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Not The Nineveh, But Jonah: Exploring God's Mercy in The Book of Jonah

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Abstract

Many scholars argue that the book of Jonah is about God's mercy for Nineveh. However, I argue that the focus of this book is God's mercy for Jonah, the stubborn, disobedient, and reluctant prophet. We can find that indeed God's mercy was for Nineveh by relenting his judgment to the repented Nineveh, but it was not the focus of God in this book. If the focus is the Nineveh, the book of Jonah could end with chapter three which states God relented his judgment on the Nineveh. This study was conducted with narrative method to the whole narrative of the book of Jonah. This study showed that from chapter one to chapter four, God dealt mercifully to Jonah who had to deal with his struggles as God's prophet. We can see how God dealt mercifully with Jonah through this book. I conclude that a narrative reading of the entire narrative of the book of Jonah can produce a different interpretation from the existing one.

Keyword: God's mercy; narrative; The book of Jonah; the Nineveh; the prophet of Jonah

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars state that the book of Jonah is about God's mercy for Nineveh. Wolff states that the book of Jonah showed God's mercy has extended to the heathen (the Nineveh).¹ Stuart describes that the book of Jonah displayed God's mercy and compassion to the Assyrians in Nineveh.² French II states that the book of Jonah is about God's benevolence to the Ninevites.³ These views seem correct. However, if we examine the book of Jonah carefully, we can find that indeed God's mercy was for the Ninevites, but it was not the main focus of God.⁴ The main focus was especially on Jonah, the prophet. Jonah was the main focus from the beginning until the end of the book.

Frolov argues that Jonah is the main character of this book or the relationship between God and Jonah is the main focus of this book.⁵ He argues that the book Jonah was a story of a divinity sacrificing its prophet to save the Nineveh from punishment

and of the prophet that refused to be sacrificed and tried to maintain his dignity.⁶ I agree with Frolov's opinion about the main focus of this book is not about Nineveh, but about Jonah, the prophet. However, I do not agree that God was sacrificing the prophet of Jonah to save Nineveh.⁷ The book of Jonah is about God's mercy for the prophet more than for the Nineveh. God showed his mercy through Jonah's disobedience, death wishes, near-death experience, God's re-assignment, and God's guidance.

In every chapter God used people, creatures, and events to teach Jonah about who God is, how God works, and God's purposes for humanity.⁸ The central focus of this book is Jonah's relationship with God.⁹ From chapter one to chapter four, God dealt mercifully to Jonah who had to deal with his struggles as God's prophet. This article will prove that the main focus of God's mercy in the book of Jonah is not for the Nineveh, but for the Jonah, the stubborn, disobedient, and reluctant prophet.

¹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 87-88, 177.

² Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah. Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 31 (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 434-35.

³ Robert P. French II, "Judgment, Anger, Benevolence, and Jonah: Exploring Human Responses to Divine Benevolence via the Framework of the Judeo-Christian Worldview," *Evangelical Journal* 33, no. 2 (2015): 82-88.

⁴ Rob Barrett, "Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah," *Journal for*

the Study of the Old Testament 37, no. 2 (2012): 237-57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089212466464>.

⁵ Serge Frolov, "Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24, no. 86 (1999): 85-105, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908929902408605>.

⁶ Frolov.

⁷ Frolov.

⁸ Frolov.

⁹ Rosa Ching Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, ed. Federico G. Villanueva, Asia Bible (Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2019), 10.

RESEARCH METHOD

The genre of this book of Jonah is narrative.¹⁰ So I will apply narrative analysis, especially examining God's actions and speeches thoroughly in this book.¹¹ Firstly, trying to investigate the main focus of God's mercy in this book. I argue that main focus of God's mercy in this book is Jonah, the prophet, not the Nineveh. Second, I will examine God's actions and speeches in dealing mercifully to Jonah. I also pay attention to the opinions of experts to finally draw some theological insights. The literature used for this article contains recent journal articles, theses, monographs, and commentaries from a wide variety of scholars. Finally, the I will conclude that the main focus of God's mercy in the book of Jonah is not for the Nineveh, but for Jonah, the stubborn, disobedient, and reluctant prophet.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

