

The Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5-7 and the Purpose of the Book of Jonah

John H. Walton
Moody Bible Institute
Chicago, Illinois

[p.47]

In Jonah Chapter 4, Jonah becomes angry concerning the particular turn of events in Nineveh. Yahweh asks whether Jonah has a right to that anger. When no answer is forthcoming, the reader is ushered into the account of Jonah's hut, the plant and the parasite, which ends in Jonah again becoming angry. This time the anger focuses on the plant, and Jonah defends his right to be angry. The chapter and the book then close with deity making a statement about compassion.

Many questions are left unanswered by the text. What specifically angered Jonah with regard to Nineveh? What does the narrator achieve by recounting this incident? How is Jonah's second anger (4:8-9) related to the first (4:1-4)? Why does the author use the unusual compound divine name, YHWH Elohim, in verse 6 to introduce the object lesson and, for that matter, what purpose does the object lesson serve in the narrative? It is the answers to these questions that will help the interpreter identify the purpose of the book of Jonah.

Early interpretations of the book often suggested that God was trying to show Jonah that people are more important than plants. So Luther argued "Of how much less value is such a shrub than a person, to say nothing of such a city?"¹ Calvin carried this moral into the last phrase of the book: "If Jonah justly grieved for one withering shrub, it was far more deplorable and cruel for so many innocent animals to perish."² Though modern commentators may change the wording and the focus, 4:10-11 have still led many interpreters to equate the plant to Nineveh in their understanding of the object lesson.³ The fact

[p.48]

is, however, that neither we nor Jonah need to be informed that people are more important than plants. I believe that there is much more to Chapter 4 than has been discovered, and that the object lesson is, in fact, the key to understanding the purpose of the book.

The appearance of the object lesson when Jonah fails to respond to God's question might suggest to us that the lesson is designed to help Jonah find the proper answer to God's question.⁴ Does Jonah have a right to be angry? The fact that the object lesson also ends with Jonah's anger may hint that its purpose is to help Jonah deal with his anger. It therefore becomes imperative that we understand the object lesson.

¹ Luther, *Works*, 19.242 (St. Louis: Concordia Reprint, 1974) 95.

² *Commentaries of John Calvin on the Prophet Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Baker Reprint, 1979) 144.

³ E.g., D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco: Word, 1987) 506-7; D. Alexander, *Jonah* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1988) 130.

⁴ Cf. L. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 230; Cf. H. W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 172; and D. Stuart (1987), 435.

CLUES TO THE MEANING OF THE OBJECT LESSON

One of the possible clues to the object lesson's purpose is the use of the compound divine name YHWH Elohim in verse 6. It has long been a curiosity for commentators. Some have seen it as an indication of early literary strata⁵ while others have passed by it as merely a stylistic variation.⁶ In contrast, many believe that it is used intentionally by the narrator as a key indicator of his intention. Up until this point in the book, the name YHWH has been used when dealing with Jonah, and Elohim is used when dealing with the non-Israelite players.⁷ So the men of Nineveh believe Elohim (3:5), and cry out to Elohim (3:8). The narrator comments that Elohim saw and changed His mind about destroying Nineveh (3:10). In the object lesson, Jonah is the focus, and we would expect YHWH to be used. Yet after the compound name is used in verse 6, Elohim is used throughout the remainder of the object lesson. L. Allen therefore concludes that the compound name signals a shift from viewing deity as the gracious God of the Jews to portraying him as the benevolent Creator of all men.⁸ Further on, however, Allen observes generally that God has put Jonah in Nineveh's shoes⁹ and I think this is more to the point. Specifically, I would like to suggest that the use of the compound divine name serves to signal to the reader that Jonah is being treated like Nineveh. Further substantiation of this hypothesis could be found in the fact that in the object lesson, Jonah has an impending

[p.49]

calamity (רעָה, 4:6) just as Nineveh does (רעָה, 3:10). Jonah's רעָה is the discomfort of the heat and east wind; Nineveh's is the destruction foretold by Jonah.¹⁰

THE EQUATIONS OF THE OBJECT LESSON

Given these two clues, the compound divine name, and the use of רעָה to describe both plights, we have the basis for suggesting that the purpose of the object lesson is to put Jonah in Nineveh's shoes to help evaluate whether his anger is justified. The details can now be seen to fall neatly into place.

1. Both Nineveh and Jonah have an impending calamity from which they desire to protect themselves (their רעָה).

Nineveh:	Destruction
Jonah:	Discomfort brought on by the weather

2. Both Nineveh and Jonah embark on a course of action to prevent the scheduled רעָה.

⁵ See discussion in H. W. Wolff, 164.

