says Jonah is buried in the Palestinian city of Halhul on the West Bank. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) believes it destroyed the tomb of Jonah in July of 2014 near the city of Mosul, Iraq. For others, Jonah's grave is believed to be near the city of Sarepta, Lebanon.

These non-Christian sources indicate the legend of Jonah has traveled far beyond Christianity and had influence among other worldviews. While they do not prove the details of the Jonah of the Bible, they increase the probability the legend has validity. As the particulars of the Jonah tale appear in additional religious and culture legends, our Jonah's factual existence appears more likely.

¹⁵ Thomas Williams Doane, *Bible Myths and Their Parallels in Other Religions* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 77–78.

Other Sources

The facts of the tale of Jonah appear in the tales of other cultures. Jonah-like nuances exist in tales from other worldviews. It can be asserted the impactful nature of the legend of Jonah has transcended cultures and the characteristics of our Prophet have found themselves in the tales of other worldviews.

There exists a long-standing tradition among sailors in calling someone “a Jonah.” The nomenclature refers to a passenger or fellow sailor, whose presence on a ship brings bad luck and endangers all aboard the vessel.¹⁶ The reference is derogatory and identifies a person who is to be avoided on seagoing vessels.

A connection has been made between the Book of Jonah and the 4,000-year-old poem, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.¹⁷ In tablet 11 of the Mesopotamian tale, Gilgamesh travels to the bottom of the sea by connecting stones to his feet. There he retrieves a plant which is thought to have rejuvenating properties.

Many similar characteristics have been found between the Book of Jonah and several Greco-Roman sources. Gildas Hamel points to Greek vases and to the accounts of Apollonius of Rhodes, Gaius Valerius Flaccus, and Orphic Argonautica as tales comparable to Jonah. Similarities exist in names of characters, the use of a dove, the relation of fleeing to storms, the perspective of mariners, sea animals swallowing the hero, and the use of a gourd.¹⁸ The similarities, while not believed to be direct connections to Jonah, are plentiful.

¹⁶ “Afflicted with a Jonah; The Sea Captain's Fear of Parsons Sons,” New York Times, March 6, 1885; available from <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9404E0D81330E433A25755C0A9659C94649FD7CF>; Internet; accessed March 4, 2017.

¹⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 90–95.

¹⁸ Gildas Hamel, “Taking the Argo to Nineveh: Jonah and Jason in a Mediterranean Context,” *Judaism* 44 (1995), 341-359.

Greek mythology says Hercules was swallowed by a sea monster where he remained for three-days and nights.¹⁹ The sea monster had been sent by Poseidon to destroy Troy. Hercules slew the sea monster in an effort to save King Laomedon's daughter.

Biblical scholars have speculated Jonah may have been a contributing factor in the inspiration behind Oannes, the mythical figure in late Babylonian lore.²⁰ Oannes, also called Adapa by the Mesopotamians, possessed the body of a fish under that of a human. Oannes was thought to have brought wisdom to man.

Many of the details of the Jonah tale have crossed cultures, geographies and languages. These non-canonical stories which bare resemblance to Jonah do not prove the existence of the Jonah from Gath-Hepher. However, the frequent occurrences of Jonah-like details appearing as aspects of tales from other worldviews does increase the probability that our true to life Jonah has impacted legends around the world. The prevalence of the aspects of Jonah's legend crossing geographic and cultural boundaries increases the probability it is not simple a tale from the Abrahamic tradition.

Literary Elements

Much has been made regarding the literary aspects of the Book of Jonah. The author of the book went to great pains to ensure the writing would be full of literary tools to aid the creative storytelling. The abundance of literary devices has been used as proof by many theologians that the book is not historical but literary fancy. Critics claim, if the book is artistry it can have no historical value.

¹⁹ William Kenrick, *London Review of English and Foreign Literature* (San Bernardino: Ulan Press, 2012), 504.

²⁰ H. Clay Trumbull, "Jonah in Nineveh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 2 (1892): 56.

The literary tools in Jonah are too abundant to be anything but intentional. Few canonical texts can match the depth and artistry of the Book of Jonah. The literary majesty has increased the frequency to which Jonah has been studied inside and outside of Christian scholarship.

The poetic and literary tools are used to draw attention to the Book and Jonah and are used to aide hearers of the tale to better remember the text. An artistic rendering of Jonah has set it apart and caused many to study its truths, who would not otherwise delve into Scripture. The creative mental images and word play have lent themselves to a narrative which is more easily remembered and more frequently shared. The author greatly valued the story he was charged with telling and desperately desired the Book of Jonah to permeate the hearts and cultures of men.

Throughout Scripture the authors use repeating imagery to stress importance. The Book of Jonah is full of this device. Two such examples in Jonah are the use of the words “down” and “arise.” The use of “down” is a literary tool used in chapter one to represent the prophet’s emotions and his separation from God. As the story progresses Jonah goes down to Joppa (1:3), then down into the ship (1:3), then down into the inner part of the ship (1:5) and then he laid down to sleep (1:5). At the end of the chapter, he reaches the depth of his state by going down into the water. “Arise” appears three times (1:2, 6; 3:2) and “arose” appears three times (1:3; 3:3, 6). The term is a common command given by God to his disciples. It appears over 200 times in the OT and over 40 times in the NT. It denotes urgency and warrants obedience. It is mirrored three times in chapter one when Jonah was not obedient and three times in chapter three when he was obedient to God’s commands. The repetitions

of “down,” “arise,” “anger,” “hurled” and others, add emphasis to the characters of both God and Jonah.

The use of inclusio is a way of bracketing a section or idea by encompassing the concept in repeated actions. The fish provides an inclusio for Jonah and his psalm in chapter two. James Fleming said of that chapter:

By a literary device known as “inclusio” God begins this episode in Jonah’s life in 1:17 by sending the big fish to swallow Jonah. This episode ends in 2:10 where the Lord commands the big fish to vomit Jonah onto the shore. Indeed, God has been superintending this entire event.²¹

The concept of chiasmus is when words or concepts are repeated in the opposite order. This concept occurs many times throughout Jonah. The most frequently discussed occurrence of chiasmus takes place in chapter one:

Table 1. Chiastic depiction of chapter one in the Book of Jonah²²

A	Yahweh hurls a wind on the sea; storm begins; sailors fear & cry to their gods (4–5a)
B	Jonah sleeps; cry to your god; we shall not perish; divine sovereignty (5b–6)
C	that we may know on whose account (7)
D	the sailors question Jonah (8)
E	I fear (9)
E	the sailors fear (10)
D	the sailors question Jonah (11)
C	I know that it is on my account (12)
B	sailors go for land; sailors cry to God; let us not perish; divine sovereignty (13–14)
A	sailors hurl Jonah into sea; the storm ceases; sailors fear Yahweh & sacrifice (15–16)

Billy Smith says of chapter one, “Many interpreters have identified vv. 4–16 as a chiasmus, that is, the recurrence of a series of terms and themes in reverse order.”²³

²¹ James L. Fleming, *What Do You Do, Jonah?* (Prestonsburg: Reformation, 2003), 110 [pages counted manually].

²² Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, vol. 19B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 234.

Other literary elements in the Book of Jonah include alliteration (2:4), onomatopoeia (1:11–13), merism (1:9), cognate accusative (1:10, 16; 3:2; 4:1, 6) and more. The literary elements are so plentiful in the Book of Jonah the elements almost act as a supporting character unto themselves. The rich use of literary tools helps to better tell the story of God's attributes and allows the reader to create a clearer picture of the author's intent.

Some critics argue the abundance of literary elements are evidence of fictional storytelling and not a historical account. Writing artistically does not make the Book of Jonah a non-historical document. Jonah is a beautifully crafted text and it is historical. Throughout Scripture we are presented with other beautifully crafted and yet still historical texts (Lamentations, Psalms, Proverbs, etc.). Art is the means through which the author is conveying the true story. A pleasing to read historical tale does not make it parabolic.

Approaching the Book of Jonah through a historical lens is a valid approach to better understanding the prophet, his task and Yahweh. Jonah is a unique book in Scripture. Reviewing canonical sources, non-canonical sources from other faiths and cultures and the literary elements provide a hermeneutical response which helps the reader see the Book of Jonah as artistic and memorable, yet still a historical account. Now we will examine the Book of Jonah from a scriptural perspective to explore the text and discern what it says about the attributes of God.

²³ Smith and Page, 234.

CHAPTER 3

ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah is succinctly divided into four acts: the storm, the psalm, the city, and the plant. Throughout these four divisions of the Jonah the reader can identify the attributes of God revealed plainly within the account of the prophet. God's sovereignty, goodness, immutability, and righteousness are interwoven within the four sections of the tale.

Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is present in all four sections of the Book of Jonah as God clearly governs this tale from beginning to end. The omnipotence of Yahweh brings glory to God and comfort to the reader as it is made plain who truly controls the outcome of the story.

Storm

From the first words of the tale to the arrival of the big fish, God's sovereignty is exhibited. God's ultimate control over nature, the elements, and animals showcase God's glory and helps administer his will. The Creator of the universe is masterfully able to use the freewill choices of men for his own good.

From the first words of Jonah there is no doubt what the book is about. The book begins, “Now the word of the Lord” (1:1). Some versions of this phrase appear over 100 times in the OT and it refers the dispensing of God’s wisdom to his followers. The first verse tells the reader he will be focusing on God’s plan. Man, in the form of the title character, attempts to have his way. The focus will always come back to God’s will.

The sovereign Creator of time and space had no difficulty addressing the disobedience of his prophet. The author states “the LORD hurled a great wind” (1:4). God is not a passive deity who sits and hopes his creation will do good. While God is always in control, this is the first example within the tale that shows God is an active player. God has no plans of leaving the fate of the souls in Nineveh up to his insubordinate prophet.

The author stated, “there was a mighty tempest” (1:4b), and the storm was intended to catch Jonah’s attention. God could have broken the rudder, or changed the direction of the winds to redirect the ship. God desired an exclamation point, and wanted to eliminate any doubt from Jonah’s and the readers’ minds that he is in control.

The reader is informed, “the ship threatened to break up” (1:4b). It was not the sea which threatened to break up the ship, it was the Creator of the sea who used the sea to create fear and stimulate action in the sailors. Had God wanted Jonah dead we could have sent lightning or a tsunami. Had God wanted the ship destroyed it would have been destroyed. God wanted the storm to be just strong enough to cause the sailors to act, without actually destroying the ship or hurting anyone.

It became clear, “the mariners were afraid” (1:5). These experienced sailors knew a storm like that was not natural, but must have a supernatural cause. The sailors responded to the storm by crying, “out to his god” (1:5b). What a sight it must have been to see dozens of

men sacrificing, praying, and wailing to dozens of different gods all at once. The offensive and sad cries to the false gods came as no surprise to Yahweh. He knew his actions of stirring the winds and churning the sea would result in the cacophony of false worship.

After Jonah was aroused from his slumber the sailors sought to “cast lots” (1:7) to determine who caused of the storm. Casting lots was a common way to receive direction from the gods and was not thought of as chance. Casting lots appears throughout Scripture to better understand God’s will (Lev. 16:18; Josh. 18:8; 1 Sam. 14:42; Ps. 22:18; Pr. 16:33; Mat. 27:35; Act. 1:26). The timing and rocking of the ship would have made the casting of lots extremely difficult, if not humorous. In spite of the comic relief of the casting lots in an ebbing ship, it should be understood the sailors are playing a part in God’s sovereign purpose. Certainly, “the sailors’ lot casting can (and should) be seen as participating in the larger theological point of the book of Jonah with regard to the nations.”¹

The “lot fell on Jonah” (1:7b). Lots were cast but Yahweh controlled the outcome. God’s intervention was not explicitly stated, but most commentators note God as the controlling factor in the results of lots. As God is showing his sovereign influence over the world to show his mercy, he uses whatever means necessary to redirect the wills of those involved.

For fear of killing Jonah, and the retribution of his god, “the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not” (1:13). As a last effort, the experienced sailors tried a technique which was common practice in sea voyages. They dug in with their oars and attempted to row against the storm in the direction of land. Like most men, the sailors did not desire to place their faith in God, but instead to first exhaust all their human options. The sea then, “grew more and more tempestuous against them” (1:13b). Yahweh had again showed

¹ Brent A. Strawn, “Jonah's sailors and their lot casting: a rhetorical–critical observation,” *Biblica* 91 (2010): 74.

his sovereignty over his creation. He strengthened the storm to give all the players one more nudge to encourage them to choose God's desired direction.