God's Mercy

Achtemeier views that God's mercy in Old Testament represents his continual

regard for the covenant with his chosen people. Not once is God's mercy granted to those outside the covenant relationship.¹² I do not agree with Achtemeier's opinion, because God's mercy is related to whole humankind, not only to the chosen or covenanted people. Towner states "Mercy is a concept integral to an understanding of God's dealings with humankind. It denotes compassion and love, not just feeling or emotions, as expressed in tangible ways."¹³ God's mercy can manifest in many different ways, such as forgiveness, deliverance, provision, etc.¹⁴ In the book of Jonah, we can see God's mercy upon the Nineveh which caused Jonah to complain (Jon. 4:2). Jonah was perplexed by the question of why God's mercy was for the people who did not seem to deserve it.¹⁵ Indeed, the book of Jonah shows God's mercy for the Ninevites, but it is not the main focus. If the main focus is the Nineveh, the book of Jonah could end with chapter three which states God relented his judgment on the Nineveh. The main focus is on God's mercy for Jonah, the prophet. From the chapter one to chapter four,

¹⁰ Mark K. Klooster, "The Literary Genre of the Book of Jonah" (Vrije Universiteit, 2019), 5.; Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 6.; Sia Kok Sin, "Keunikan Kitab Yunus Dan Metode Penafsirannya," *The New Perspective in Theology and Religious Studies* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1–13.

¹¹ Shimon Bar-Efart, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Decatur: The Almond Press, 1989), 47-86.

¹² E.R. Achtemeier, "Mercy, Merciful," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. K-Q* (Abingdon, 1981), 352-53.

¹³ Philip H. Towner, "Mercy," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Baker Books, 1996), 520.

¹⁴ Achtemeier, "Mercy, Merciful," 352.

¹⁵ Paul Ferguson, "Jonah, Theology Of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Baker Books, 1996), 427.

God dealt mercifully to Jonah who had to deal with his struggles as God's prophet.

God's Mercy for the Nineveh

Bolin describes two kinds of background in reading about Nineveh.¹⁶ From the Hebrew Bible perspective, Nineveh was the city the antithesis to Jerusalem, the bitter enemy of Israel and the evil of the Gentile world.¹⁷ From Greek literary traditions, Nineveh was one of the greatest cities that has ever been and was famous for its opulence, lawlessness, and madness.¹⁸ The Ninevites were famous for their brutality in foreign war and extremeness in domestic matters, for example: If an Assyrian man's wife were found guilty of adultery, he could demand that her nose and the testicles of her lover be cut off.¹⁹ With this background, we can see God's mercy in Nineveh. In chapter one, God sent Jonah to proclaim God's judgment for Nineveh. God not only sent Jonah to Nineveh to be the herald of divine wrath, but he wanted to allow the Ninevites to repent and be forgiven.²⁰ Although Jonah disobeyed God's assignment, in chapter

three God commissioned him for the second time. And finally, Jonah delivered the shortest sermon in world history.²¹ The king of Nineveh responded seriously to this message by commanding fasting and repenting for the people of Nineveh.

The Ninevites repented, both as individuals and as a community. And God gave his forgiveness to them.²² The Ninevites' heartfelt confession of sin and improved conduct were necessary before forgiveness occurs, but they could not guarantee it.²³ The forgiveness was based upon God's mercy. God showed his mercy by relenting his judgment upon the Nineveh. It was an action of God's mercy upon the Nineveh.

God's Mercy for Jonah

The book of Jonah is not the message of the prophet about Nineveh, but rather about the attitudes and behavior of the prophet himself.²⁴ We can see how God dealt with Jonah through this book. God commissioned, forgave, recommissioned, and guided him. We also saw how God showed his mercy, because Jonah disobeyed, faced the

¹⁶ Thomas M. Bolin, "Should I Not Also Pity Nineveh?" *Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 20, no. 67 (1995): 109–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908929502006706>.

¹⁷ Bolin.

¹⁸ Bolin.

¹⁹ Janet Howe Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 33.

²⁰ Gaines.

