EXEGETICAL EXPOSITION OF JONAH 4

A Paper
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OTS 510S, Hebrew Exegesis: Acquiring Interpretive Skills

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Text and Translation

This section will display the Hebrew text, a rough translation, and a smooth translation:

1. And it became evil to Jonah a great evil and it was anger to him.

1. And it became evil to Jonah—a great evil—and it angered him.

2. And he prayed to YHWH and he said, “Now YHWH is not this my word during my being upon my ground upon thus I came to flee to Tarshish because I knew that you are a God of graciousness and compassionate, long to anger and much loyal-love and regret upon evil.

2. And he prayed to YHWH and he said, “Now YHWH isn’t this my message while I was in my land, therefore I came to flee to Tarshish because I knew that you are a God of graciousness and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in loyal-love and regretful of evil.

3. And now YHWH, please take my life from me because good I die from live.

3. Now YHWH, please take my life from me because it is better if I die than live.

4. And YHWH said, “What good it is anger to you?”

4. And YHWH said, “What good is your anger?”
5. And he went out Jonah from the city and he sat down from east to the city and he made to him there a booth and he sat underneath the shadow upon which he saw what it would happen on the city.

5. And Jonah went out from the city and he sat down to the east of the city and he made a booth there for himself and he sat underneath the shadow until he saw what would happen to the city.

6. And YHWH-God appointed a plant and it went up above Jonah to become a shadow upon his head to deliver him from harm of him and he rejoiced Jonah upon the plant a great joy.

6. And YHWH-God appointed a plant and it went up above Jonah to become a shadow on his head to deliver him from harm and Jonah rejoiced with great joy because of the plant.

7. And He appointed God a worm in the going up to the following day and it struck the plant and it withered.

7. And God appointed a worm at the dawn of the following day and it struck the plant and it withered.

8. And it came to pass it rose the sun and He appointed God a wind east scorching. It struck the sun upon the head of Jonah and he covered himself and he asked his life to the death and he said, “Good I die from I live.”
8. And it came to pass that the sun rose and God appointed a scorching east wind. The sun struck the head of Jonah and he covered himself and he asked his life to die and he said, “It is better if I die than live.”

9. And he said God to Jonah, “What good is anger to you upon the plant?” And he said, “Good anger to me unto death.”

9. And God said to Jonah, “What good is your anger upon the plant?” And he said, “My anger is good to death.”

10. And He said YHWH, “You trouble upon the plant that no that you not labor upon it and not cause it to grow which child of the night it is and child of the night perished.

10. And YHWH said, “You are troubled about this plant and you did not labor for it and you did not cause it to grow which grew overnight and perished overnight.

11. And I not pity upon Nineveh the city the great one that exist in her from two-ten ten thousand men that not know their right hand from their left hand and many animals?

11. And I should not have pity upon Nineveh, that great city, in which exist one hundred and twenty thousand people, which do not know their right hand from their left hand, as well as many animals?
In this second section we will examine textual variants within this chapter.

**V. 5:** The textual annotations of the BHS compare this v. with 3:4. In 3:4 Jonah goes through the city and proclaims that judgment will occur in a certain amount of time. The MT reads אֶלֹהִים יָמִים (forty days). The LXX τρεῖς ἡμέραι (three days).

The thing to notice about 4:5 is that after Jonah proclaims the judgment of God he goes outside the city to wait to see what will happen. While it is possible that he would have waited forty days, and since the story ends with him waiting, we cannot conclude that forty days is not part of the original text. We can note though that the LXX has three days (rather than forty), the number three shows up in Jonah on three other locations (twice in 1:17; once in 3:3), and it would not be as hard to imagine that Jonah would wait three days to see if God indeed was going to spare Nineveh. It is therefore a strong possibility that the content of 4:5 should influence whether or not one read the LXX of 3:4 are accurate.

**V. 6:** In the LXX is τοῦ σκιάζειν (to overshadow) used to where לְהַלְבָּשׁ (to deliver) appears in the MT. The reading of the MT would suggest that God provided shade to “deliver” Jonah from the elements. The reading of the LXX suggests that God provided a shade to overshadow Jonah. While both make sense grammatically the MT reading is more contextually appropriate since the plant is being used as an example of grace.

