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DEVIANT MERCY:

A REEXAMINATION OF THE KIKAYON PARABLE AND JONAH 4:11

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Introduction

The book of *Jonah* has proven to be a consistent interpretive battleground among Old Testament scholarship and a consistent victim of misuse and misapplication by pastors and scholars alike. The meaning and message of *Jonah* have proven so enigmatic that Rabbi J. H. Hertz contends that it is “the most ill-used and least understood of all the books of the Bible.”¹ Even among Jews and early Christians, opinions differed as to the significance and purpose of *Jonah*.² Much of the confusion and controversy centers on the answer to two essential questions: What is the unifying message and theme of *Jonah*? And what is the meaning of the parable of the kikayon at the conclusion of the book?³ Most interpreters recognize that the answer to the latter informs the answer to the former, yet interpretation of the enigmatic kikayon parable becomes even more difficult with the ambiguity of Yahweh’s final statement in *Jonah* 4:11. While the majority of scholars contend that the final verse is a rhetorical question with a presumed answer of “yes,” the Hebrew is ambiguous, lacking the typical ‘interrogative π ’ that would clearly designate it as a question.⁴ Because of this, the exact meaning of Yahweh’s final statement remains unresolved, creating an even greater difficulty in understanding the kikayon parable and the meaning of *Jonah* as a whole.

¹ Qtd. by Sandor Goodhart, “Prophecy, Sacrifice and Repentance in the Story of Jonah,” *Semeia* 33 (1985), 52.

² For a detailed discussion of early views of Jonah, see: Uriel Simon, *Jonah*, JPSBC (trans. Lenn J. Schramm, Philadelphia: Jewish, 1999), vii-xii; Simon Chow, *The Sign of Jonah Reconsidered: A Study of Its Meaning in the Gospel Traditions*, Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series 27 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995), 25-43; Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Reconsidered* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 18-47.

³ This author refers to this episode as a “parable” not to signify that the event did not happen, but rather because it functions parabolically as Yahweh’s didactic tool to instruct both Jonah as the original recipient and also to the audience of the book. Thus, it is to be regarded as a “living parable.”

⁴ See: Philippe Guillaume, “The End of Jonah is the Beginning of Wisdom,” *Biblica* 87, no. 2, (2006): 243-250; Allen Cooper, “In Praise of Divine Caprice: The Significance of the Book of Jonah,” in *Among the Prophets* (ed. Philip R. Davies and D. J. A. Clines; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993): 144-63. Furthering the complication is the fact that even if grammatically it can be proven that the final statement is a rhetorical question, some contend that the presumed answer is, in fact, “no.” See: Thomas M. Bolin.

The Field of Interpretation

The Unifying Theme and Message of Jonah

While opinions abound as to the exact unifying theme of *Jonah*, the majority of conclusions fall under five primary views: atonement versus repentance; universalism versus particularism; the nature of prophecy; justice versus mercy; and the freedom and sovereignty of the divine nature.⁵

1) In the B. Megillah, *Jonah* is set as the *haftarah* for the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement to call people to repentance. In this view, *Jonah* reflects an image of proper repentance and describes Yahweh's faithfulness to have mercy on those who rightly repent and turn from their sin. From this standpoint, *Jonah* fights against the "ancient view" that only punishment can cleanse sin, underscoring the power of repentance in washing away iniquity and atoning for sin.⁶

2) The view of Rashi and others takes a different approach, interpreting the main theme of the book to be the importance of placing Yahweh's universal love and mission to the nations above the nationalistic loyalty that places Israel's welfare above all else.⁷ In this view, *Jonah* represents Israel's exclusivism (particularly the exclusivism after the exile), which the book of *Jonah* condemns in favor of a universal mission and love for the nations.⁸

3) The third view states that *Jonah*'s motivation for not prophesying is his "jealous concern for the veracity of prophecy and his apprehension lest his credibility be undermined."⁹ Thus, *Jonah*

⁵ Simon, *Jonah*, vii-xii; Bolin, *Freedom*, 61-63; 183.

⁶ Simon, *Jonah*, vii. Kalisch adamantly argues that the obvious message of the book is the power of repentance. Ref. in James Hardee Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (Nashville: Broadman, 1956), 87. Simon rejects this view, however, citing that only chapter 3 deals with actual sinners who properly repent. The sailors are not deemed as sinners and *Jonah* doesn't repent like Nineveh. Walton persuasively argues that the response by Nineveh is merely to repent and go through ritual expressions of their repentance. It does not show a holistic turning to Yahweh worship or of putting away all their idols. It is not that God saw their faith, but that he merely saw their works—and feeble works at that. Furthermore, if the point of the book is to call Israel to repentance, then the book would have ended at chapter 3. John Walton, "The Object Lesson of *Jonah* 4:5-7 and the Purpose of the Book of *Jonah*," *BBR* 2 (1992), 50-54.

⁷ Simon, *Jonah*, viii-ix.

⁸ Simon, *Jonah*, ix-x. Kiel takes this view. C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Minor Prophets* (ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; trans. James Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 417. Simon rejects this. He does not believe *Jonah* symbolizes Israel or that Nineveh symbolizes the gentile world. Bolin also makes a strong argument against this view given the fact that there is little to know historical evidence that there was much exclusivism in post-exilic Israel. Furthermore, 2 Kings doesn't portray *Jonah* as a pious nationalistic zealot, as many portray him as. Even if one doesn't take a late date for *Jonah*, there is little evidence that anti-exclusivism would be a significant message for Israel during any time in her history. Walton argues against the missionary element of *Jonah*, stating "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. [. . .] it presents a picture of God that encourages hope for grace even when the sentence has already been passed." Bolin, *Freedom*, 59-60; Walton, "Object Lesson," 56.