⁶ D. Stuart, 501.

⁷ Derek Kidner, "The Distribution of Divine Names in Jonah," *TynB* 21 (1970) 126-28.

⁸ L. Allen, 232.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233; See also D. Stuart, 505. Others, e.g., J. Sasson (*Jonah* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1990] 76), have noted the thematic use of *rā'â* throughout the book.

Nineveh: Repentance
Jonah: Building a hut

3. Both attempts are supplemented by an act of divine grace.

Nineveh: God changes His mind
Jonah: God sends a plant

4. At this point there is a change. Rather than allowing His gracious act to continue to protect Jonah, God's gracious protection is removed—a parasite devours the plant and Jonah is exposed to the full force of the dreaded calamity. His own attempt to protect himself, the hut, does him no good.

ALTERNATIVES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The above scheme goes contrary to two of the most agreed upon equations usually made by interpreters. The first has already been mentioned, i.e., that Nineveh is to be equated with the plant. While it is true that 4:11 suggests that they can be compared on one level (the former should have more readily been an object of Jonah's concern than the latter), I would suggest that that is only a secondary function for the plant. After all, Jonah does not really care about the plant in an objective sense, he only cares about himself. The object

[p.50]

lesson understands the plant as a representation of God's unmerited grace.¹¹

The second equation that must be discarded is that Jonah = Israel. This has been a much more pervasive element in the interpretation of the book. D. Alexander has classified the various interpretations of the purpose of the book of Jonah into 4 major categories, each with a few sub-categories.¹² They may be summarized as follows:

1. About Repentance
 - A. To encourage the Jews to repent
 - B. To show the possibility of repenting
 - C. To identify repentance as the correct response to prophecy
2. About Unfulfilled Prophecy
 - A. To discuss prophetic non-authentication
 - B. To offer justification for unfulfilled prophecy
 - C. To consider the problem of conditional vs. unconditional prophecy
3. About Jewish Attitudes Toward Gentiles
 - A. To encourage a missionary concern
 - B. To condemn Jewish exclusivism (re: Ezra and Nehemiah)
 - C. To condemn the Jews' reaction against God's forgiving Gentiles
4. About Theodicy

¹¹ T. Fretheim recognized that the equation plant = Nineveh would not work ("Jonah and Theodicy," *ZAW* 90 [1978] 231).

¹² D. Alexander, 81-91 where each of these is documented and discussed.

- A. To affirm God's freedom to act graciously
- B. To explore the relationship between mercy and justice

Category three has been, by far, the most popular option among interpreters of the book, and it depends on the equation $\text{Jonah} = \text{Israel}$; that is, Jonah is seen as a representative of the values and opinions of Jewish thinking. The book's purpose would then, in effect, be to urge the Jews not to act like Jonah. Categories two and four focus more on understanding God's methods and God's attributes through the agency of Jonah's situation. Category one, however, offers the equation $\text{Israel} = \text{Nineveh}$, that is, that instead of urging Israel that they should not act like Jonah, the book is urging that Israel should respond as Nineveh responded. Alexander rightly observes that the difficulty with this interpretation is that the book nowhere drives that point home. Another problem with this approach is that it ignores the object lesson.¹³ If the lesson were merely that Israel should be as willing to repent as Nineveh was, the book could have ended after chapter 3.

[p.51]

The final verses of the book demand that the purpose of the book focus on Yahweh. While such a lesson would certainly suggest implications for Jonah, Israel and us, the narrator's resolution concerns the character of Yahweh, and leaves to inference the ramifications. In the object lesson the equation suggested is that $\text{Jonah} = \text{Nineveh}$. It is this equation that is used to bring out the essential aspects about the nature of Yahweh.