²¹ Frolov, "Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah."

²² Mera J. Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah," *The Review of Politics* 76, no. 1 (2014): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670513000867>.

²³ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 98.

²⁴ Johan Ferreira, "A Note on Jonah 2.8: Idolatry and Inhumanity in Israel," *The Bible Translator* 63, no. 1 (January 2012): 28–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026009351206300103>.

near-death experience, obeyed reluctantly, expressed his death wish, and got angry with God's decision.

God's Mercy upon Jonah's Disobedience

Jonah 1:1-2 states God's word and assignment for Jonah to deliver God's judgment for the wicked Nineveh. However, Jonah disobeyed God's assignment by fleeing to Tarshish. Jonah did something a prophet should not.²⁵ Unlike Abraham and other God's servants who quickly responded to God's command, Jonah refused to obey God's command. He was different with Moses and others who were reluctant, but still obeyed God's commands.²⁶ Jonah was the only prophet who rebelled so outrageously against God's calling.²⁷ It is a serious act of disobedience for God's prophet. Then God hurled the violent storm and caused the ship was about to break up. Jonah knew that he was the cause of this situation, yet he showed no concern for God's judgement or even for his own life.²⁸ Jonah asked the sailors to throw him into the sea and hoped that it would make calm the sea.

He determined not to fulfill God's mission and prepared to die to avoid it. Interestingly, God did not punish Jonah for his disobedience. God seemed to have a cooperative response. God still tried to achieve Jonah's willing partnership with Him.²⁹ Jonah completely misjudged God, because God did not seek his death, but his responsive life.³⁰ God appointed the great fish to swallow up him. The great fish served as God's instrument for deliverance.³¹ And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. The fish provided a refuge that saved Jonah and gave him a second chance.³² Jonah was the prophet of second chance.³³

Then Jonah prayed to God in the belly of the fish. Jonah 2: 2-7 states that Jonah uttered that God's action brought him into danger and near-death experience. In this situation he prayed to God, then God listened to his prayer and saved him. In describing his journey from danger to deliverance, Jonah was utterly silent about his refusal to respond to God.³⁴ Jonah describes that God was faithful to Jonah's prayer, but in reality, he still sank into a sea of mis-

²⁵ Frolov, "Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah."

²⁶ Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah."

²⁷ Sandy Habib, "Who Converts Whom? A Narrative-Critical Exegesis of the Book of Jonah," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (2014): 67-75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107914526522>.

²⁸ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 28.

²⁹ Barrett, "Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah."

³⁰ Barrett.

³¹ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 37.

³² Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah."

³³ Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, "The Prophet of Second Chances: Jonah, Israel and Assyria and Their Missed Opportunities for Redemption," *Biblical Interpretation* 29, no. 3 (October 2020): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00284P25>.

³⁴ Barrett, "Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah."

apprehension about God's action.³⁵ He was grateful that God did not destroy him. However, he did not speak of his disobedience.³⁶ The text was silence about any words of penitence.³⁷ However, God showed his mercy to Jonah. God saved Jonah from the sink and the fish, then he reassigned him to go to the Nineveh.

Jonah has the privilege to hear the word of God directly without going through an intermediary, but he disobeyed it.³⁸ To this disobeyed prophet, God not only delivered him from the sink and death, but he also recommissioned him to bring God's message to the Nineveh. Jonah was the only prophet who was entrusted with the same mission twice.³⁹ A second chance was a blessing of God and proof of God's mercy.⁴⁰ God's mercy for Jonah is amazing.

God's Mercy in Using Jonah, the Reluctant Prophet

After receiving God's reassignment, Jonah went to Nineveh and preached, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). He said it once, without repeating or explaining it. It seemed that Jonah was trying "to be unsuccessful."⁴¹

The narrator did not show Jonah wooing the people, winning their hearts and minds, and pleading with them to reform.⁴² It was surprising that the Ninevites, from the king, nobles and people responded by fasting and wearing sackcloth. The Ninevites repented. Then God displayed his mercy to the Ninevites by forgiving them.