**V. 8:** The textual annotation of the BHS proposes that ἁρπαγμός (scorn, disgrace) replace ἀρπάζει (sharp, scorching). The difference would be between God sending a wind that scorches Jonah or scorns/disgraces Jonah. Either word could fit the context of the narrative but ἁρπαγμός appears to function better within the discussion regarding the plant that provided protection.
Literary-Historical Content

Literary Content

The literary content of the Book of Jonah begins with the call of the prophet to proclaim the message of YHWH to Nineveh in Assyria. Although the content of the message is coming judgment (1:2) the prophet Jonah flees to Tarshish via ship (1:3). The prophet meets a series of characters that fear YHWH because of what Jonah is doing and because YHWH is angry with Jonah and has sent a storm to sink him—the sea, the ship (1:4), the sailors (1:5), and the captain (1:6)—yet Jonah simply prepares to accept whatever may come (1:5-10). Finally, Jonah informs the sailors that if he is thrown overboard YHWH will spare them so this is done (1:11-16).

YHWH shows Jonah grace and sends a great fish to swallow him (1:17). After three days in the fish Jonah finally prays to YHWH, who has preserved him thus far, and he begs for the deliverance he is already experiencing which is recorded in the form of a Psalm (2:1-10). YHWH then commands the fish to spew Jonah onto the shore (2:11).

YHWH commands Jonah to go to Nineveh again and this time he obeys (3:1-3). Jonah proclaims the message of coming judgment (3:4) and surprisingly Nineveh, led by her king, begins a city-wide repentance (3:5-10). God sees this and spares Nineveh (3:11). This leads to chapter four which is the focus of the paper.

Historical Content

The historical content of the Book of Jonah can be divided into two sections. The first is the historical setting of the writing of this book. The second is the historical setting of the narrative.

Some have suggested that this book was written during the exile. Others have noted that it may even be post-exilic.¹ The reason for this is because there is several words that used the
Aramaic meaning of a word rather than the older Hebrew. This means that the original audience would have been exilic or post-exilic Jews. Therefore the story of Jonah would have been read not simply as a timeless narrative, but as we note below, as a historiography. It would have told this story in a way that was meaningful to the original audience.

There is obviously “an older historical tradition” that was adapted literarily. Therefore, to understand Jonah one must have some knowledge of Nineveh and Tarshish. Nineveh was the capitol of Assyria. Tarshish was where Jonah sought to flee in order to avoid going to Nineveh.

The location of ancient Nineveh is near the modern Iraqi city of Mosul on the east bank of the Tigris River downstream from the Kurdish foothills. It was a North to South trade route as well as an East to West route which made it an important center for commerce. The patron deity of the city was Ishtar, goddess of love and war.

Although Nineveh existed before the rise of the Assyrian Empire she became “an integral part of the land of Assyria”. Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) made Nineveh the capitol of the entire Assyrian Empire in the 7th Century B.C. It remained the capitol until the fall of the empire in 612 B.C. Nineveh being a city that was the heart of an ever expanding, vicious empire, whose patron deity was a goddess of war, the reader can begin to understand why Jonah may have been unable to find any grace for Nineveh in his heart. In fact, when Nineveh eventually collapsed the canonical book of Nahum was written to rejoice in this event (1:1).

Tarshish, on the other hand, is a vaguer historical reference. Many believe the etymology of the name comes from an Akkadian word meaning “to heat, melt, or smelt”. Therefore, Tarshish would have been a refinery of sorts. The historical references to Tarshish often referred to this type of thing as well as its location as a maritime city. This has led some to suggest Tartessus in SW Spain which was a Phoenician colony on the Guadalquivir River (which may
explain the Akkadian etymology). Others have suggested ‘Carthage’ which has a Semitic name of origin qrθdst meaning “New Town” which would place it in N. Africa. Either of these locations is the opposite direction of Nineveh which laid to the NE of Israel/Judea. There are a handful of other suggestions, but there is nothing firmly established as being the ancient Tarshish of the story of Jonah.4

Form and Structure

The *Tooman Literary Genre Coding of the Old Testament* presents Jonah 4:1-8 as “Novella, Prose, Story” and 4:9-11 as “Novella, Prose, Admonition”. We add to this that it serves as a historiography. In other words, it is a retelling of actual historical events through the subjective, interpretive lens of the author who is seeking to convey a modern, applicable message for his audience.