THE OPERATION OF DIVINE GRACE

Certain deductions can now be made on the basis of this understanding of the object lesson. Jonah's anger after the object lesson focuses on the loss of the benefit of the plant—God's grace was retracted. If the second anger is related to the first, we could conclude that Jonah's anger toward Nineveh in the first instance likewise focused on the issue of God's grace and the way in which it was bestowed. In this regard I would agree with J. D. W. Watts who saw Jonah's anger as a response to the "tension between belief in a God of justice and a God of grace."¹⁴ Jonah was angry that God's grace functioned when Nineveh's response had been insufficient to merit that grace. In the object lesson we found that God put Jonah in Nineveh's shoes. But the difference is that God then did to Jonah what Jonah wanted him to do to Nineveh. Jonah was made a recipient of unmerited divine grace (the plant), when his own attempt to protect himself was insufficient, just as Nineveh had been. But for Jonah, God retracted that grace (by the parasite) and left Jonah exposed to his calamity. Jonah's anger in verse 8 was that God's grace did not work (for him), even though it was unmerited. His anger in verse 3 was that God's grace did work (for Nineveh), even when it was unmerited. On the basis of the object lesson, however, we must see that the point, strictly speaking, is not what Jonah (Nineveh) deserved or did not deserve. Rather, it is whether or not Jonah's (Nineveh's) own mechanism was capable of providing relief from the calamity in and of itself. The object lesson argues not and thereby offers a suitable parallel to Jonah's confession in 2:10, "deliverance belongs to the Lord."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴ J. D. W. Watts, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975) 92.

Jonah would have defended his initial anger on theological grounds. Nineveh deserved judgment. The verdict had been given and he, Jonah, had passed the sentence. The object lesson showed Jonah that what he thought was sound theology was nothing more than selfishness.¹⁵ When he benefitted from unmerited divine grace,

[p.52]

it was fine. God's right to bestow grace, Jonah is being taught, cannot be limited in any way. In the end, the issue was not Nineveh's sinfulness, but God's sovereign right to be gracious, which Jonah affirmed by his response to the object lesson. As H. W. Wolff observes, "When Jonah insists on Yahweh's free pity, he cannot really avoid simultaneously conceding to his God the forgiving mercy he has extended to the heathen."¹⁶ Jonah practically demanded God's sovereign, though unmerited, grace to be applied to him.

JONAH'S HUT AND NINEVEH'S REPENTANCE

The implications concern our understanding of Nineveh's response to Jonah's message as well as our understanding of the purpose of the book of Jonah. Of great significance in this regard is Jonah's hut. It is interesting that the hut is frequently ignored in commentators' attempts to explain the object lesson.¹⁷ Many have seen 4:5 as intrusive because of the chronology of the events and have tried to move it back into chapter three.¹⁸ J. Sasson attempts to remove the hut by having the wind blow it down because he does not see any other function for the wind, and the presence of the hut, in his understanding, would make it difficult to explain why Jonah was exposed to the elements.¹⁹ Yet he himself suggests a more promising possibility when he later allows (in passing) that the plant may have augmented the inadequate shade of the hut.²⁰ Concerning the function of the wind, Alexander has noted that certainly the plants Jonah had used to make a roof for his hut would have withered, and the wind may have blown them away, further reducing the hut's capability of providing shade.²¹ The fact that interpreters have ignored, removed, and otherwise misunderstood the hut testifies to the failure to recognize the importance of the hut in the object lesson. In contrast I would suggest that it is the hut that helps us to understand the object lesson because it represents Nineveh's repentance. If we have analyzed the object lesson correctly, the implication would be that the "repentance" of Nineveh should be understood as being shallow

[p.53]

¹⁵ H. W. Wolff, 172.

¹⁶ H. W. Wolff, 88. See also 87, 172-73; D. Alexander, 90; and especially T. Fretheim, 231.

¹⁷ E.g., H. W. Wolff.

¹⁸ See P. Tribble, "Studies in the Book of Jonah," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1963) 96-102; and H. Winckler, "Zum Buehe Jona," *Altoreintalische Forschungen* 2 (1900) 260-65; citations from J. Sasson, *Jonah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1990) 287-88.

¹⁹ J. Sasson, 304.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

²¹ D. Alexander, 129.

and naive, though it is certainly a positive step in the right direction. The important characteristic of both Nineveh's repentance and Jonah's hut is their insufficiency.²² Neither is capable of achieving its intended goal—neither can prevent the calamity on its own.

JONAH'S MESSAGE AND NINEVEH'S RESPONSE

The text of Jonah 3 does not contradict this view of Nineveh's response. In Jonah 3:5 the text reads: וַיִּאֱמְנוּ אֲנָשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים. Many translations past and present have rendered this: "The men of Nineveh believed in God" (e.g., NASB, KJV). While one could not deny that the Hebrew preposition *bet* is regularly translated "in"—there are wider semantic issues involved here. The English phrase "believe in" has idiomatic value, particularly in Christian jargon, as a comprehensive statement of faith. In Hebrew, however, the same idiom does not always maintain. Rather, the preposition *bet* is sometimes used to introduce the direct object of the Hiphil verb אָמַן. 1. In those cases, as with other direct object markers,²³ it should remain untranslated in English. The translation would then read, "The men of Nineveh believed God" (so NIV and NRSV). At the first level of meaning this would indicate that they believed what God had said through the prophet Jonah.²⁴ Alexander goes further to suggest that the collocation "denotes more, however, than just believing what someone has said; it expresses the idea of trusting someone."²⁵ Alexander's comment and the NASB rendering are good examples of what has been throughout history a staple of popular interpretation of the book of Jonah; that is, it has been widely held that the Ninevites were converted to the Israelite faith. To the contrary, the lexical evidence cannot be demonstrated to imply conversion on the part of the Ninevites.²⁶ Rather, the men of Nineveh actually believed that 40 days' time would bring their destruction. Their trust in God's ability and intention to do this led them to respond as best they knew how.