Seeing no other option, the sailors "picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea" (1:15). Jonah knew it was not the sailors who cast him into the sea, but God. A decisive decision was made by the mariners. God would have been pleased had Jonah willingly gone to Nineveh or changed his own mind at some point to redirect his path to the Assyrian capital. Instead, God would use the actions of the mariners to get Jonah where he wanted him. This reveals that while Jonah was not for God, God was also not for Jonah. God is not capricious, and God will do what God desires.²

After the stormy sea served God's purpose it "ceased from raging" (1:15b). Yahweh is the master of the elements. He hurls and stops wind when it pleases him. The ceasing of the storm also glorifies God more greatly in the eyes of his new converts, the sailors. God calming the storm is a recurring theme in Scripture (Ps. 65:7; Luk. 8:24).

Psalm

Jonah's psalm from within the fish provides a display of the sovereignty of God. Jonah tells of God's control over the prophet's life, and expounds upon the authority God has over salvation. While in the fish, Jonah worshiped and understood God was his only way out of the sea. Jonah said, "I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you" (2:9). Jonah desired to praise God through sacrifice as had his forefathers (Ps. 50:14). With the desire to sacrifice to God, the desires in Jonah's heart mirror that of the sailors' hearts (1:16).

Some commentators have been concerned that Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving focused on appreciation for the past and not aide for the future. It has been hypothesized

² Amanda W. Benckhuysen, "Revisiting the psalm of Jonah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 47 (2012): 19.

Jonah's prayer topic alone was evidence he never intended to complete his calling. More likely it was the belief Jonah was resigned to the reality that God was in control and God's will regarding Nineveh would be accomplished with or without Jonah's participation.

Jonah continued in his psalm to pray to his sovereign Lord. He said, "what I have vowed I will pay" (2:9b). Jonah mirrored the sailors (1:16) in making a vow to the Lord. The vow of obedience he made is relevant for chapters three and four of the book. While Jonah said nothing about agreeing with God's will, he vowed to be obedient to God's will.

Jonah acknowledged the sovereignty of Yahweh when he stated, "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (2:9b). At the midpoint of the book is the heart of the message God wants the reader to see. Salvation is of God, and is God's prerogative alone. It is not of Jonah or of man. The transformation of Jonah's heart had come full circle. Where in chapter one Jonah refused to pray, sacrifice, or vow to the Lord, he here longed to pray, sacrifice, and vow. His heart was again inclined toward the supreme authority of God, who then uses Jonah for his own glory.

The sovereign Yahweh "spoke to the fish" (2:10). Throughout Scripture God influences his created animals to impact his created humans (Gen. 9:2; Exo. 8:21–22; Num. 22:28–30; 1 Kng. 17:2–6; Dan. 6:22; Mat. 17:27; Luk. 5:6–9). God handed dominion over animals to man (Gen. 1:28), yet he maintains sovereignty over all things. God speaks to the animals, commands the animals and uses them for his glory. The free agency man enjoys does not extend to beasts.

Although Jonah was fleeing from Yahweh's presence (1:3), the fish had served to preserve Jonah's life and set him back on track. Jonah was vomited up, precisely "on the road to Nineveh." This vomiting, ironic and disgusting though it may be, was exactly how

Yahweh got the job done with this reluctant prophet.³ The reader will detect a bitter humor and a mocking note in the sovereign Lord's undignified dealings with Jonah. Jonah was left grotesquely "high and dry," as if he were something indigestible. This is the storyteller's ironic view of the person who thinks he can escape Yahweh.⁴

City

From the beaches of the Mediterranean to the streets of the Assyrian capital, God's sovereignty was evident. God used the actions of sinful men to display his ultimate control over the salvation of his elect people. The king of Nineveh declared, "man and beast be covered with sackcloth and let them call out mightily to God" (3:8). Yahweh was being proclaimed, in Nineveh, like in no other place. This type of universal allegiance to God rivals, and likely surpasses, that of even Israel. The supreme power of God was evident in Assyria's response.

The king instructed, "everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (3:8b). This is a common theme for the merciful Yahweh. Frequently, God gave others the same chance to turn from their wicked ways (Jer. 18:11, 36:3). Israel has not always respond positively to God's call to repent (2 Kings 17:13–14). Nineveh was called to turn from evil, but more specifically, to turn from their famous violence. In Scripture, the violence of Assyria was legendary (Hos. 12:1; 2 Kings 16:9; 2 Chr. 32:22; Isa. 52:4). God used Assyria to perform his will and punish Israel (Isa. 10:5; Prov. 16:4; Jer. 50:17; 2 Kings 17:3–6). Yet, the supreme authority of Yahweh turned Assyria.

³ Strawn, 72–76.

⁴ Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 139.

Plant

The concluding scene of the Book of Jonah more clearly displays God's complete sovereignty over his creation. The events surrounding the plant demonstrated for Jonah and the reader exactly how much control God maintains over his creation. The supreme power and authority of Yahweh is on display when he appointed, "a plant and made it come up over Jonah" (4:6). This verse is the only place this Hebrew word (קִיץ), translated as "plant," exists in Scripture. The word can mean plant or leafy plant. However, the type of plant is unknown. In an effort to justify the fast growth of the plant many commentators have attempted to hypothesize what type of plant this was based on the region, or shade provided. There are two major problems with trying to identify the type of plant: 1) It is impossible with the knowledge provided in Scripture, and 2) It is irrelevant. Trying to explain the fast growth by identifying the type of plant misses the primary point—this is a miracle from God.

The reason for the plant was, "that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort" (4:6b). Yahweh uses his omnipotence over the world to ease the discomfort of his children. In this example of great compassion God's sovereignty over all plant life is used for the pleasure of Jonah. The result was, "Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant" (4:6b). This is the only time in the book Jonah was glad. Much has happened in this tale which should have made Jonah glad. His life was saved, he was delivered from the fish, his labors resulted in a massive revival, but it is the provision of personal and selfish shade which brought Jonah to gladness.

The next day, "God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered" (4:7). God's sovereignty is central. God provided a day of shade and a night of windbreak with the plant. Jonah enjoyed much unmerited mercy from the Lord. Yahweh exercised

complete sovereignty over the animal kingdom and used a worm to accomplish his will. God used his authority to sanctify his prophet and teach him a valuable lesson.

Goodness

God is good, and only good can result from the actions of God. However, God can use man's sin and evil in the world to administer his perfect and upright will. In doing so, God's ultimate goodness is clearly seen in this book.

Storm

God's will is challenged by the pagan sailors and his own prophet, yet his goodness is clear through his actions and their results in the first scene of Jonah. Jonah was instructed by God to, "go to Nineveh, that great city" (1:2). The word translated as "great" (גָּדוֹל) does not necessarily refer to the city's size, but the prowess of the city. The same word translated in Ps. 145:6 talks about the greatness of deeds. In Est. 1:4 it references splendor and pomp. In 2 Sam. 7:23 it is related to awesome things. Yes, Nineveh was large, but when God references the "great city" he was conveying that Nineveh was important to God. If this is the case, Jonah would have understood God valued Jonah's enemies. This is then a mercy mission for Nineveh and Jonah wished to have no part in it. Our good Lord was saving his elect people.

Even in his disobedience Jonah told the sailors, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:8). Jonah spoke here for the first time in the book. Jonah's refusal to obey the Lord only five verses earlier (1:3) stands in stark contrast to his insistence that he fears God. Nothing to this point in the story

indicated Jonah feared God. Only nine verses into the story and already Jonah has disobeyed God, fled, refused to pray and ignored a chance to share his faith.

Then the sailors were “exceedingly afraid” (1:10). The sailors previously stated they were “afraid” (1:5) of the storms, but they were here “exceedingly afraid.” The pagans’ healthy fear of God stood in contrast to Jonah disinterest.

The sailors said to Jonah, “What is this that you have done” (1:10b). Most English Bibles translate this phrase as a question. The ESV translates it as an exclamation. Either way, it is not a question that demands an answer.

In verse 10 the reader is told, “the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them” (1:10b). In this conversation, Jonah explained to the sailors what the reader learned in 1:3. Jonah admitted he was fleeing from God so as not to be a participant in unchanging goodness. After Jonah was deposited in the ocean and God’s goodness was immediately revealed in the ceasing of the storm (1:15), the sailors worshiped and vowed to the good Yahweh (1:16). There was a revival on the boat and the sailors worshiped Yahweh. Some commentators have indicated that Jonah inadvertently or unknowingly influenced the mariners and it was Jonah’s actions that resulted in the conversion of the mariners.⁵ Instead, it was a testament to God and his unceasing goodness.

After God sent the fish to rescue his prophet, “Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (1:17b). This time in the fish was most certainly punishment. God did not need three days to transport Jonah to Nineveh. As a literary representative for Israel Jonah’s incarceration may suggest an image of exile in the desert for God’s people. It also points forward to Jesus in the tomb for three days (Mat. 12:40). This fish became Jonah’s jail

⁵ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, *Oxford Bible Series* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 132.

cell. God spared Jonah's life, taught Jonah a valuable lesson, and showed loving compassion by saving Jonah from his own death wish.

Psalm

From within the fish Jonah tells of God's great goodness. The prophet of the Lord has experienced it personally, and begins extolling God's virtues toward himself and the rest of sinful creation. After being in the fish for almost three days, "Jonah prayed to the LORD his God" (2:1). Jonah likely never lost sight of the fact God is good, but he admitted it in his prayers. Prophets who pray are not extraordinary, but Jonah's prayer came at an odd time. It was strange because Jonah prayed a psalm of thanksgiving while he was in the fish.⁶ Jonah was chastened by God, and he is like a child who is sorry only after he has been caught. Throughout Scripture, God's children returning to him when they are low (Ps. 18:6, 31:22; 2 Chr. 30:27; Lav. 3:54). Our sin is abhorrent to the good and perfect God, but our prayers to God as we turn to him in pain are received by the sweet caress of a loving Father.

Jonah thanked Yahweh for his goodness by acknowledging that God saved him when his, "life was fainting away" (2:7). In a deathbed prayer Jonah again embraced the Lord. God had previously sent wind, waves, and sailors to try to get Jonah's attention. It was the threat of his impending death which caused Jonah to return to the goodness of the Lord. It was only a few verses earlier (1:12), Jonah asked to be put to death. Here, that same impending death caused Jonah to seek the mercy of the Lord.

In Jonah's prayer, he, "remembered the LORD" (2:7b). Jonah sought mercy from the Lord for himself, but previously tried denying that same mercy to the people of Nineveh by

⁶ Annette Schellenberg, "An anti-prophet among the prophets?: on the relationship of Jonah to prophecy," *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* 39 (2015): 368.

fleeing to Tarshish. The goodness of God saved an undeserving Jonah. Jonah's prayer went to God, "into your holy temple" (2:7b).

City

God's great goodness was on exhibition within the walls of Nineveh. The highlight of the third scene occurs when the author confirmed, "the people of Nineveh believed God" (3:5). It is one of the most amazing displays of God's grace in history. It has caused some debate to think all the people of Nineveh could turn to God in unison. After the proclamation of judgment, there was a penitent reply which results in God's decision to withhold punishment. The Ninevites "called for a fast and put on sackcloth" (3:5b), which were common cultural ways to express mourning (2 Chr. 20:3; 2 Sam 3:31; Neh. 9:1; Est. 4:3; Dan. 9:3). Repentance occurred, "from the greatest of them to the least of them" (3:5b). The people of Nineveh turned in unison from their false gods at a scale unequaled in Scripture. The massive revival did not begin in Jerusalem, but in Nineveh, the heart of Gentile lands.

God's "word reached the king of Nineveh" (3:6). It is uncertain if the unnamed king of Nineveh refers to the king of Assyria Adad-nirari III (800s) or Assurdan III (700s), or a mayor or governor of the city of Nineveh. Nevertheless, the king "arose from his throne, removed his robe" (3:6b). Kingly robes carry great prestige, and by removing them he symbolically separated himself from his power. In the presence of God, the king removed his dignity and acknowledged a higher kingly authority.

The king also "covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes" (3:6b). The king mourned over their situation and responded the same way as his subjects. The king would lower his dignity like this only for one he acknowledged as sovereign and above himself in

all ways. It was one thing for the common man to respond in this way, but when the king lowered himself, he made a statement of respect toward the goodness of Yahweh.