The structure of the Book of Jonah is built on various juxtapositions. In the first and third chapter vv. 1-3 are nearly exact parallels. In chapter one (1) Jonah is called the “son of Amittai” (which means “truth”) in v.1, (2) YHWH gives details to His message v.2, and (3) Jonah flees to Tarshish rather than going to Nineveh. In chapter three (1) Jonah is not called “son of Amittai” in v. 1, (2) YHWH simply mentions His previous message v. 2, and (3) Jonah finally goes to Nineveh in v. 3.

Jonah is juxtaposed with the sea, the boat, and the sailors in chapter one. Everything and everyone except Jonah fears and obeys YHWH. Jonah is the prophet and a representative of Israel, yet he is the least prophetic and the least loyal to YHWH.

The second and fourth chapters can be juxtaposed as well. In chapter two Jonah is quasi-thankful for the mercy of YHWH (and he seems to have expected YHWH’s grace) yet in chapter four Jonah is angry with YHWH because he was correct that YHWH would show grace to
Nineveh as well. Jonah is depicted as a man who seems to believe that he has a particular status that means he deserves for God to rescue him that others, like the people of Nineveh, do not have.

The structure of Jonah 4 provides an imperfect, yet noticeable, chiasm:

A. Jonah displeased with YHWH’s actions (v. 1)
B. Jonah addresses’ YHWH’s compassion for Nineveh (v. 2)
C. Jonah request death (v. 3)
D. YHWH questions Jonah’s anger (v. 4)
E. Jonah under a shelter and watches the city (v. 5)
F. God provides a plant (v. 6)
F’. God removes the plant (v. 7)
E’. Jonah without a shelter and wishes for death (v. 8)
D’. YHWH questions Jonah’s anger (v. 9a)
C’. Jonah wishes for death (v. 9b)
B’. YHWH addresses Jonah’s compassion for a simple plant (v. 10)
A.’. YHWH justifies His actions (v. 11)

We can conclude from this structure that the central point of this chapter is the provision and removal of the plant over Jonah’s head. It should be noticed that vv. 6-7 display the sovereign nature of YHWH. If YHWH wants to provide salvation He can. If YHWH wants to remove salvation He can. YHWH shows Jonah that He has the freedom to do as He pleases. Therefore, in v. 11, if YHWH wants to save Nineveh who is Jonah to question this action?

Grammatical and Lexical Data

Jonah 4 is built on a series of waw-constructs. There are nine waw-consecutives and two waw-conjunctions that function to introduce new lines of thought as well as several other waw-constructs throughout the passage. These waw-constructs function to provide a progressive event-by-event flow for the narrative.

The key words in Jonah 4 include:
Angry: The word  הָרָה  appears four times (vv. 1, 4, 9) in this chapter. The chapter opens and closes with Jonah being angry over YHWH’s compassion toward Nineveh. In vv. 4 and 9 YHWH questions Jonah’s anger and both times Jonah makes an attempt at self-justification.

G. Sauer notes that, “The root  hrh  can be considered alongside  hrr  “to be hot, to burn”. The range of meaning for this word goes from “to cause to become inflamed” to “to be wrathful” or “to be heated up”. It appears that when this word is used for wrath the picture would be something hot and inflamed. The use of this word, when referring to wrath, is split between references to human and divine wrath (human in Jonah 4).

Death: The word  דָּתָן  appears four times (vv. 3, 8, 9) in this chapter. Each occurrence is from the mouth of Jonah as he either wishes to die or explains that his current circumstances are worse than death. Jonah is depicted as an extremist who finds that death for is the only way he can handle seeing YHWH give life to Nineveh. J. Illman discusses the use of the word when part of a death wish. He notes that there is a similarity and dissimilarity between how Jonah 4 uses these death wishes and how the author of 1 Kings (19:4) uses this death wish. Jonah wishes for death because he is upset about the “victory” YHWH accomplished by bringing Nineveh to repentance. Elijah wished for death when he feared for his life after accomplishing a great victory for YHWH against the enemies of God. Whereas Jonah had the success that Elijah could have only wished for—that being mass repentance—Jonah still asked for God to take his life echoing Elijah while actually being the anti-Elijah.