A context such as Numbers 20:12 confirms this usage of the phrase ... וַיִּאֱמְנוּ ב'. There Moses had just struck the rock and the Lord had informed him that he would not be the one to take Israel into the promised land. The reason He gave was the Moses did not

[p.54]

believe/trust Him. It is clear that we could not translate this as "Moses did not believe in Him," interpreting it as referring to a comprehensive faith statement. Moses' orthodoxy is not in question here, and it certainly does not record his failure to "convert." Rather, as in the case of Nineveh, Moses' response demonstrates the extent to which he believed what God had said, and trusted him to do it. Belief or lack of it is demonstrated by response. Therefore, while some occurrences of אָמַן with the preposition *bet* may be defined as more comprehensive statements of faith, that nuance comes only from the context and is not a lexical requirement.²⁷

²² T. Fretheim, 231.

²³ Usually *’et* marks definite direct objects, but the inseparable *bet* is used with certain verbs, e.g., *māšal*.

²⁴ D. Stuart, 489; L. Allen, 223.

²⁵ D. Alexander, 121; Cf. H. W. Wolff, 150.

²⁶ L. Allen, 190.

²⁷ For full lexical treatment see A. Jepsen, "’aman" in *TDOT* 1:298-309.

Further description in Jonah 3 likewise fails to suggest any conversion on the part of Nineveh. We have no indication that Jonah preached of Yahweh, Torah or monotheism.²⁸ Nor is any hope or avenue of escape offered; instead Jonah's oracle, as presented in the text, is nothing more than pronouncement of judgment. The reform of the Ninevites makes no mention of putting away their other gods or in any way fearing, honoring, worshiping or even recognizing Yahweh (in contrast to statements of converting pagans such as Ruth or Naaman). Nineveh's reform is described in terms of turning from their wicked ways, coupled with the ritual acts of fasting and donning sackcloth. Ritual response and ethical tidying up are precisely what one would expect from pagan Assyrians—and, from every indication, they are still just that, despite the fact that they have taken a step in the right direction. Further, it is clearly stated in 3:10 not that God saw their faith, nor that God saw that they turned from their pagan gods, nor that God saw that they sought Him with their whole heart, but rather, that God saw their works. While one cannot deny the importance of proper works as a major step in repentance, this is not the terminology that would be expected of a full conversion to Yahweh. If the popular belief in the conversion of the Ninevites was simply irrelevant we would not need to address it in such detail. Unfortunately, however, the failure to recognize the shallowness of Nineveh's response has obscured the purpose of the book, and therefore cannot be ignored.

JONAH'S ANGER

What angers Jonah is now clear. It reflects the same concern that has led interpreters to read conversion into this passage for centuries: "Is that all they did?" Why should God even acknowledge, let alone

[p.55]

respond to this shallow, naive, repentance "Assyrian-style"? They understood neither Yahweh nor Torah, nor faith, nor monotheism. They were still just as pagan and, Jonah suspects, just as wicked yet God had responded with grace. Jonah's anger was theological. Nineveh's condition was still wretched. But that is exactly God's point. His grace is bestowed not upon the final achievement of an unblemished, perfect faith (for in that case what hope would any of us have?). Rather, His gracious acts reward attempts—no matter how small they may be. A step in the right direction is a significant step. What is communicated then about repentance is that though it is insufficient to provide deliverance by its own virtue, it has the ability like nothing else to stimulate God's graciously bestowed compassion.²⁹

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

Where does this interpretation belong in Alexander's classification system (see above)? As mentioned earlier, 4:10-11 suggests that the primary emphasis of the narrator is on the character of God. God's compassion leads him to perform gracious acts, and he will not be restricted in that exercise by anyone's narrow theological strictures. This is what the object lesson taught Jonah. Nineveh was not spared because of her repentance, but because of the freely offered gift of God's grace. On the other hand, though his grace is given without merit,

²⁸ R. Clements, "The Purpose of the Book of Jonah" *VT Sup* 28 (1974) 18.