The king then, “issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh” (3:7). He mandated, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water” (3:7b). The fast is intended to help the repentant better focus on God’s will.

The king hypothesized, “Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger” (3:9). The phrase, “who knows,” is a personal expression of hope by the king on behalf of his people. The saying was common (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) and conveyed confidence in a hopeless circumstance. The king concluded with hope in God by saying, “so that we may not perish” (3:9b). What was striking, however, was in chapter three it is the king of Nineveh and not Jonah who took up the task of intercession for the people. Jonah failed to function prophetically for the Ninevites by interceding and advocating on their behalf. It is clear from the narrative Jonah had no desire to advocate for Nineveh or to participate in its deliverance from God’s judgment in any way.⁷ Because Nineveh’s human advocate was a pagan king, God’s goodness was on display for relenting to punish the people of Assyria.

Plant

In the final scene, Jonah’s selfish heart stands in stark contrast with the unlimited goodness of God. Yahweh is good to Nineveh, Jonah and provides a great lesson for the reader to better comprehend the depth of his goodness.

Jonah, “prayed to the LORD” (4:2). This was the second-time Jonah prayed to Yahweh (2:2–9) with two drastically different tones to the two prayers. In the prayer in

⁷ Benckhuysen, 22.

chapter two Jonah talked about the attributes of God and used the words “you” or “your” 10 times in the English translation, while the prayer in chapter four used “you” only once. Jonah was not focusing on God in the second prayer. In both prayers, Jonah talked about God’s steadfast love (רַחֲמֵי), but, while it was spoken of as a good thing as it related to Jonah in chapter two, it was a bad thing as it related to Nineveh in chapter four. In the prayer in chapter two, Jonah thanked God for his life, while in chapter four he asked God to take his life. Two drastically different themes were revealed from Jonah in his two prayers.

Jonah explained that this “is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish” (4:2b). Jonah lifted the veil and clarified what caused him to disobey God. Jonah continued, “for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (4:2b). Jonah quoted the mercy formula (see Ex. 34:6–7; Num. 14:18), but, he did not want that mercy to be shown to Nineveh. Jonah knew God was good and merciful, and he was angry because God was slow to anger and relenting in disaster towards the Ninevites. The Assyrians were a vile and loathed people in that region, and Jonah hated Assyria for their treatment of Israel. In Jonah’s mind, if there was any people that deserved judgment, it was the Assyrians. However, Jonah knew from history, Yahweh was willing to share his great grace and mercy with others not deserving it, Israel included.

God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant” (4:9). God asked Jonah the same question he asked earlier (4:4). This time he added “for the plant.” God revealed his purpose for appointing the plant, the worm, and the wind. God could not get Jonah to answer his question earlier, so here he used physical distress to elicit a response from Jonah. God desired to dialogue with Jonah and to provide an object lesson for the reader. A human parent shows love to his children by training, correcting, and punishing. It would be ludicrous to

assume the source of the ultimate love and goodness would not want the best for his children and be willing to punish them. Simon Bakon stated, “The author undoubtedly wished to convey the thought that Jonah’s vision of the Lord, as God of justice, or even as God of compassion ready to offer an opportunity to spare Nineveh, was counter to his conscience.”⁸

Jonah responded, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die” (4:9b). It was Jonah’s personal discomfort which pushed him over the edge and made him willing to talk. The reader should not assume this conversation was simply about shade, heat, and discomfort. Jonah’s distress was the catalyst that allowed him to talk about what was truly upsetting him: God’s goodness toward the Assyrians. Chesung Ryu states, “He was in his angry mood not just because of the plant, but because of all the events which had happened to his people and God’s treatment of his people and Nineveh.”⁹

Some have seen Jonah’s anger in chapter four as proof of false repentance back in chapter two. Amanda Benckhuysen says:

[T]he visceral and raw emotion exhibited by Jonah in chapter 4 weakens the plausibility of sincere repentance or a change of heart in chapter 2. Jonah’s exchange with God in chapter 4 portrays him as angry enough to die and although the text does not indicate that he is angry with God per se, it does show Jonah to be angered by God’s compassion toward the Ninevites.¹⁰

This view, however, is shortsighted. It disregards the emotion and stress of Jonah, and does not honestly look into the heart of every believer.

The good Lord said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night” (4:10). Jonah

⁸ Simon Bakon, “Jonah: The Conscientious Objector,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, (2009): 99.

⁹ Chesung Justin Ryu, “Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1–11,” *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* 34 (2009): 216.

¹⁰ Benckhuysen, 12.

lamented the loss of the plant because the plant was bringing him personal comfort. God understood the reason for Jonah's distress. Jonah cared for the plant only in as much as it benefited him. Jonah expressed throughout the short book that he valued his own views and opinions more than he valued God's will, God's glory, or the eternal souls of others.

Immutability

Yahweh's unchanging nature is complicated for man to comprehend, but it is consistently displayed in this book. From the calling of Jonah to the appointing of plant, God's heart is the same. While the means may seem confusing, the purpose of God's actions is to show his mercy and grace and bring himself great glory.

Storm

Jonah's running from the Lord (1:3) is the only canonical reference to a prophet refusing God's directive. Jonah remained a conscientious objector from beginning to end. He vehemently disagreed with God's plan to save Nineveh and elected to not participate. Prophets who argue with God about their appointments are common in the OT, but Jonah's response is extraordinary, as he does not argue with God, but instead flees.¹¹ The problem with Jonah was not how he viewed Assyria, but how he viewed God. Jonah was intimately familiar with Exodus 34:6–7 which reads:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

¹¹ Schellenberg, 355.

This concept of grace is central to the Book of Jonah. Our immutable Lord cannot change his character over time.

In another symbolic step of the prophet's emotional dissention, "Jonah had gone down" (1:5). Jonah going down into the ship is here to be contrasted with the mariners who were afraid and scurried around up on deck while Jonah was relaxed down below. Jonah, "was fast asleep." The sailors are calling out to their gods, but Jonah slept. The contrast here is drastic. The pagans were panicked, while Jonah was relaxed. The pagans rush around, while Jonah was resigned to die. The pagans cried to their gods, while Jonah was ignoring his God. While the heart of man is fickle and evolving, God is immutable and constant.

Psalm

Jonah never forgot about God's immutable grace and mercy. In fact, that is why he fled. In the belly of the great fish Jonah reminded himself and the reader of God's unchanging justice and love. Where Jonah fled due to God's immutability, here he rests in it.

In his psalm, Jonah prayed, "For you cast me into the deep" (2:3). Jonah acknowledged God's unchanging goodness without lamenting the problem of evil. Jonah knew from the start his disobedience to the Lord deserved punishment. He was resigned to a death sentence in chapter one. Even though the text tells us it was the sailors who put Jonah into the ocean (1:15), Jonah understood the immutable God was working through the free actions of the sailors to administer his will. Jonah acknowledged it was God who cast him into the sea.

Jonah continued, “all your waves and your billows passed over me” (2:3b). As is true elsewhere (Ps. 42:7), God’s physical waves casting over his servant mirrors the change in Jonah’s heart. Jonah becomes inclined toward God’s will. God cannot change, but man can.

From within the fish Jonah lamented, “The waters closed in over me to take my life” (2:5). The water represented the sorrow Jonah felt toward being distanced from God. The distance between Jonah and the immutable love of God threatens to deprive Jonah of both his life and soul.

Jonah remembered the, “weeds were wrapped about my head” (2:5b). Seaweed is found on the ocean’s floor. When Jonah’s heart was furthest from God, his sorrow (the ocean) bound him and kept him separated from the love of God. God’s love for Jonah never wavered, as Jonah experienced his emotional ebb and flow.

Jonah “went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever” (2:6b). Continuing the literary reference of going down (1:3, 5) and being separated from God, Jonah had gone as low as he could go. The bars are those on the gates of Sheol (Job 33:22–24; Ps. 63:9) the land of the dead. Jonah knew, at his lowest point, he had been sentenced to spending an eternity separated from the love of God.

Jonah marveled at the immutable mercy of God, “yet you brought up my life from the pit” (2:6b). As with all sinners, Jonah cannot save himself. God selected Jonah even though Jonah had previously rejected God. There was nothing in Jonah worthy of salvation, but through the merciful love of God he chose to have an eternal relationship with Jonah.

City

God's immutability was on display with, "Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying" (3:1). The second half of the book started the way the first half did. This illuminates several points: 1) God is immutable, 2) God will reach Nineveh, and, 3) God is determined to use Jonah. God would not be diverted by his pesky prophet problem. He told Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city" (3:2). God repeated himself to drive home a valuable point. Chapman and Warner state, "There is perhaps even a hint of exasperation on God's part, as Jonah is told this time to 'proclaim to [Nineveh] the message that I tell you' (3:2)."¹² God again reminded Jonah he viewed Nineveh as a great city.

God told Jonah to "call out against" Nineveh, with, "the message that I tell you" (3:2b). There is an intriguing deviation from God's original command (1:2b). The mention of the evil of Nineveh is noticeably absent the second time. Nineveh is still evil, but that is no longer the focus. The words God used are very important for two reasons: 1) God is not allowing Jonah any wiggle room to deviate from the message. Jonah was reminded to be obedient; and, 2) God wanted Jonah to use only the message he told him to use.

Plant

God's immutable love of his elect, "displeased Jonah exceedingly" (4:1). An important literary point can be missed in the English translation which is present in the Hebrew. The word *רָעָה* is used twice in 3:10 and once in 4:1. In 3:10, Nineveh "turned from their evil (*רָעָה*)," so God responded and "relented of the disaster (*רָעָה*)." In 4:1 God's actions

¹² Stephen B. Chapman and Lacey Warner, "Jonah and the imitation of God: rethinking evangelism and the Old Testament," *Journal Of Theological Interpretation* 2 (2008): 58.

“displeased (יָרַע רָעָה) Jonah.” God and Nineveh were in step, and Jonah disagreed. Jonah was displeased that Nineveh repented and God relented.

In response to Jonah’s anger (4:1), his statement of displeasure (4:2), and his request to die (4:3) the immutable Lord provided a quick response to Jonah’s prayer: “do you do well to be angry” (4:4). The question was designed to highlight Jonah’s foolishness. The question was asked just as much for the reader to answer as it is for Jonah. Most modern translations render the word well (הֵיטֵב) as a predicate. However, traditional grammar takes its function as an adverb that modifies the meaning of the verb, suggesting its translation as a degree adverb. Linguistic considerations support the latter option. Yoo-Ki Kim stated, “This line of understanding opens up a possibility to interpret Yahweh’s question in verse four not as a confrontation but as an expression of consolation and compassion toward his prophet.”¹³

The unchanging Yahweh “appointed a scorching east wind” (4:8). God’s immutability, as we saw earlier (1:4), extends over the elements. This is the fourth appearance of the Hebrew word (מָנָה) translated as “appointed” in the Book of Jonah. God appointed a fish (1:17), a plant (4:6), a worm (4:7), and now a wind (4:8), all to communicate a message to Jonah. God changed his means, but his purpose stayed the same.

Then, “the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint” (4:8b). This is God’s doing. He attempted to discomfort Jonah for his own purposes. God used this condition to punish Jonah, but also to teach a lesson to the reader. Some have scoffed at Jonah feeling “faint” and tried to ascribe a delicate constitution to the prophet.¹⁴ This is more than Jonah being soft. God purposefully sent a blazing hot wind to torment his servant.

¹³ Yoo-Ki Kim, “The function of הֵיטֵב in Jonah 4 and its translation,” *Biblica* 90 (2009): 393.

¹⁴ Mary Mills, “Urban Morality and the Great City in the Book of Jonah,” *Political Theology* 11 (2010): 457.

Jonah informed God, “it is better for me to die than to live” (4:8b). This is reminiscent of Elijah’s response (1 Kin. 19:4). It is a magnification of the emotional pain Jonah felt from seeing his enemies come to the Lord. This is the third-time Jonah has preferred death to life (1:12; 4:3, 8). The Lord will not relent in his purposes for the prophet.

Righteousness

The righteousness of God is a natural extension of his holiness. God must oppose sin and administer justice. God’s actions are always in perfect unison with his attribute of righteousness within the Book of Jonah.