Plant: The word  יִנְחַל  appears five times (vv. 6, 7, 9, 10) in this chapter. Three of those occurrences are in the center of the passage (vv. 6-7). The plant is the focus of the chapter in that it is the means of YHWH’s analogy to Jonah. The plant is a gift of grace (again) for Jonah who rejoices over it. It also becomes a great distress for Jonah when it is removed (he wishes to die).
YHWH uses Jonah’s strange love for the plant to show him how petty he is and to show him that YHWH’s love for Nineveh is infinitely more understandable than Jonah’s love for a plant.

**Biblical and Theological Context**

**Jonah 4 in the Canon**

While the words of Jonah 4 are not directly quoted elsewhere in Scripture the message of Jonah 4 is bedrock for much of the message of the New Testament. In most prophetic literature the judgment of God upon Israel appears to be related more or less to their fidelity to the Mosaic covenant. The post-exilic community sought to reform this behavior behind leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah. By the time of events recorded in the New Testament the Jews are depicted as very zealous for the ways of YHWH and the Mosaic covenant. It appears that Jesus’ condemnation of his people is basically a way of telling them “You can’t win for trying.”

Yet Jonah 4 shows that the problem that Jesus sought to address was already apparent even before the return from exile. Jonah is the Jews *par excellence*. He boasts in his relationship with YHWH. He sees himself as loyal to the God of the temple. He even sings Psalms (see Jonah 2) regarding YHWH’s deliverance and mercy. Yet he *refuses* to announce to the pagan world that YHWH is a God of mercy and grace for all people.

Below we will reference a small handful of those passages but it is sufficient to say that the Book of Jonah provides an important historical and hermeneutical key to understanding the New Covenant context, the New Testament message, and the Gospel of Jesus. If one reads the Gospels or passages like Romans 9-11 with Jonah in the other hand one can see the root of the problem that Jesus and others were addressing.
Jonah 4 in Christian Theology

One could argue that Jonah 4 is the Old Testament text on missiology. Most of the Old Testament canon focuses upon Israel/Judah’s relationship to YHWH and her separation from the pagan world. It is hard to find very many texts that depict Israel/Judah as a people who ought to proclaim YHWH to the world. Jonah 4, and Jonah in general, is that text. In essence it provides the Old Testament counterpart to the New Testament’s Book of Acts (except by Acts 17 it seems that the Jews are finally beginning to understand the Great Commission).

The Book of Jonah also contributes to a theological understanding of the election of Israel. Israel was not elected by YHWH to be His people arbitrarily. Israel was elected to bless the world as it was foretold to Abraham. This means that elections has more to do with the grace of God for all people than it does for the grace of God upon some.

Application

The message of Jonah 4 has direct application when teaching on (1) grace and (2) forgiveness. The message of grace is most obvious throughout the Book of Jonah since Jonah received grace when he disobeyed the command of YHWH and Nineveh receives grace rather than judgment from YHWH. As regards forgiveness the message of Jonah 4 is often echoed in the preaching and parables of Jesus when he reminds his audience that God has forgiven them and therefore they should forgive others.

If the message of Jonah 4 peaks at vv. 6-7 then part of this message of grace must be the sovereignty of God. Jonah thinks that God should show him grace because he is a Hebrew (as is made most evident in chapter 2). God think Nineveh should not receive grace because it is a city full of wicked pagans (as is most evident in chapter 4). In 4:6-7 God brings grace and removes grace through the plant at His own will. This echoes the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans
9:18-25 where God declares He can have mercy on whomever He wants and He can call a people that are not His people to become His people.

This message can be applied in an individual and corporate context. It can be applied individually to those who do not want to show the grace of God to others for whatever reason while ignoring the grace of God in their own lives. Those who think that grace is earned or deserved have misunderstood grace. There is no formula for grace.