However, God also exhibited his mercy for Jonah. God used Jonah, the reluctant prophet to bring the repentance of the Ninevites. God still used the reluctant prophet to be his instrument. Jonah was perhaps the most successful of all prophets.⁴³ However, this amazing result displeased Jonah exceedingly and made him angry (Jon. 4:1). Instead of being proud of himself and praising God, Jonah was displeased and angry. It showed that there was something that God and Jonah must work out.⁴⁴ Jonah still had a problem understanding the mystery of God's mercy, especially for Nineveh. Jonah wanted God's law and order, not mercy.⁴⁵ Regardless of Jonah's reluctance, God demonstrated his mercy by using Jonah to be an instrument for Ninevite's repentance.

³⁵ Barrett.

³⁶ Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah."

³⁷ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 43.

³⁸ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 32-34.

³⁹ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 51.

⁴⁰ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 81.

⁴¹ Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah."

⁴² Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 88.

⁴³ Gaines, 104.

⁴⁴ Gaines, 105-6.

⁴⁵ Gaines, 107.

God's Mercy in Dealing with Jonah's Death Wishes

In dealing with the storm, Jonah offered himself to be thrown into the sea. It is not a sacrificial act, because Jonah was ready to destroy himself instead of obeying God's assignment.⁴⁶ It may also represent his stubbornness, death wish, and desire to avoid Nineveh.⁴⁷ We can presume that it is one of his death wishes. God could let Jonah drown and die at the sea. However, God demonstrated his mercy by appointing the great fish to swallow up him.

There is no death wish in Jonah chapters 2 and 3. In Jonah 4:3, Jonah for the first time openly asked God to kill him.⁴⁸ Gaines states that other prayers appeared in the book of Jonah, but this was the only one to which God responded verbally and the prophet became the center of attention or discussion.⁴⁹ God has saved Jonah with the fish, but Jonah asked God to let him die. It seemed Jonah twisting the reality of his existence.⁵⁰ However, God showed his mercy and patience in dealing with Jonah's attitude. God wanted Jonah to learn about the mystery of God's mercy.

Frolov mentions two opinions about the reason for Jonah's death wish. First, Jonah could not "swallow" the new concept of God revealed in the Nineveh affair. Second, Jonah thought that his professional career as a prophet was ruined because of the unfulfillment of his message to Nineveh.⁵¹ I prefer the first opinion about the difficulties of Jonah in understanding God's action in Nineveh. Perhaps Jonah rightly mistrusted the sincerity of the Ninevites' repentance and saw it was motivated by momentary fear.⁵² However, Jonah had difficulties understanding God's mercy for Nineveh. God had the freedom to show his mercy for everyone, including Nineveh. Barrett states that Jonah complains about God's character which is too gracious, merciful, and patient, although Jonah has survived his disobedience, his flight, his storm, and the fish only because of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love.⁵³ God could conceivably be angry with Jonah, the stubborn prophet, but God showed his mercy to Jonah with his soft reproof that allowed him to engage in self-examination.⁵⁴ God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" (Jon. 4:4).

⁴⁶ Frolov, "Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah."

⁴⁷ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 50.

⁴⁸ Frolov, "Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah."

⁴⁹ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 111.

⁵⁰ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 75.

⁵¹ Frolov, "Returning The Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah."

⁵² Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 112.

⁵³ Barrett, "Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between YHWH and Jonah."

⁵⁴ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 114.

Then Jonah went out of the city and built a shelter for himself and still hoped that Nineveh would be destroyed. God made a plant that grew up to be a shadow over Jonah's head. God was caring and generous in his gift to Jonah. God has prepared the plant to preserve Jonah from the dry heat of the sun, just as he prepared the fish to preserve him for the sea.⁵⁵ God showed his loving kindness and mercy. God was concerned about Jonah's physical and psychological health.⁵⁶ Later God appointed a worm that withered the plant and a scorching east wind that made Jonah uncomfortable and faint. Deprived of his comfortable, he cried, "It is better for me to die than to live." (Jon. 4:8). And again, Jonah expressed his death wish. Again, God displayed his mercy to Jonah by engaging him in a discussion about his objection to God's mercy to Nineveh.⁵⁷ Kaplan states:

In chapter four, Jonah exhibits an "obsessive desire" for the shade of plant, whose death elicits Jonah's anger, even though he has not been deprived of shade. Jonah also displays, in this chapter, a lack of understanding regarding the nature and extent of divine justice.⁵⁸

However, God taught kindly and patiently the mysteries of his action to Jonah. Whether Jonah could understand or accept God's attributes and deeds, was unclear.⁵⁹ In the end, Jonah's disobedience was by no means resolved. In the book of Jonah, God's primary focus was on Jonah, not Nineveh. Jonah was the focus of God's mercy.