Storm

In the first scene of Jonah God acts with flawless righteousness. The actions God take in the storm are in perfect accordance with his just and loving nature. The righteousness attributes of God permeate every verse.

God instructed Jonah to “call out against” (1:2b) Nineveh. Jonah’s mandate from God was unmistakable. Assyria worshiped different gods and were brutal toward adversaries. Jonah was instructed to go to a people who hated his culture and tell them they must abandon their worship of false gods and turn to the one true God of Israel for deliverance. This mission must have felt a bit overwhelming to the prophet. This lone man was being called to carry a message of doom and gloom to the terrifying Assyrian empire and escape with his life.¹⁵ It is unlikely, without God’s intervention, a prophet would survive such a mission. The timing of God’s charge to Jonah was set in the middle of real and significant period of

¹⁵ David Leong, “Prophet, pagan, prayer: urban theology of reversal in the story of Jonah,” *Ex Audit* 29 (2013): 114.

conflict between the small state of Israel and the vast Assyrian empire. Assyria had been an enemy for of Israel's for centuries and was one of the greatest powers of the ancient world.¹⁶

Jonah was to preach to Nineveh because God said, “for their evil has come up before me” (1:2b). The wickedness of Nineveh was not surprising to God. Nahum chapter three informs readers that even after the people of Nineveh repented in the book of Jonah they returned to “violence, lying and greed.” The reader, without questioning the righteous will of God, must puzzle at the trouble God went to in the Book of Jonah only to have Nineveh return to evil later in the days of Nahum. This conundrum is made easier to comprehend when we return to the central premise of this book. Jonah is not about a big fish, a wayward missionary, or an evil people. The Book of Jonah is about a just God.

While Jonah was sleeping, the captain of the ship came looking for him (1:6). It had likely been observed there was one missing trying to fix the situation by praying to their gods for help. The situation was so dire the ranking officer searched for the missing passenger to confront him. Astonished to find Jonah sleeping, the captain said, “what do you mean you sleeper” (1:6b). The captain was amazed Jonah was not calling out to God. Everyone else was sacrificing, burning and wailing and this Hebrew was not seeking spiritual aide. The captain did not refer to Jonah as a paying customer, a Hebrew, or a gentleman. The captain questioned Jonah by calling him the thing that shocked him the most. The disgust boiled over as the captain ordered his customer to “arise, call out to your god” (1:6b). The captain likely understood by Jonah's appearance and where he boarded the ship, that Jonah was a Jew. To the captain, the Hebrew god was one in the pantheon of deities.

After Jonah explained to the mariners the storm was his fault because he disobeyed Yahweh, they asked, “what shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us” (1:11)?

¹⁶ James T. Clemons, “Jonah without his whale,” *The Living Pulpit* 19, no. 3 (2010): 19.

This was a rhetorical question. The men had cast lots (v. 7), asked what Jonah had done wrong (v. 8), received the answer (v. 9), and showed astonishment (v. 10). They knew what must be done to appease the angry god. The offender must leave. Being in the middle of the sea the only way to put distance between themselves and Jonah was to drop him in the sea. To nudge the sailors God intensified the storm (1:11b) and the men responded with fear and haste. God sought justice for Nineveh and Jonah, and he would not be denied.

Jonah instructed the sailors to pick him “up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you” (1:12). Jonah knew he was the problem. While Jonah had earlier implied indifference and disdain toward God, here for the first-time Jonah would rather die than relent and head toward Nineveh. God’s righteousness was being administered.

The sailors “called out to the LORD” (1:14). God had one of his prophets on board ship and the prophet did nothing. But God sent a storm which caused the worldly pagans to call out his name. Without Jonah’s aide, God showed his righteousness to the sailors.

The sailors said, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you” (1:14b). The sailors called on the name Yahweh, likely showing their conversion to Jonah’s God. It has been suggested the sailors were simply adding Yahweh to their list of gods in their pantheistic belief system, but there is no evidence to suggest that their conversion was not real. Interestingly, the sailors even employed the divine name “Yahweh.”

When God’s justice was done, “the sea ceased from its raging” (1:15b). The Creator had used the sea as tool to achieve righteousness. God’s will was done and he returned the sea to its natural state.

Psalm

During Jonah's psalm, God's great justice is described and experienced by Jonah. From within the great fish, the righteousness of God is revealed to the reader by God's omnipresent hand. Jonah praises his Lord for the righteousness which was shared with him.

Recalling the righteousness of the Lord, Jonah declared, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress" (2:2). Calling out to God while in distress is a common posture in Scripture (Ps. 3:4, 120:1; Lam. 3:55) and in the hearts of men. After three days of turmoil Jonah reflected on how he prayed from a position of great distress. It is frequently interpreted the distress felt by Jonah was due to his near-death experience in the ocean and in the fish. However, it should not be overlooked Jonah's distress also likely covered his pain over being sent to Nineveh and the anguish he felt over disobeying his just Lord.

Jonah continued, "out of the belly of Sheol I cried" (2:2b). The word Sheol (שְׁאוֹל) is the most frequently used word in the OT to designate the place of the dead. It is the underworld or the Hebrew understanding of Hades. The term, when used in conjunction with a life-threatening experience, is an exaggerated way of stressing the gravity of the circumstances (Job 17:16; Ps. 30:3). It is not thought that Jonah actually went down to Sheol, but instead, that God saved him from a very near death experience.

Jonah acknowledged he was "driven away from your sight" (2:4). Earlier Jonah attempted to flee the presence of the Lord (1:3), but now he longed to be in the sight of the Lord. The prophet desired to "again look upon your holy temple" (2:4b), signifying Jonah's desire to worship God. The temple was where man worshiped in the loving presence of God.

In a just move, God talked to the fish, "and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" (2:10). The unavoidable humor of this scene was likely intentional by the writer. The word

vomit is used 13 times in the OT, and in each case, it is used to denote extreme emotion (see, e.g., Lev. 18:25; Job 20:15; Prov. 26:11; Isa. 19:14). When someone vomits, it is a violent action where the body is violently forcing something bad to exit. There is gentle way to vomit. The fish is an obedient servant of the Lord and it was expelling the offensive prophet from its innards. God “spoke to the fish” and then “it vomited Jonah.” It is God who desired this regurgitating exclamation mark on Jonah. David Leong stated, “It is in remembering YHWH that Jonah’s prayer enters into the presence of God, and his hope of God’s deliverance is rekindled. Moving up from the depths with thanksgiving and out of the fish with such emphatic momentum, his confidence in his prophetic task seems restored.”¹⁷

City

The people of Nineveh experience the ever-present righteousness of Yahweh. Jonah desires to see Nineveh suffer for their sins, while God wishes to commune with the Assyrians after they turn from evil. The justice of God is seldom more tangible than in this scene.

To God, “Nineveh was an exceedingly great city” (3:3b). Nineveh, was a very old city, which disappeared completely after it fell to the Medes and the Babylonians in 612 BC. Carolyn Sharp stated, “The Book of Jonah was written well after that time, so it was always obvious to the implied audience of the book that Nineveh would not flourish for long.”¹⁸

Nineveh was, “three days’ journey in breadth” (3:3b). The first school of thought is that indeed; it would take three days to walk across Nineveh unimpeded. Most calculations agree a day’s walk would be about 20 miles, thus making Nineveh 60 miles in diameter.

¹⁷ Leong, 124.

¹⁸ Carolyn Sharp, “Wrestling the Word: Submission and Resistance as Holy Hermeneutical Acts,” *Anglican Theological Review* 97 (2015): 17.

Archeological discoveries of Nineveh bear out it was a very large city for its time, but nowhere approaching 60 miles across. The second camp believes the three days refers to the time it would take a prophet to proclaim God's message if he traveled through every neighborhood and navigated the winding streets to contact everyone.¹⁹ The third belief is the reference to three days is a figure of speech. Comparing secular literature of the time and Hebrew literature in the OT many conclude "three days' journey in breadth" is a figure of speech implying Nineveh was a big city.²⁰ The fourth thought is indeed, it did take three days to walk across Nineveh. But, it was not a reference to the city proper, but the surrounding area. In the same way, when someone says they are going to visit Los Angeles, they are not referencing the City of Los Angeles with 4 million inhabitants. They are talking about the Greater Los Angeles Area which consists of five counties and 18 million people. Because the content of verse three is talking about the size of Nineveh and verse four is talking about Jonah's journey, the reference is likely talking about Nineveh's size. That likely rules out the second view of Jonah taking three days to walk through all the streets and neighborhoods. The Hebrew phrase that is used in this verse to describe Nineveh as a "great city" is also used to describe Nineveh in Genesis 10:11–12, where the "great city" is described as the four cities of Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen. It is likely the "three days' journey in breadth" is literal reference, but describes the city of Nineveh and its surrounding suburbs and smaller towns. It would take a truly fair and just Lord to save a city of this size.

Jonah then "began to go into the city" (3:4). Jonah was all alone and unarmed and entering the stronghold of a brutal enemy. He certainly had great fear of going into Nineveh.

¹⁹ James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck; (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 90.

²⁰ Charles Halton, "How Big Was Nineveh? Literal versus Figurative Interpretation of City Size," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (2008): 205.

Israelites were physically distinctive and he would stand out as an adversary in the midst of a brutal culture. Being chastised by the righteous God was a very useful tool to motivate Jonah into obedience. He feared the Lord more than he feared the people of Nineveh.

Jonah went, “a day’s journey” (3:4b). Jonah must have been horrified. His dress, his hair, his skin color, his accent all stood out and betrayed him as a foreigner. He walked a day through a land that was unfamiliar, with smells that were unfamiliar. He would have been ceremonially unclean and likely needed to eat unclean foods. All the while he headed deeper into a culture he despised and feared. Jonah showed great obedience to the Lord.

Jonah then, “called out” (3:4b). This is the fourth time (1:2, 6; 3:2, 4) the verb to “call out” (קרא) is used in the book. Finally, Jonah was doing what he was told to do in the beginning. He called out to the people in Nineveh. This was Jonah’s highlight of obedience, but it is by no means, the highlight of the book. Jonah was obedient, but God is righteous.

Jonah preached God’s righteous message, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4b). Earlier (3:2) Jonah was instructed to give “the message that I tell you.” God’s eight-word message (six in Hebrew) was short and all God used to convert the entire city. Only God can be credited with glory if a message that short had such a profound impact. Of what is said, several glaring absences are present. Jonah did not proclaim God’s name. The next verse states the Ninevites “believed God.” It is unclear if the name of God came from divine revelation, Jonah’s mouth or knowledge Jonah was a Hebrew. Mary Wills stated:

The bodily movement of the prophet carries his initial desire to be at a distance from the city with it. He sees the city while also avoiding engagement with what he sees in action.²¹

²¹ Mills, 461–462.

The righteous Creator, “saw what they did how they turned from their evil way. God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it” (3:10). God can change his mind to put his great and loving mercy on display and ultimately to bring himself great glory. Patrick Reimnitz stated, “He both can and will extend His mercy to anyone who repents, including Israel’s hated enemies.”²² God did not contradict himself, he did what he wanted to do from the start. Repenting and relenting is the heart of this story.

Plant

The events surrounding plant are a wonderful illustration to better comprehend God’s infinite justice. Jonah believed, “it is better for me to die than to live” (4:3). Jonah believed it was better to die than live with the knowledge the Assyrians would not be destroyed.

Jonah then “went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there” (4:5). He sat under a booth, which was a small temporary structure built with branches and sticks intended to provide shade during the day and a wind break at night (Gen. 33:17; Jhn. 4:5). This was a common, flimsy structure quickly put together to provide short term respite from the elements, and it suggests that Jonah did not intend to stay put very long.

Jonah waited to “see what would become of the city” (4:5b). Jonah was holding out hope his righteous God would change his mind or the people of Nineveh would return to their old ways. Jonah planned to sit and wait to see if his prophetic words (3:4) could still come true. Jonah desired that within the next forty days the city of Nineveh would be overthrown by the just Yahweh. The salvation of Nineveh had made him angry and only their destruction would please him. After being in the fish for three days Jonah’s heart changed,

²² Patrick J. Reimnitz, “Fish out of water: the Book of Jonah among the minor prophets,” *Journal Of Theta Alpha Kappa* 38, no. 1 (2014): 25.

but to what degree? Jonah knew, as a follower of God, he needed to be obedient. He would be obedient to God, but Jonah would not charge his heart to match the justice of God.

