

Just a Few Thoughts on Jonah

1. A careful reading of the book leaves the initial reader with an obvious question (at least that is how it appears to me) – Why would Jonah not want to go to Nineveh to “point his finger” in the face of the arch enemy of his people, and declare that the God of Israel would be destroying them in the very near future?

The opening verses in the NASB read:

The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה בֶן־אֲמִתַּי לֵאמֹר:
קוּם לֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוֶה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי־עֲלָתָהּ רָעַתָּם לִפְנָי:

So why wouldn't Jonah delight in going to Ninevah with such a message? Obviously, the rest of the book makes it clear that it was not because he was afraid that the people would retaliate by doing him bodily harm, but rather, that he understood that such a message flowed from God's compassion and sovereign grace, and he didn't want that for the arch enemy of Israel. But then how do we fit this obvious theme of the book together with the opening verses?

Here's where I think the Hebrew could be better translated, particularly the final phrase of v. 2, :
וּקְרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי־עֲלָתָהּ רָעַתָּם לִפְנָי: – The preposition על, while often having the sense of “against,” can also indicate “concerning” or “with regard to.” Further, the particle כי can mean “because” but often is equivalent with the English word “that,” particularly when it introduces a marker that the clause it initiates explicates a previous active verb. Finally, the noun רָע / רָעָה can have the meaning “evil,” “unethical,” or “immoral,” but it commonly means “trouble” or “calamity,” as in the famous saying of Isaiah (45:7), “The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity (רָע) ; I am the LORD who does all these.” Clearly, God does not create evil! One more thing: לִפְנָי, “come up before Me,” could just as well indicate “come to My attention.”

So, perhaps the final line of v. 2 could be translated this way: “...and proclaim concerning it [i.e., the city of Ninevah] that their trouble (or calamity) has come to My attention,” where Ninevah is a merism for the whole nation of Assyria, being the capital of the nation. Instead of proclaiming an “in your face” message (“Our God is about to do you in!”), Jonah understood the message given to him by God to be that the Almighty, in His sovereignty, was actually concerned about the capital of the Assyrian nation, i.e., the people of Assyria. And why not?! Hadn't God promised to Abraham that He would bless every family/nation of the earth in Abraham's seed (=Yeshua, Gal 3)?

Thus, I would suggest that one of the deep problems that Jonah had was, in particular, ethnic pride. I think it possible that Jonah held to this idea: Israel, and Israel alone was God's chosen people, and thus Israel was the only people God would bless. If Assyria wanted to be blessed, they would have to submit to the rule of Israel, not visa versa, i.e., become a vassal of Israel, not a conquerer of Israel. He did not want to accept the fact that God would bless Assyrians as ethnic Assyrians. In a way, it might be that Jonah felt God's blessing would always be mediated through Israel and not directly given by God. If anyone wanted to be blessed by the God of Israel, they would have to ask Israel for the blessing.

But God gives His grace sovereignly in a one-to-one relationship. Surely such grace brings the individual into the covenant of blessing given to Abraham (“in your seed all the families/nations of the earth will be blessed”). The blessing comes through the “seed of Abraham,” i.e., through the work of Yeshua. This, I think, was part of what Paul means by using his famous “in Messiah/Christ” clause.

2. A second thought, pertaining to Jonah's prayer while in the belly of the fish:
I agree fully that there is no sign of repentance in Jonah's Lament, Praise, Dedication and Declaration. But here was my dilemma as I've worked through the text of Jonah in the past:
 - a. Why is he essentially quoting Scripture in his prayer: the Psalms (18, 42, 69, etc) and Prophets? Where is a prayer of repentance? Why no remorse?
 - b. I wonder if when he told the sailors to cast him into the sea, it was a semi-suicidal wish. "I'd rather die than go give a message of God's grace to the Assyrians!" – That was his final request, right? "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." (4:3)
 - c. Perhaps Jonah thought he would die in the fish (a normal conclusion for anyone in that situation) and he was consoling himself that his death was better than returning to Israel and being marked as a "turncoat" prophet who went to Nineveh to "comfort" the Assyrians.

3. One last thought I've had for years in terms of trying to wrap my brain/heart around the message of Jonah: It seems likely, at least to me, that Jonah, being a prophet, thought that in some way he could control the revealed word of God. He had the authority (so he thought) to give God's message to those he felt deserved it. Thus, in going to Tarshish and away from Ninevah, he thought that he could put a "strangle hold" on God's word in order to bring about what he considered to be a proper and just application of God's revelation.
 - a. teachers today do this by wresting the historical, grammatical interpretation from the inspired text and replacing it with their midrashic, fanciful, and (all too often) money-grabbing, ear-tickling perspective in order to move the people of God in the direction they desire rather than in preaching the authoritative text as it is found, and leaving the outcome to the Almighty. (Of course, the arminians have always thought it necessary to "edit" the gospel message to make it more "receivable." That's just good advertising methods for selling a product!)
 - b. Thus, one major theme I see in the overall story of Jonah is that God's word, God's revelation of Himself and of His glorious plan of salvation, cannot be bought and sold or controlled by man. Inevitably, when God sends forth His word, it will bring to pass what He desires and ordains by His eternal and infinite sovereignty. Those who submit to Him, and to His word, may be privileged to be His messengers of grace, but they are not in control of God's word. And if they seek to be in control of it, God will bless others who submit to Him to carry the message.
 - c. And to this I might add: is it possible that the many false teachers (whether from their own selfish agendas or through their willful ignorance) which are an increasing voice in our times, are one method of fulfilling Paul's prophecy in 2Thess, perhaps in preparing people to receive an end times "man of sin"?

"For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness." (2Thess 2:11–12)

It just seems to me that with the power of the internet (and it can most certainly also be a power for good), false teachings are multiplied many times over, and people are following all kinds of nonsense. It may well be that the enemy intends to use something that has great power for good, to turn it as a means for evil, to blind the eyes of people from the truth of the Scriptures. Of course, the truth of the Scriptures, empowered by the Ruach, can be a powerful tool on the internet, reaching thousands of people with the glorious message of God's redemptive salvation of sinners. But the inspired scriptures, well translated into the language of the people, must still remain as the "litus test" against which all teachings, in what ever compacity, are to be test as to whether they are true or false.