²⁹ Cf. similar directions in R. Clements, 28; and T. Fretheim, 231.

it often comes in response to steps in the right direction. In these acts of grace God's justice is not compromised, because the sin is not forgiven, instead, the punishment is postponed.³⁰ The book's lesson is this: God is a gracious, compassionate God. This is not by any means a new interpretation of the book, but the role of the object lesson in establishing this meaning has not been previously recognized. This interpretation would fall into category four in Alexander's classification, but the other categories are not thereby deemed entirely inappropriate. Though the weaknesses of category one as the primary interpretation have already been identified, it is nevertheless still acceptable for drawing specific applications from the lesson. The inference for Israel from the way in which the lesson is presented comes a fortiori: If God's grace can be stimulated by wretched Nineveh's uninformed, minute steps in the right direction,

[p.56]

how much more will that grace be stimulated by the informed repentance of Israel, his chosen people? While it is not impossible that this lesson would be of significance to a postexilic Israel,³¹ it should be observed that it would be of much greater significance to the preexilic audience of the classical prophets.³² In the classical period, God began to bring messages of exile, deportation and national collapse to the people of Israel for the first time. Were they then without hope? Was despair all that remained? Jonah's mission to Nineveh would suggest not.³³ If God responded graciously to Nineveh, no one is without hope that the deserved punishment could be postponed, despite the prophecies of judgment to the contrary. The appropriate response then is not despair, but willingness to take a step in the right direction. The relatively microscopic size of the step is then important for the application of the message of the book. This is not a book for missionaries, for Jonah's oracle concerns only impending judgment, not the offer of hope or salvation; God is not striking a bargain. The book likewise has nothing to do with Jewish exclusivism, for Jonah is not given a Jewish message to preach, nor even a positive one. The book has little to do with politics, for Assyria was not a serious political threat to Israel in the days of Jeroboam II. The message is a theological one. It presents a picture of God that encourages hope for grace even when the sentence has already been passed.

Though as a narrative that makes a theological point the book of Jonah may appear anticlimactic, as a theological treatise that happens to use narrative, it is not. Yahweh draws a comparison between the misplaced compassion of Jonah and His own compassion.³⁴ It is God's compassion that motivates His grace. Nineveh is a city of 120,000 who do not know

³⁰ This conclusion is derived from the normal use of the verb *nĥm* when God is the subject of the verb. It is especially clear from the paradigmatic narrative of the golden calf (Exod 32-34). See Francis Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Amos* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1989) 649, 674.

³¹ R. Clements, 27.

³² Cf., D. Alexander, 91.

³³ R. Clements, 22.

³⁴ While this is a point the book makes, the idea that the main purpose of the book was to contrast the attitudes of Yahweh and Jonah toward Nineveh is difficult to maintain. For an *a fortiori* argument to be successful, the compassion of God would need to be the most compassionate human that could be found. Little would be achieved by making that point at the expense of a dupe such as Jonah turns out to be. Michael Jordan's basketball abilities would not be showcased by pitting him one-on-one against the star of the local junior high school. As a result, the comparison in 4:10-11 is the perspective used to make the final point about God's compassion, but should not be construed as the pivot point of the book's purpose.

their right hand from their left. It is their ignorance that, in some ways, makes them objects of God's compassion. The narrative certainly leaves some loose ends. What about Jonah's attitude? What about Nineveh's repentance, where did it

[p.57]

lead? But those are details that are nonessential to the theological message of the book. Dealing with them would only detract from the main point: God's compassion leads Him to gracious acts of deliverance if only Israel, or we, will move in the right direction.³⁵

© 1992 *Bulletin for Biblical Research*. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in November 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁵ Does the New Testament offer any different picture of the Ninevite response? In Matthew 12:38-43, Jesus states that the men of Nineveh will stand up in judgment and condemn the Pharisees for their lack of belief. The reason is given—they repented at Jonah's preaching. It should be noticed that this statement says little about the nature of the Ninevites' response. Repentance cannot be equated with conversion. The important part is that they responded to the prophetic word, which is much more than what the Pharisees were doing. This is still the a fortiori case that the book itself implied. This minimalist understanding of the Ninevite response in Christ's statement is further confirmed by the fact that the Queen of Sheba is also identified in the same context as one who will stand up in judgment and condemn the Pharisees (v. 42). Her merit is also in her response, though it was not a theological one in any sense—she saw and believed. But the object of her belief was Solomon's reputation, not God's.