God concluded by saying, “should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (4:11). Jonah just received mercy from God, but he still did not want Nineveh to receive the same compassion. God put Jonah in the position of favoring mercy for a plant in order to highlight Jonah's disapproval of mercy for Nineveh.²³ Jonah was not simply angry because Nineveh was evil and received justice. Jonah was angry because Nineveh responded the way Israel should have responded to the righteous Lord—with repentance and worship.

This is one of the most intriguing endings in the Bible. The book of Jonah is one of two books in Scripture which closes with a question. The other is Nahum, which also concerns Nineveh. The question is as much for the reader as it is for Jonah. The readers is asked to take sides, Jonah or God. Will we select to implement God’s mercy, or like Jonah, will we put your personal preferences ahead of God’s glory.

Jonah has great self-interest, but a lack of care for Gentiles. Chapman and Warner stated, “The book of Jonah issues a strong reminder to Israel that it is accountable before God for providing a faithful witness to other nations and, in fact, to the rest of creation.”²⁴ Our righteous God has the first word (1:2) and the last word (4:11) in the Book of Jonah.

Conclusion

The storm, the psalm, the city, and the plant provide the reader with a clear picture of the attributes of God. The four chapters of Jonah clearly reveal God’s sovereignty, goodness,

²³ Chapman and Warner, 58.

²⁴ Chapman and Warner, 57.

immutability, and righteousness as the focus of this book. Each scene (the storm, the psalm, the city, and the plant) wonderfully displays the character and nature of God the Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. This book teaches God's people in narrative fashion who Yahweh is and what he is like, both in relation to Israel and the nations. We will now explore in greater detail the theology surrounding the four attributes of God expounded in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah provides a clear view of the doctrinal traditions of the attributes of God. The doctrine of God is the foundation of systematic theology, and the attributes of God aide in comprehending the nature of God. Understanding God’s sovereignty, goodness, immutability, and righteousness helps us understand our relationship with the Creator. In this chapter, the attributes of God are further discussed in view of the Book of Jonah.

Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is, arguably, the central point of the Book of Jonah. God’s absolute control over creation is shown to the reader from the beginning to the end. James Montgomery Boice says of God’s sovereignty in the book, “Jonah should also be studied for what it teaches about God’s sovereignty, the point on which the book is most informative and most profound.”¹ The Book of Jonah begins and ends with a focus on this doctrine.

In the storm, God’s sovereignty is clear. The wind, waves, fish, and the casted lots were controlled by God. Scripture does not state God had control over the lots. However, as James Rosscup states:

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 263.

Casting lots helped the sailors identify the culprit they figured a god was judging. God in His sovereignty no doubt caused the method to work as He had in other cases insofar as they served His will (Prov. 16:33).²

Nothing falls out of the grasp of God.

Inside the fish, Jonah attested to God's sovereignty in his psalm. Jonah acknowledged his own lack of control and restated God's rule. Referencing the idol worship aboard the ship, Richard Phillips says, "In the presence of the true and sovereign God, the idols are unmasked and Jonah looks upon them with repulsion."³ Jonah ridiculed the idol worshipers, yet bypassed self-criticism for attempting to usurp God's sovereignty.

Jonah's greatest challenge to God's sovereignty came from his view of the Assyrians worthiness of God's mercy and grace. While in the city Jonah obeyed God, yet never stopped disagreeing with God about his sovereign choice to save Nineveh. John Broad states:

Why Nineveh in particular should have been chosen as the scene of the Prophet's labors is a question which ultimately resolves itself into the sovereignty of God, as there were no doubt many other cities at that time to which a similar messenger might, with equal propriety, have been sent.⁴

Jonah challenged God's choice to save Nineveh to the end.

In the final act, Jonah's heart toward God's control faded. Jonah could not grasp how his God could be so merciful. Billy Smith notes:

Not grasping the message of God's sovereignty and care, Jonah's depression deepened as he felt that his entire life had been wrong. Having failed as a prophet, now he had failed his God in his heart. He wished to die.⁵

² James E. Rosscup, *An Exposition on Prayer in the Bible: Igniting the Fuel to Flame Our Communication with God* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2008), 1349.

³ Richard D. Phillips, *Jonah & Micah*, eds. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 90.

⁴ John Broad, *Lectures on Jonah* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1860), 9.

⁵ Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, vol. 19B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 280.

God's sovereignty over mercy so displeased Jonah that he called for his own death.

If the reader grasps one point from the Book of Jonah, it should be God's attribute of sovereignty. The central focus of the tale must remain on God. Uriel Simon writes:

The paradoxical tension between the Lord's inordinate severity with Jonah and His extraordinary leniency with Nineveh teaches us about the absolute sovereignty of the divine will; it is resolved only when Jonah comes to realize that the will of the Lord is not arbitrary, but compassionate, for those who are near and for those who are far from Him.⁶

God's control is complete and encompasses all of creation. Yahweh's sovereignty abounds throughout Jonah and should come as assurance to the reader.

Depravity of Man

Man is so sinful he cannot turn toward God on his own. Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites show the reader salvation lies in the Lord. Without God reaching out to sinners, man would never embrace a salvific relationship with the sovereign Creator. John Broad says:

Evidently Jonah thought it exceedingly probable that God would spare Nineveh, as he had done Israel, notwithstanding the warning voice he was commissioned to utter. He looked upon his mission in the light of an experiment, for the purpose of exhibiting the inveteracy of human depravity and the richness of the Divine forbearance.⁷

As Jonah acknowledged, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (2:9b). Man does not have the inclination to choose good.

Responsibility of Man

⁶ Uriel Simon, *Jonah, The Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), xxiv.

⁷ Broad, 16.

Man must exhibit faith in God, but even faith is a gift from the Creator. The sailors, the citizens of Nineveh, and the king embraced the Lord and understood that salvation was from him. Jonah struggled embracing his responsibility to trust God in what he was doing.

H.D.M Spence-Jones writes:

He dares to attempt extricating himself, not only from his obligations to God, but from his very “presence.” Alas! men have not merely the power but the disposition to oppose God.⁸

Even though faith is a gift from God, man is still responsible for exhibiting that faith.

Goodness

God’s attribute of goodness leads to his disposition to dispense beauty, mercy, and love. God’s goodness compels him to justify the lost. Jonah’s rebellion and the sins of the Assyrians are the canvas upon which God paints a masterpiece of his own goodness. Charles Simeon writes, “Know then, both from his dealings with the Ninevites, and his forbearance towards his perverse prophet, that He is abundant in goodness and truth, and that where sin has abounded, his grace shall much more abound.”⁹ While the Lord abhors the evils of man, it is against the backdrop of our sin the attribute of God’s goodness shines brightest.

In the storm, neither Jonah nor the sailors earned God’s favor. Yet, the goodness of God covered them with his mercy. When Jonah was cast into the ocean he had earned the death, which was ahead of him. Patrick Fairbairn says:

But in what presently befell Jonah we are also called to behold the goodness of God; for no sooner is he cast out, as a victim of divine justice, into the raging deep, than a great fish was ready to swallow him up—not for instant destruction, but for safe preservation.¹⁰

⁸ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Jonah, The Pulpit Commentary* (London; New York: Funk & Wagnall, 1909), 41.

⁹ Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae: Hosea to Malachi*, vol. 10 (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1832), 279.

¹⁰ Patrick Fairbairn, *Jonah: His Life, Character, and Mission* (Edinburgh; London: John Johnstone, 1849), 61.

The goodness of God spared Jonah.

While in the fish Jonah recited a psalm to Yahweh's goodness. H.D.M Spence-Jones writes, "Even in the depths of the sea Jonah did not lose his faith in the oversight, the care, the goodness of the Lord."¹¹ Only the God of goodness could save Jonah's life and soul.

There are few races of people in Scripture less deserving of Yahweh's blessings than the Assyrians. The vile race was used by God because of their abhorrent treatment of others. Within the walls of Nineveh, only God's goodness could have penetrated the dark hearts of the Ninevites. Reed Lessing says, "Yahweh's action in forgiving the Ninevites is similar to his observation of the goodness of his original creation, only now the good works of the Ninevites are the result of God working in them a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15)."¹²

In the final scene, Jonah's attitude contrasts God's goodness. Jonah cared not for the souls of the Ninevites, but that did not prevent God from withholding mercy. William Brown writes, "Whereas the prophet was concerned about a mere bush that flourished and died in one night, God's goodness includes a whole city, 120,000 people and 'many animals.'"¹³ The reader can see the goodness of God in his actions contained in the Book of Jonah. The prophet's struggles with his Creator aided the Lord in showcasing this attribute. Of the Book of Jonah, John Calvin says, "Hence the goodness of God alone ought to be regarded by us,

¹¹ Spence-Jones, 45.

¹² R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2007), 317.

¹³ William P. Brown, *Obadiah through Malachi*, ed. Patrick Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 28. D. Miller and David L. Bartlett,

when we desire his mercy, and when we have need of pardon.”¹⁴ God’s goodness is imperative and evident in Jonah.

Election

God’s election of sinful human beings shows his goodness to the world. God predestined some for an eternal relationship with himself (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:5) and reprobate others to live eternity separated from God’s love (Jhn. 10:26; Rom. 9:13–18). The elect do not deserve God’s goodness, as is clearly seen in the case of Jonah. John Lange writes, “But we adhere strictly and inflexibly to the Word of God, and admit that Jonah, in this instance, committed a great sin, on account of which he would have been eternally condemned, had he not, in the number of the elect, been written in the book of life.”¹⁵ In this way, God’s goodness is modeled in election.

Initiative

Man’s sinful nature prevents him from crossing the canyon that separates him from God. Instead God reaches out to man, and his goodness is revealed. William Brown writes, “This first episode in Jonah’s adventures demonstrates God’s initiative in leading people into conversion, into the circle of grace. Jonah was simply an unwitting instrument.”¹⁶ Through God’s great goodness and his initiative toward man, his elect can come to him by faith.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jonah* in *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* vol. 3. trans. John Owen. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 125.

¹⁵ John Peter Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 21.

¹⁶ Brown, 21.

Immutability

God's character and attributes can never change, but how he exhibits those attributes may vary. As John Lange explains:

God's immutability is that of principle—not of plan and action. He immutably hates and punishes sin: hence, when a sinner becomes a penitent, God turns from threatened vengeance to free pardon.¹⁷

Notably, God's "relenting" (3:9, 10; 4:2 ESV) has been seen by some interpreters as implying that Yahweh can be fickle or erratic. Richard Phillips addresses those concerns this way:

Some translations of Jonah 3:10 state that God "repented" of his judgment. This has led some to question the omniscience of God, as if he had previously judged them in error; or the immutability of God, that is, his changelessness, since he appears to have changed his mind.¹⁸

The immutable God cannot turn from his disdain for sin, but the sinner's response to his sin determines God's actions.

In the scene with the plant, Jonah reveals that God's unchanging nature lies behind his reasons for fleeing. Jonah knew Yahweh would forgive the Ninevites if they turned from their sin as this is God's way with man. Reed Lessing says:

Thus divine immutability does not imply that God is unconcerned, inactive, or unrelated to his creatures. Therefore, when speaking about how God reveals himself, we can use terms in biblical creeds such as Jonah 4:2, including that God changes his verdict, implying that God's attributes remain constant even as he changes his actions in the world.¹⁹

God hates and punishes sin, but if sinners turn from rebellion to repentance the Lord will receive them. Interestingly, John Butler writes,

¹⁷ Lange, 35.

¹⁸ Phillips, 110.

¹⁹ Lessing, 340.

God changes His attitudes and actions towards men in regards to man's attitudes and actions towards God. And He is unchangeable in this. God ever frowns on evil and ever smiles on holiness. Man, decides whether God will smile or frown. So there is no contradiction with God's immutability in God's repenting. In fact, if God did not repent, it would contradict His immutability.²⁰

The immutable Yahweh accommodates the changing attitudes of man to sin, but never himself changes.

Righteousness

The righteousness of God is found in him, not in our works. Because of God's righteousness, man must submit to him. Reed Lessing wrote:

With respect to Nineveh's sin against Yahweh, it is in the same position as Israel, who stood guilty before the righteous God. Yet God now shows himself "merciful" toward Nineveh, just as he is toward Israel.²¹

The attribute of God's righteousness is clear within the Book of Jonah.