It can be applied corporately to a church to remind the congregation of her mission to the least of these and to remind her that all people are God’s people. Although the church has a special status before God this does not mean God does not love all of humanity. To assume that God should reserve grace from someone because that person is not a Christian is to forget that God must have first shown grace to them before they could become a Christian themselves.

From Exegesis to Sermon

Title: The Prodigal Prophet

Theme: Understanding the Grace of God

Key Word: Grace

I. Introduction

A. Summary of the Story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

1. The younger brother is considered wasteful, yet he receives the grace of the father.

2. The older brother is more wasteful than his younger brother since he does not understand the grace of the father.

B. The Story of Jonah is the Problem of Israel
1. Prior to the exile Israel/Judea relied upon the grace of YHWH, yet never considered that grace to be for the nations.

2. During the exile the Jews cried to YHWH for deliverance, yet never cried to YHWH for the salvation of the nations.

3. After the exile the Jews pursued the Mosaic covenant, yet never grasped the Abrahamic promise to bless all nations.

4. By the time of Christ the Jews, especially the Pharisees, sought God through the Mosaic Covenant while continuing to ignore the nations.

5. The Jews are the older brother; the Jews think that their covenant with YHWH secures His grace and favor while ignoring that YHWH is the God of the nations.

C. Proposition: To truly understand and value grace one must reflect the grace of God.

1. Jonah-Israel thought their position before God equated to deserved grace—an oxymoron.

2. The story of Jonah, and the preaching of Jesus, shows that grace is by default undeserved.

II. Misunderstand Grace and Grace becomes Evil (vv. 1-4)

A. Jonah understands YHWH’s grace to be evil.

1. Jonah wanted judgment

2. Jonah thinks God was unjust (and he was right)

B. Jonah thought grace was deserved

1. Jonah boasts of being a Hebrew (1:9)

2. Jonah understood his own deliverance as a victory over the will of YHWH (2:2-9)
3. Jonah could not understand how God could be graceful to Nineveh

C. Jonah knew that God is graceful.

1. Jonah defines God: gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abundant in loyal-love, and slow to bring calamity.

2. Jonah willing to accept this for himself; Jonah displeased when offered to others.

III. God is Sovereign in His Showing of Grace (vv. 5-8)

A. God provided Jonah with a plant for shelter from the elements.

1. Jonah accepts the graceful act of God.

2. Jonah again expects gracefulness from God

B. God is God of all.

1. The divine name YHWH is prominent throughout the book.

2. The general name of “God” is equally prominent in chapter four.

C. God removes the plant as a shelter for Jonah by appointing a worm.

1. Jonah upset with God for killing the plant.

2. Jonah upset with God’s lack of grace for the plant (and for him)

IV. Sermonic Interrogation and Transitional Sentence

A. Why is that only by reflecting the grace of God do we know we are beginning to understand the grace of God?

B. We must reflect the grace of God if we fully understand it because to not reflect the grace of God is to show that we have not accepted the grace of God in our own lives.

V. God has a Reason for Grace (vv. 9-11)

A. Jonah is questioned.
1. God asks why Jonah thinks he has the right to be angry.

2. Jonah maintains his right

B. YHWH’s rebuttal

1. Jonah did nothing to bring about the plant.

2. It is implied YHWH did.

3. YHWH can do to the plant as He pleases.

C. YHWH’s justification

1. Nineveh is a city full of people.

2. It is implied YHWH has something to do with their existence.

3. YHWH has the right to show compassion to whoever He pleases since He is creator of all.

VI. Conclusion

A. Jonah is like the older brother of Jesus’ parable.

1. He expects more from the father.

2. He ignores what he has been given.

B. Everyone else is like the younger brother of the parable.

1. The sailors and their captain repent.

2. Nineveh repents.

C. Jonah never fully understood or received the grace of God.

1. Jonah thought he deserved grace.

2. Jonah thought others do not.

D. We should be like the younger brother, the sailors, and the Ninevites.

1. We should receive the grace of God.
2. We should become examples of the grace of God to others.

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2. Ibid.