God's Mercy in Dealing with Jonah's Limited Understanding

Stuart states that Jonah knew God was compassionate, but he hated the fact that God was truly consistent being merciful and patient among the nations as well as within Israel.⁶⁰ Jonah thought that God has been merciful to Nineveh while not having been merciful to Israel throughout her history.⁶¹ Bolin argues that the book of Jonah is not about God's forgiveness to the wicked Ninevites or God's lesson for a particularistic Israel, but about God's freedom for loving the Jews or the Gentiles.⁶² God made no distinction between Israel and foreigners.⁶³ God is too gracious, too merciful, too

⁵⁵ Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah."

⁵⁶ Habib, "Who Converts Whom? A Narrative-Critical Exegesis of the Book of Jonah."

⁵⁷ Flaumenhaft, "The Story of Jonah."

⁵⁸ Jonathan Kaplan, "Jonah and Moral Agency," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43, no. 2 (2019): 146–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089217725258>.

⁵⁹ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 8-9.

⁶⁰ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah. Word Biblical Commentary*, 443.

⁶¹ Carolyn J. Sharp, "Wrestling the Word: Submission and Resistance as Holy Hermeneutical Acts," *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 1 (2021): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861509700102>.

⁶² Bolin, "Should I Not Also Pity Nineveh?" *Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah*.

⁶³ Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 86.

patient and too loving.⁶⁴ God's mercy is not viewed as the necessary consequence of repentance. God's mercy has a completely free nature.⁶⁵ Jonah was angry with God for his mercy.⁶⁶ God showed his mercy to the Ninevites, although in Jonah's opinion, their repentance was not sincere.

Jonah could not grasp the whole concept of God's mercy. He had a problem with the recipients of God's mercy.⁶⁷ It caused his flight, disobedience, and resistance. He had a limitation in understanding God's mercy, especially for Nineveh. Jonah complained about God's mercy to the Nineveh, however he did not realize that God also showed his mercy abundantly to him.⁶⁸ God did not condemn Jonah to despair, death, or even damnation.⁶⁹ I argue that God showed his mercy more to Jonah than to the Ninevites because God's mercy was displayed through Jonah's disobedience, the "insincere repentance," God's reassignment, his death wishes, and God's guidance.

Jonah's problems are universal and all of us face the same problem. Jonah's enemy lay within. He knew God wanted

him to do it; he just did not want to do it. When we see Jonah let his work undone, we bond and identify with him and his plight. Observing his unresolved conflicts, we become Jonah.⁷⁰ Through Jonah, we recognize our powerlessness considering divine mastery.⁷¹ However, the book of Jonah shows God's mercy to His prophet unceasingly.

CONCLUSION

A narrative reading of the entire narrative in the book of Jonah can reveal other meanings of the narrative besides the existing ones. Looking at the narrative as a whole, the prophet is the centerpiece of Jonah's narrative. Nineveh and Israel are merely the context for the narrative. This shows that the text is polysemous, depending on the approach used and the context of the reader.

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⁶⁴ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 10.

⁶⁵ Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 87.

⁶⁶ Scolnic, "The Prophet of Second Chances: Jonah, Israel and Assyria and Their Missed Opportunities for Redemption."

⁶⁷ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 68.

⁶⁸ Joel Edmund Anderson, "YHWH's Surprising Covenant Hesed in Jonah," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (2012): 3–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107911431222>.

⁶⁹ Shao, *Jonah. A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, 80.

⁷⁰ Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World. Jonah's Dilemma*, 9–10.

⁷¹ Gaines, 110.

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