Jonah and Israel had enjoyed God's justice and mercy, but Jonah now wanted God's righteousness kept from his enemies. Jonah was so conflicted he preferred death. Richard Phillips states:

Notice that God does not even dignify the prophet with an answer. Jonah wants to die because of God's sovereign, saving grace; the prophet's idea of justice has collided with the reality of sovereign mercy.²²

Jonah did not desire for God to freely justify the Ninevites.

In the fish, Jonah acknowledges the Lord's righteousness, and he knew he deserved death. It is only because the Lord justifies that had Jonah has been saved. Gary Strauss

²⁰ John G. Butler, *Jonah: The Parochial Prophet*, vol. 2, *Bible Biography Series* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 1994), 179.

²¹ Lessing, 354.

²² Phillips, 118.

says, “In the belly of the fish Jonah finally came to acknowledge his disobedience, and in his prayer he acknowledged God’s righteousness and said in effect, ‘I know I deserve this.’”²³

God’s righteousness gave Jonah eternal and corporeal life.

Humanity’s version of justice and mercy frequently corresponds with that of Jonah. Jonah believed the evil deeds of Assyria deserves complete judgment. Richard Philips said:

Moreover, it was righteous of God to give that wicked city an opportunity to repent. They were his own creatures and, whether they knew it or not, God was their sovereign king as well.²⁴

God’s attribute of righteousness provided mercy for Nineveh.

God provided the plant for Jonah’s relief, even more, to display God’s righteousness. As Uriel Simon states, “Jonah’s mute response indicates that he had no answer to it and may perhaps have ended his rebellion, recognizing at last the righteousness of his God.”²⁵ The reader is meant to see God’s attribute of righteousness with the plant, even if Jonah cannot.

The glory of the Lord is displayed through Jonah even as the prophet struggles with the implication of God’s attributes. The reader as well is challenged by the nature of God. As Billy Smith writes:

The very thought of God “changing his mind” causes difficulty for some believers. In perfect consistency with his justice, righteousness, and mercy, he spared Nineveh.²⁶

God’s righteousness is revealed for his glory and man’s benefit.

²³ Cyril J. Barber and Gary H. Strauss, *My Son, Jonah: A Practical Commentary on the Books of Jonah and Nahum* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 74.

²⁴ Phillips, 16.

²⁵ Simon, 41.

²⁶ Smith and Page, 269.

Conclusion

As has been shown, the sovereignty, goodness, immutability, and righteousness of God are main ideas in the book of Jonah. Through history pastors and theologians examined these theological doctrines in this portion of Scripture and worked out their implications. Having laid down the foundations of these doctrines, the next chapter will examine the views of prominent theologians in church history regarding the attributes of God in Jonah.

CHAPTER 5

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah has had great influence throughout history. Christian theologians have had much to say regarding how Jonah reveals the attributes of God. This chapter will sample two prominent writers from five eras of the Christian church: The Early Church Fathers (pre-5th century), the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries), the Reformers (15th and 16th centuries), the Puritans (17th and 18th centuries) and Modern Theologians (19th century to today). The following is a sampling of how Christian theologians over two millennia have viewed the Book of Jonah and its centrality to the attributes of God.

Early Church Fathers

Due to time, the lack of a printing press, and persecution, much of the writings from the first 500 years of the Christian church have been lost. However, two of the most influential theologians of the era had much to say about the Book of Jonah. This section will view the work of Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) and Augustine (354–430) on the Book of Jonah.

Tertullian

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (c. 160–c. 225) was one of the first great influential apologists and writers in the Western church. Tertullian, who wrote in Latin and

Greek, provided some of the earliest exegetical writings for the Christian church. Tertullian was a Roman lawyer of North African descent.

Tertullian wrote about the sovereignty of God being revealed when he said:

Now I apprehend that in the case of Jonah we have a fair proof of this divine power, when he comes forth from the fish's belly uninjured in both his natures—his flesh and his soul. No doubt the bowels of the whale would have had abundant time during three days for consuming and digesting Jonah's flesh, quite as effectually as a coffin, or a tomb, or the gradual decay of some quiet and concealed grave; only that he wanted to prefigure even those beasts (which symbolize) especially the men who are wildly opposed to the Christian name, or the angels of iniquity, of whom blood will be required by the full exaction of an avenging judgment.¹

God controlled the actions of the fish and even its digestive process to preserve his prophet.

Tertullian wrote a 152-line psalm titled, "Strain of Jonah the Prophet." Much of Tertullian's poem was on the goodness of God. Tertullian said of God's goodness "that Jonah was swallowed by the monster of the deep, in whose belly whole ships were devoured, and after three days was vomited out again safe and sound."² Also, Tertullian wrote:

Do the ears of God wait for sound? How, then, could Jonah's prayer find way out unto heaven from the depth of the whale's belly, through the entrails of so huge a beast; from the very abysses, through so huge a mass of sea?³

Only the goodness of God spared Jonah from digestion.

Tertullian addressed the immutability of God in discussing God's relenting of his judgment against Nineveh. Tertullian wrote:

Then, you will say, if you excuse the evil under name of justice, on the ground that He had justly determined destruction against the people of Nineveh, He must even on this argument be blameworthy, for having repented of an act of justice, which surely

¹ Tertullian, "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), 568.

² Ibid., 591.

³ Tertullian, "On Prayer," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), 686.

should not be repented of. Certainly not, my reply is; God will never repent of an act of justice.⁴

Tertullian fixed on God's unchanging hatred of sin.

Tertullian discussed God's righteousness when he said, "In Jonah you find the signal act of His mercy, which He showed to the praying Ninevites."⁵ Earlier in the same book Tertullian had written, "I see how the Ninevites obtained forgiveness of their sins from the Creator."⁶ Tertullian saw the righteousness of God as a focus in the Book of Jonah.

Tertullian was a prolific early Christian writer and theologian. In his work on the Book of Jonah he discussed the attributes of God extensively.

Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was a philosopher and Christian theologian whose writings greatly impacted the development of the Western church. Augustine was a Bishop in Hippo Regius, a Roman city in Northern Africa. He was an influential exegete with over 100 written works surviving to this present day.

Augustine saw the sovereignty of God as central to the Book of Jonah. He wrote, "But that story of ours about the prophet Jonah is far more incredible, – more incredible

⁴ Tertullian, "The Five Books against Marcion," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), 316.

⁵ Ibid., 452.

⁶ Ibid., 358.

because more marvellous, and more marvellous because a greater exhibition of power.”⁷ He saw the display of God’s great power as a central theme of Jonah.

Augustine saw the sending of a prophet and the warning of the wrath of God as a display of his goodness. Augustine indicated God wanted to spare the Assyrians when he wrote, “He spared the city of Nineveh when it repented, after He had announced to it, by means of a prophet, the destruction that was about to overtake it.”⁸ God’s perfect goodness demanded he spare the Ninevites.

God’s immutability was central for Augustine when he explained God’s relenting in his punishment of Nineveh. Augustine wrote, “For sinners are destroyed in two ways, – either, like the Sodomites, the men themselves are punished for their sins, or, like the Ninevites, the men’s sins are destroyed by repentance. God’s prediction, therefore, was fulfilled, – the wicked Nineveh was overthrown, and a good Nineveh built up. For its walls and houses remained standing; the city was overthrown in its depraved manners.”⁹

Conversion of sinners is how the immutable Yahweh destroys the wickedness of sin.

Augustine affirms God’s righteous intent when he sent the fish to deliver his prophet. Augustine wrote of God’s merciful plan, “Let him, therefore, who proposes to inquire why the prophet Jonah was three days in the capacious belly of a sea monster, begin by dismissing

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887), 10.

⁸ Augustine of Hippo, “On the Catechising of the Uninstructed,” in *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 3, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887), 303.

⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, 471.

doubts as to the fact itself; for this did actually occur, and did not occur in vain.”¹⁰ God purposed the fish to display his justice.

Augustine wrote much on the Book of Jonah. The Bishop from Northern Africa wrote about God’s attributes being revealed in the tale of the prophet.

Middle Ages

The Middle Ages, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of Constantinople, is known as a low point in biblical studies. Still, two significant voices stand out in the Middle Ages in the studies of theology and biblical interpretation. This section will view the work of Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) on the Book of Jonah.

Bonaventure

Born Giovanni di Fidanza in Italy, Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274) entered the Franciscan Order and earned a doctor of theology. He was Augustinian in his approach and did great work in the areas of mystical and philosophical theology. Bonaventure wrote, preached, and taught extensively on Scripture and theology.

Bonaventure, as Christ had done, addressed the sovereignty of God in his fulfillment of the prophecy of Jonah in Jesus. Bonaventure said:

O Holy FATHER, show me the sign of Jonas the Prophet. It has already been shown in the Head; it shall hereafter be shown in the members. A good sign is the Resurrection of CHRIST; for it is the sign of His glory in heaven, the sign of His

¹⁰ Augustine of Hippo, “Letters of St. Augustin,” in *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin with a Sketch of His Life and Work*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. G. Cunningham, vol. 1, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886), 423.

mercy in the world, the sign of His victory in hell, the sign of His justice in judgment.¹¹

In the supreme sovereignty of Yahweh, Jonah's three days in the fish, pointed forward to Christ's three days in the tomb.

Bonaventure saw great torment in the sufferings of hell. Yet, the righteousness of God provides sinners with great mercy and justice. Bonaventure said:

By the belly of the whale, then, the infernal abyss is set forth. And well: for as there are many thousand shads in the belly of the whale, so there are many thousand souls in hell. GOD guard us from ever being east into that horrible belly!¹²

Only through God are sinners saved from torment.

True goodness is only found in the Creator. Only through God's goodness could Nineveh be saved. Bonaventure said, "For as after the sign given in Jonas, Nineveh was converted by him; so, after the Resurrection of CHRIST, the world which is signified by Nineveh, was converted by CHRIST and by His Apostles."¹³ Through the goodness of God in Christ the Ninevites will judge from heaven.

Bonaventure found the attributes of God in the Book of Jonah in their connection to Jesus. Through actions in Jonah, God pointed forward to his coming Son.

Thomas Aquinas

¹¹ J. M. Neale, *Medieval Preachers and Medieval Preaching: A Series of Extracts, Translated from the Sermons of the Middle Ages, Chronologically Arranged: With Notes and an Introduction* (London: J. & C. Mozley; J. Masters & Co., 1856), 259–260.

¹² *Ibid.*, 261.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

Aquinas (1225–1274) was a contemporary of Bonaventure. He was an Italian born apologist, philosopher, and theologian. From the Dominican Order, he wrote and taught extensively on a wide range of biblical and theological topics.

Aquinas saw God's sovereignty in the Book of Jonah. In *Summa Theologica* Aquinas addressed God's sovereignty when answering the question, can prophecy be false? Aquinas said:

This is instanced in the example of the Ninevites, according to Jon. 3:10: The Lord had mercy with regard to the evil which He had said that He would do to them, and He did it not. Therefore, the matter of prophecy can be false.¹⁴

The omnipotent Lord can do as he pleases.

Aquinas saw God's goodness in Jonah. God's goodness must go to the righteous.

Aquinas said:

Now the prophecy of commination is not always fulfilled: as appears from what was said of the destruction of Nineveh (Jonas 3); and yet it was not destroyed as foretold by the prophet, who also was troubled for that very reason (4:1). Therefore it would seem that much more will the threat of eternal punishment be commuted by God's mercy for a more lenient punishment, when this will be able to give sorrow to none but joy to all.¹⁵

Only God commutes an earned punishment, and this is a display of his goodness.

Aquinas addressed the question of the immutability of God. He said, "God is said to repent, metaphorically, inasmuch as He bears Himself after the manner of one who repents, by changing His sentence, although He changes not His counsel."¹⁶ God is unchanging. He cannot help but hate sin, but he shows mercy to his children.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washburn, 1942), II-II. Q171. A6.

¹⁵ Ibid., I-II. Q99. A4.

¹⁶ Ibid., II-II. Q171. A6.

The righteous attribute of God was seen by Aquinas in the Book of Jonah. Aquinas wrote, “Now God changes His sentence but not his counsel—in whom it is apparent that the sentence pronounced against them by God was commuted by the Divine mercy.”¹⁷ Yahweh is just, merciful, and righteous. True mercy can only come from God.

Thomas Aquinas, in his landmark *Summa Theologica*, addressed the attributes of God revealed in the Book of Jonah. Aquinas made clear the richness of God in found in this prophetic book.

Reformers

Rich exegesis, thorough systematics, and disciplined biblical studies became a hallmark of the reformers. The 15th and 16th centuries saw a return to *sola scriptura* that reinvigorated a desire to analyze God’s Word. This section will view the work of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) on the Book of Jonah.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a German Augustinian who earned a doctor of theology. He was a seminary professor, composer, monk, and priest. His Ninety-five Theses are considered the launching point of the Protestant Reformation. Luther preached, taught, and wrote voraciously. Much of his work was foundational for those who followed.

Luther saw the sovereignty of God in the Book of Jonah. Specifically, Luther discussed God’s influence during the casting of the lots. Luther said, “They must believe that

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Supplementum*. Q71. A6.

God directs the lots and rules our fates with sovereign power; they must not doubt that gain or loss of lot and game is decided by God.”¹⁸

God’s attribute of goodness was evidenced by Luther. In the Book of Jonah, the good Yahweh reigns. Luther wrote, “For Jonah here speaks of God’s mercy and goodness, which is ours, that is, which is offered, promised, and presented to us.”¹⁹

Luther saw the immutable Lord of Creation within the Book of Jonah. Luther wrote, “It is superfluous to enter on the subtle question here how God can repent, turn from and regret His anger, since He is unchangeable. Some people are deeply concerned about this; they complicate the matter for themselves unnecessarily.”²⁰ Luther found God’s relenting of his punishment in Jonah as consistent with his unchanging attributes.

Luther understood Jonah as pointing toward a righteousness found in God and not man. Luther stated of God’s righteousness:

That is Jonah’s experience here. This is no longer human righteousness based on our works and power, but it is an angelic, yes, a divine righteousness based on faith and spirit and devoid of any works.²¹

The divine righteousness of God is provided to his elect through faith.

Martin Luther saw the Book of Jonah, not as a story of a wayward prophet, but a tale designed to show the attributes of God. Luther exposed God’s attributes from the pages of the short book. Many theologians have built on Luther’s work over the past 500 years.

John Calvin

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 19: *Minor Prophets II: Jonah and Habakkuk*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 19 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

John Calvin (1509–1564) was a pioneer exegete of Scripture. He was a pastor, writer, and earned a doctorate in jurisprudence. Calvin was a French theologian who advanced the Protestant Reformation throughout Europe. His *Institutes* and *Commentaries*, which built on the work of Augustine and Luther before him, were invaluable to later theologians.

Calvin understood God's sovereign will as being evident in the Book of Jonah. Calvin saw God clearly in control of the wind:

When he desired that Jonah should be thrown into the sea, he sent forth a whirlwind. Those who deny that God holds the reins of government will say that this was contrary to ordinary practice, whereas I infer from it that no wind ever rises or rages without his special command.²²

Calvin found joy and comfort in knowing the loving Yahweh had complete control of all.

In discussing God's hand in the salvation of the underserving in the Book of Jonah, Calvin clearly saw God's goodness. Calvin wrote:

If then men are inclined to mercy through some hidden impulse of nature, what may not be hoped from the inconceivable goodness of God, who is the Creator of the whole world, and the Father of us all? And will not he, who is the fountain of all goodness and mercy, spare us?²³

Man cannot fathom the depths of God's goodness, but he can know God's goodness is endless and perfect.

God's immutability is evident in the relenting of Nineveh's punishment. Calvin saw this unchanging attribute of God clearly. He said that God's:

decrees are sometimes said to be annulled. He had by Jonah proclaimed to the Ninevites, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," but, immediately on their repentance, he inclined to a more merciful sentence, (Jonah 3:4–10).²⁴

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 240.

²³ Ibid., 143.

²⁴ Calvin, 264.

God abhors sin and that cannot change. As the heart of man turns from darkness to light, God's response to man must change.

Calvin understood God as being righteous in his interactions with the nations. The attribute of God's righteousness is shown in the Book of Jonah. Calvin said:

But Jonah, by saying here that they feared with great fear, means that they were so smitten, that they really perceived that the God of Israel was a righteous judge, and that he was not such as other nations fancied him to be, but that he was capable of affording dreadful examples whenever he intended to execute his vengeance.²⁵

God's justice was truly evident.

John Calvin's systematic and exegetical work has buttressed 500 years of substantive theological study. He saw the depth of the doctrine of God in the Book of Jonah, and recognized God's attributes as a central focus of the book. Calvin helps the reader more clearly see God in the story of Jonah.

Puritans

The English Reformed Protestants of the 16th through 18th centuries sought the theological purity of the church. The Puritans supported a high standard for personal and corporate study. This section will view the work of John Owen (1616–1683) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) on the Book of Jonah.

John Owen

John Owen (1616–1683) was an English born theologian, pastor, and academic administrator at Oxford. Owen was a nonconformist puritan and ardent defender of Calvinism. He wrote extensively and is considered to have been one of the most prominent English theologians.

²⁵ Ibid., 53.

The sovereignty of God in the Book of Jonah was clear to Owen. God does as he chooses with his creation. Owen said, “Yea, but they are failing ones perhaps, such as may flourish for a season, and be but children of a night, like Jonah’s gourd. Though God hath begotten us of his own will, and bestowed good and perfect gifts upon us, yet he may cast us off for ever.”²⁶ The all-controlling Lord can choose to save or condemn his creation as he wills.

The attribute of goodness is abundant in Yahweh, and Owen believed that God’s goodness was beyond his creation’s understanding. Owen wrote, “There is a general compassion in God, by which he proceeds in the dispensation of his providence, that is too hard for the apprehensions of men when they come to be concerned in it. Poor Jonah was angry that he was so merciful.”²⁷ God shows mercy and grace as he desires.

Owen saw the immutability of God as central to understanding his withholding of punishment on Nineveh: “And there are judgments threatened, which have been diverted by the repentance of men; as it was in the case of Nineveh. But in this case, neither will God repent, nor shall man repent; but those judgments shall be universal and unavoidable.”²⁸ God’s love of righteousness and punishment of wickedness is never changing.

The Creator administers justice and mercy as only he can understand. The attribute of God’s righteousness is seen by Owen the Book of Jonah. Owen said, “But, alas! when the storm came on the ship at sea, wherein there was but one person that feared God, upon an inquiry for whose sake it came, the lot fell on him, Jonah 1:7. The cause of the present storm

²⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 11, *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1853), 21–122.

²⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 8, *Posthumous Sermons—Part 1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1851), 39.

²⁸ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 9, *Sermon XVI* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1851), 616.

may as well be the secret sins of professors as the open provocations of ungodly men.”²⁹ The ungodly must be judged and those who repent must receive mercy.

John Owen found God’s attributes to be plainly visible in the Book of Jonah. Owen pointed to the profound explanations of God in the short book of the fleeing prophet. Owen, in his preaching and writing, talked of better understanding God through Jonah.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) is arguably America’s greatest theologian. Edwards was a pastor, missionary to the Indians, and theologian who wrote over 1,000 sermons. Edwards played a critical role in shaping the First Great Awakening.

Edwards highlighted God’s sovereignty in Jonah by connecting his eternal prophecy of foretelling Christ through Jonah. Edwards said:

Christ was given up to the devil as his captive for a season. This antitype of Jonah was thrown to this great leviathan, to be swallowed up as his prey. The time of Christ’s suffering, was the time of the prevalency of the power of the devil, wherein Christ was delivered up to that power.³⁰

Edwards saw the goodness of God in the manner and timing that God answers Jonah’s and our prayers. Edwards said:

God is pleased sometimes to answer the prayers of unbelievers. Indeed he hears not their prayers for their goodness or acceptableness, or because of any true respect to him manifested in them, for there is none; nor has he obliged himself to answer such prayers; yet he is pleased sometimes, of his sovereign mercy, to pity wicked men, and hear their cries. Thus he heard the cries of the Ninevites, (Jonah 3).³¹

²⁹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 7, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1852), 309.

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Remarks on Important Theological Controversies* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 575.

³¹ Edwards, 117.

The great goodness of God is revealed in his response to the prayers of sinners.

Edwards grasped the immutability of God in his relenting of punishment to Nineveh.

Edwards pointed to God's consistent treatment of sin and repentance:

Another objection may arise from God's threatening to Nineveh. He threatened, that in forty days Nineveh should be destroyed, which yet he did not fulfil. – I answer, that threatening could justly be looked upon no otherwise than as conditional. It was of the nature of a warning, and not of an absolute denunciation.³²

The righteousness of God is explained by Edwards in God's consistent judgment of sinful races. God judges all peoples justly. Edwards said:

Why was Jonah sent to the Ninevites, but to give them warning, that they might have opportunity to repent, reform, and avert the approaching destruction? God had no other design or end in sending the prophet to them, but that they might be warned and tried by him, as God warned the Israelites, Judah and Jerusalem, before their destruction.³³

God's right and just treatment of sin and repentance is seen in Jonah and throughout the OT.

Jonathan Edwards saw in the book of Jonah more than a simple story of a wayward prophet, a fish, and a worm. Edwards saw God's attributes displayed for all to see.

Modern Theologians

In the 19th through 21st centuries, biblical theology has been tested by secularism, postmodernism, and theological liberalism. This section will view the work of Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) and Christopher J. H. Wright (1947–) on the Book of Jonah.

Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892)

³² Ibid., 87.

³³ Ibid.

Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892), the “Prince of Preachers,” was a British Baptist minister. Spurgeon preached over 3,500 sermons and published over 45 books. He was one of the most popular preachers of his time. Staunchly Reformed, Spurgeon frequently battled against theological liberalism and Armenianism in his day.

Spurgeon attested to the attribute of God’s sovereignty in the Book of Jonah by contrasting Jonah’s sinful focus on self with God’s omnipotence. Spurgeon said, “Jonah would never have bowed his self-will to sovereign grace had he not been cast into the deep, compassed about with floods, and overwhelmed with billows and waves.”³⁴ Spurgeon suggested that God chastened Jonah to bring him in line with his own will.

Spurgeon artfully compared the good God with the sinful free will of man to advance his perfect and good plan: “In Jonah’s case, the Lord prepared the worm; and although no evil thing can be charged against the good God, yet at the back of man’s free will there is the great truth of divine predestination, which, without taking any evil upon itself, yet overrules even the waywardness of man for the Lord’s own glory.”³⁵ The good and perfect God can use all to administer his mercy and justice.

Spurgeon was certain of God’s immutability in the book of Jonah. Spurgeon stated that Jonah was aware of God’s unchanging attribute as should be all disciples:

Jonah felt that God knew where he was, because he had sent the fish. God knows your whereabouts, my good woman; he knows what quarters you are now in, my fellow-sinner. Remember, too, that you are yet alive! what a wonder it is that you are still permitted to hear the voice which says, “Return, return; oh! backslider, return.” God is immutable; he cannot change; his covenant is steadfast; he will not alter it.³⁶

³⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Student’s Prayer,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 23 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1877), 162.

³⁵ Spurgeon, 78–79.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 209–210.

The nature of God is that he cannot and will not change. His creation can depend upon his eternal consistency.

In demonstrating the righteousness of God, Spurgeon contrasted God's justice with the sinful heart of Jonah. Spurgeon juxtaposed God and Jonah's views on Nineveh:

Jonah, on the contrary, thought everything of God, and very little of men. He fell into an error by so doing, and there was a want of balance of judgment, yet is Jonah's error so very seldom committed that I am half inclined to admire it in contrast with the error on the other side. He felt that it would be better for Nineveh to be destroyed than for God's truthfulness to be jeopardized even for a single moment.³⁷

Spurgeon explained the right and just Lord is the only one capable of dispensing perfect judgement. While man's sin interferes with objectivity, sinless God is completely righteous.

Charles Spurgeon preached extensively from Jonah. He saw how it provided insight into God's nature. Spurgeon regularly pointed to attributes of God being revealed in Jonah.

Christopher J. H. Wright (1947–)

Christopher J. H. Wright was born in Northern Ireland. He is an ordained Anglican with a Ph.D. in OT Theology. Wright is the author of 15 books and is a leading theologian on the OT. He served as a missionary to India for five years and currently serves as the International Ministries Director of the Langham Partnership International.

Wright explains how the sovereignty God is revealed in his sending of his disciples to do his bidding. God sends sinful man, yet the Creator never surrenders complete control. Wright writes, "God's mission involved a host of sent-ones, deliverers and messengers, but ultimately the accomplishment of God's mission did not depend on such human agents, but

³⁷ Ivid., 561.

on the sovereign power of God himself, though his Spirit and his Word.”³⁸ Servants of the Lord are little more than tools in the sovereign hands of the Master Carpenter.

Wright shows the goodness of God by contrasting him with the sin of Jonah. God’s merciful treatment of Nineveh angered Jonah. Wright states:

Jonah proclaims the impending doom of Nineveh. From king to beggar, the city repents. So God also “repents” and withholds his judgment. But the amazing twist of the book is that this signal demonstration of the mercy of YHWH as God in dealing with a foreign nation is an embarrassment to Jonah.³⁹

The dark heart of man always stands in contrast to the goodness of God.

Wright sees the immutability of God clearly when compared to the inconsistency exhibited by Jonah. Wright wrote, “Paradoxically, Jonah’s disgruntled reaction to God’s gracious response to the repentant Ninevites stands in ironic contrast to his own quotation of the Exodus text as a reason for his original rejection of the mission.”⁴⁰ While Jonah desired a biased administration of God’s mercy, God is unchanging.

Wright sees the righteousness of God magnified by Jonah’s sinfulness. Wright says:

The book clearly teaches important lessons about the nature of God and his attitude to outside nations; that is the obvious thrust of the final chapter. It clearly challenges the kind of attitude that Jonah adopts in reaction to God’s suspension of judgment on Nineveh.⁴¹

God’s right and just character is glorified in his treatment of Nineveh.

Christopher Wright holds a strong position on the perspective that the attributes of God are revealed in the Book of Jonah, and the rest of the OT. Wright is fascinated by

³⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission, Biblical Theology for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 209.

³⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 460–461.

⁴⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics: For the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 460.

⁴¹ Wright, 503.

Jonah's adventure, but sees the portrayal of God as the real focus of the book. He believes Jonah helps provide a backdrop in which God's heart toward the lost nations is displayed.⁴²

Conclusion

Throughout the existence of the Christian church many prominent theologians and preachers have focused on the Book of Jonah and its role in clearly revealing the attributes of God. Many have seen God's sovereignty, goodness, immutability, and righteousness as clearly evident in the book.

Having looked at exegetical, theological, and history matters, the following chapter will consider the practical application of this information. The Book of Jonah clearly points to the attributes of God, but what does that mean for the disciples of God?

⁴² Ibid., 461.

CHAPTER 6

APPLICATION OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The Book of Jonah is reduced to simply another story if God's people do not implement the substance of its message. Knowing the attributes of God leads to understanding what kind of God Yahweh is. This knowledge is central in helping believers to live for God and to bring him glory. This chapter will explain how understanding the attributes of God, as found in the Book of Jonah, can impact the life of the church.

Knowledge of God

Frequently disciples of Christ worship God, not as he is, but as they want him to be. Understanding the attributes of Yahweh helps us serve and glorify our Creator to the fullest of our ability. Misinterpreting God's nature is dangerous for our faith. A.W. Pink says:

A merely theoretical knowledge of God has no effectual influence upon the soul, nor does it exert any beneficial power on one's daily walk. Nothing but a vital knowledge of God will produce the former, and only a practical knowledge of Him secures the latter.¹

God has revealed his true nature to us and desires his creatures to worship him as he is.

The Book of Jonah aides the reader in better comprehending God's sovereignty, goodness, immutability, and righteousness. This knowledge of God is an asset in the life of the church. In each of the four scenes of Jonah the reader is provided with a clear

¹ Arthur Walkington Pink, *Gleanings from Paul Studies in the Prayers of the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 340.

understanding of who God is. An example can be seen among the storm of the first chapter. The knowledge of God's attributes gained by the sailors resulted in them turning from their false gods to Yahweh. Reed Lessing said of this revelation:

When these sailors realize that their own gods will not avail, they urge Jonah: "Call to your God" (Jonah 1:6). In that way, they give evidence of the universal, natural knowledge of God.²

A greater knowledge of God's attributes draws his elect closer to him.

Imitation of God

As sinful man becomes more familiar with the attributes of God he is provided a holy example of how to live in community and how to live a life that reflects the perfection of Yahweh. In the storm, the sailors learned to avoid false idols. In the psalm, Jonah trusted in God's sovereignty. In the city, the Ninevites gained an example of God's mercy and justice. These characteristics teach and challenge believers to be more like our Creator.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians instructs disciples to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph. 5:1). As man becomes more familiar with the attributes of God, he better understands how he is to imitate God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote of this verse:

Become imitators mimics, of God. In what respect? In respect of these communicable attributes! We are not just to be good people, we are to be imitators of God!³

The Book of Jonah familiarizes God's children with his attributes and gives them a better understanding of exactly what we are to imitate.

Living for God

² R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2007), 121.

³ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17–5:17* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 293.

The people of God are called to exist as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). The life of a Christian disciple is to be lived, and even forfeited, for God. Within the Book of Jonah, the sailors, prophet, and Ninevites learn to live for God. Remembering the attributes of God in chapter two encouraged Jonah to live for God in chapter three. Charles Spurgeon preached:

A saint is a person who is set apart unto God, consecrated to God, sanctified, separated, a man who is in the world, but not of it; he belongs to God, and he lives for God. Now, if God loves you in the sense in which we have been speaking, he has made a saint of you, a dedicated man. You remember that Jonah was asked, “What is thine occupation, and of what people art thou?” and he answered, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord.” That was his occupation; he was a God-fearing man. It is not every man who could give such an answer as that.⁴

Living for God is the sacrificial call for all who name Yahweh their King. When we see the attributes of God plainly we are more inclined to live a life focused on the glory of God.

Local Church

The bride of Christ must consider the Book of Jonah, and study God’s attributes of sovereignty, goodness, immutability, and righteousness. The local church should then emulate the dedication of the sailors, the submission of Jonah, and the repentance of the Ninevites as they live for Christ. The church is also to show God’s grace and mercy in the world, and train its members to glorify the Lord. As the members and leadership of a church comprehend God’s attributes, they see that the Lord is worthy of serving and glorifying.

Global Outreach

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Beloved Pastor’s Plea for Unity,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 39 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1893), 377–378.

The purpose of the church is to take God's salvific message to the sinners in their community and around the globe (Mat. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). In the Book of Jonah, the modern church sees a God who is zealous to spread his name and glory to the nations. The dedication shown by God to reveal his justice and mercy with Nineveh helps his modern disciples to more clearly understand the enthusiasm in which God wishes his followers to reach the lost in the world.

Enduring for God

God's plan is not always the plan we would choose. Sometimes the sanctification of the saints and God's glory require his disciples to suffer for their Lord. Christians are instructed to endure for God (Mal. 3:2; 1 Cor. 13:7; Col. 1:11). John Piper says:

The other prong is the suffering of God's anointed. This suffering is endured for God's sake. And the suffering is either the means by which the adversaries are brought to repentance and saved, or the means by which they are confirmed in their hardness and condemned.⁵

When the reader comprehends the attributes of God, he sees a Savior who is worth enduring for.

Jonah's personal trials and suffering were endured for God's glory. From the opening scene to the closing verse, Jonah endures physical, emotional, and spiritual trials. Jonah suffered, not because he supported God's plan, but because he loved the Lord. John Chrysostom says:

⁵ John Piper, "Pour Out Your Indignation Upon Them" (sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, June 22, 2008); available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/pour-out-your-indignation-upon-them>; Internet; accessed March 4, 2017.

The case of Jonah is further cited in illustration. The exhortation on the fear of death is here continued; and it is shewn, that he who suffers unjustly, and yet gives thanks to God, by whose permission it happens, is as one suffering for God's sake.⁶

God's glory is worthy of our sacrifice.

⁶ John Chrysostom, "The Homilies on the Statues," in *Saint Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W. R. W. Stephens, vol. 9, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature, 1889), 381.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

While the Book of Jonah is a very practical book for Christians, its central focus is the revelation of the attributes of God. The book is a resource to teach a knowledge of God which is nearly unparalleled. God's sovereignty, immutability, goodness, and righteousness are displayed in his interaction with his prophet. Knowledge of these attributes are not for our personal joy, but to advance God's perfect will. Donald Wiseman said:

At odds with God, Jonah typifies those who see the divine attributes of justice and mercy as functioning for their own convenience; mercy for themselves, but justice for their enemies. Fortunately, however, these attributes are not directed by human motives or desires. As the book of Jonah makes plainly obvious, God is sovereign, his justice is totally impartial, and his mercy may extend to anyone.¹

Knowledge of the he attributes of God were given to Jonah, and by extension all followers of God, not to advance our personal agenda.

Interestingly, it was Jonah's understanding of God's attributes which caused him to disobey Yahweh. Uriel Simon writes, "Jonah cites his knowledge of the Lord's attributes to explain his flight from His presence and ground his repeated insubordination."² By contrast, the author of Jonah emphasizes that God's attributes enable the reader to better understand

¹ Donald J. Wiseman, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 26, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 98.

² Uriel Simon, *Jonah, The Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 37.

his God and God's purposes in the world. While knowledge of the attributes of God caused Jonah to flee from Yahweh, the same knowledge should cause the reader to flee to God.

The Book of Jonah provides the reader with analogy to Christ, life lessons, historical insight, and a greater understanding of God. Jonah is the best known among the twelve Minor Prophets. It is extremely unique in comparison to the other prophetic books. Evidence of Jonah's influence throughout history echo in other religions, countless cultures, art, poetry, and secular literature. Its influence among Christians and non-Christians alike is undeniable.

The Book of Jonah, from God's call to the prophet at the beginning of the book, to God's literarily out of place question at the end, is about Yahweh. Many analysts of the book have missed the central focus. Much has been made of the historicity of the book, the lessons provided by the prophet, the literary magnificence, and the whimsical elements. The central focus of the Book of Jonah is not about the created world, but the Creator. Jonah provides remarkable insight into understanding the character and attributes of God.

As we learn more about the attributes of God and understand him better, we learn that sinful man does not always appreciate the attributes of God. In fact, it was Jonah's understanding of God's attributes which caused him to flee. John Hannah said:

Jonah also said He knew God relents from sending calamity. The prophet feared that all these attributes of God would be extended toward the despicable, cruel Ninevites—and it happened!³

Better knowledge of God has not always brought his disciples closer to God. But, better understanding God's attributes provides his disciples with greater insight as to how to serve, love, and worship their Lord.

³ John D. Hannah, "Jonah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1470.

Jonah used his knowledge of the attributes of God to rebel against God's will. As a follower of the Lord he had history and Scripture as evidence of God's nature. Jonah used that knowledge to place his will above God's. D.A. Carson said:

When the prophets want grace and mercy for themselves, they appeal to God's character; when Jonah does not want grace and mercy for others, he portrays the same attributes of God as fatal weaknesses.⁴

God's attributes are not to be understood and known to attempt to subvert the will of God.

God provides his disciples a clear understanding of his attributes so they can comprehend how to serve and glorify him. This is to implement God's will and to result in the salvation of man. Cyril Barber said, "In recounting God's attributes, Jonah teaches us that the Lord warns people of judgment so that He may spare them, and admonishes them in order that He might save them."⁵ This greater understanding of the knowledge of God's attributes comes with it an increased responsibility for the disciples of Yahweh to dedicate themselves to God's service.

Today, the Book of Jonah is occasionally overlooked as an insubstantial writing among the other 65 books of cannon. The poetic nature and literary qualities of the book cause some to disregard the gravity and depth of this 48-verse dynamo. But there is profound theology and depth in the account of Jonah that should not be missed. Throughout the history of the Church, many of our Christian fathers have understood the value of Jonah and acknowledged that the book has much to say about the attributes of God. From the early church to modern day, biblical theologians have appreciated the insight the Book of Jonah gives us about our Lord.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word.*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 25.

⁵ Cyril J. Barber and Gary H. Strauss, *My Son, Jonah: A Practical Commentary on the Books of Jonah and Nahum* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 113.

In the historical account of Jonah, the Lord brings glory to himself by using elements, animals, and the choices of men to accomplish his perfect will. While God does not need man to call the elect to himself, he uses his imperfect vessels so his sovereignty, immutability, goodness, and righteousness will be magnified among the nations. In this way, the Book of Jonah reveals the attributes of God as the Lord brings his salvation to a sinful and rebellious people.

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