⁹ Simon, *Jonah*, x.

instructs about “the educational purpose of prophecies of doom, countering Jonah’s belief that his role was to announce future events and his credibility was predicated on its being fulfilled.”¹⁰

4) The fourth view states that Jonah argues against God’s mercy in favor of strict justice, which upholds the primacy of law and underscores the consistency of the reward/punishment system of God’s justice. By Yahweh forgiving Nineveh, he is setting himself up above the law, which Jonah rejects as good or valid. He believes that by showing mercy, Yahweh does not fully deter, but actually encourages transgressors to continue in sin. Thus, Jonah “must learn that the world can exist only through the unfathomable amalgamation of justice and mercy, that fear of sin is produced not only by fear of punishment, but also by awe at the sublimity of salvation [. . .] and by fascination with grace and absolution.”¹¹

5) The fifth view, which shares many elements of the fourth, asserts that *Jonah* “is about the theodical issues of divine freedom,”¹² and the “absolute freedom, power, and sovereignty of Yahweh over all creation.”¹³ The freedom and sovereignty of God over nature and salvation form the unifying theme of the book.

This study will contend for an amalgamation and extension of views four and five, arguing that the meaning of the parable of the kikayon and the intentional ambiguity of Yahweh’s last words provide the interpretive framework for the book of *Jonah* as didactic and prophetic, intended to underscore Yahweh’s freedom to show both unmerited mercy and retributive justice in order to drive recipients to full repentance.

Problems to Address

One of the fundamental pitfalls of many interpretations of *Jonah* lies in too hastily moving from textual analysis to the transcendent theological claims of the narrative—and particularly the kikayon parable. Many interpreters seek to extrapolate massive theological claims about Yahweh’s nature that apply to all peoples at all times before considering what message Yahweh particularly intended for Jonah the prophet and the original audience of the book. In order to understand the transcendent principles intrinsic to the story, one must first understand what it is that Jonah needs to learn and what it

¹⁰ Simon, *Jonah*, x-xi. Within this view, Hitzig argues that Jonah is an apology for God, justifying the fact that Obadiah’s prophecy against Edom remained unfulfilled (Ref. in Kennedy, *Studies*, 62). For a fuller discussion and refutation see: Bolin, *Freedom*, 60-61.

¹¹ Simon, *Jonah*, xii.

¹² Bolin, *Freedom*, 62-63.

¹³ Bolin, *Freedom*, 183.

is that Israel and Judah must learn.¹⁴ From the answers to these immanent questions come the transcendent principles that can be applied universally. In order to understand the original meaning of *Jonah*, several problems must be addressed:

1. Why did Jonah run away and why is Jonah angry?
2. Is Nineveh's repentance true and full?
3. What is Yahweh trying to teach Jonah through the storm, fish, and kikayon?
4. What new truth does Jonah need to learn that he does not already know?
5. Is the final verse a question or an affirmation, and what is Yahweh's point in making it?

Understanding the meaning of the parable of the kikayon informs the answer to these five questions and thus the meaning of the *Jonah* to the original audience and subsequent audiences.

Background Issues

Genre

The genre of *Jonah* proves to be one of the most debated elements of the book. The primary contentions are that Jonah is historical, didactic, allegorical, satiric, midrashic, parabolic, or a combination of these.¹⁵ It seems clear that Jonah is presented as historical narrative. As Limburg notes, the introductory word “יְהוָה” is used in eight other historical books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, Esther, and Nehemiah).¹⁶ The same formula is used in Yahweh's address to Elijah in 1 Kings 17.¹⁷ VanGemeran contends that the book is “historical with a parabolic force.”¹⁸ While arguments for Jonah's historicity exceed the scope of this essay, most scholars agree that *Jonah* is fundamentally didactic in nature, which

¹⁴ This is where many of the interpretations of the unifying message of Jonah and the kikayon parable fall short. It can't simply be a lesson that Yahweh is gracious and compassionate: Jonah already knows this—indeed, it is the impetus for his flight at the beginning. It can't simply be that Yahweh is sovereign over everything: Jonah knows this as well. It can't merely be instruction as to the nature of prophecy, for this would assume that a prophet of the Yahweh doesn't understand the nature of his own call, which is unlikely.

¹⁵ Willem A. VanGemeran, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 147.

¹⁶ James Limburg, *Jonah* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 23. Limburg himself doesn't make this claim to historicity, however. Rather, he regards Jonah as a fictional tale meant to instruct. Nonetheless, he argues that the book presents itself as historical narrative, even though it is not. This author agrees with Limburg's assessment of Jonah's presentation, but contends that Jonah not only presents itself as historical narrative but is, in fact, to be taken as historical based on presuppositional grounds related to divine authorship. Arguments for Jonah's historicity and inspiration far exceed the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ Limburg, *Jonah*, 23. This makes a thematic connection between Jonah and Elijah, the significance of which will be discussed later.

¹⁸ VanGemeran, *Interpreting*, 147.

is essential to understanding the meaning of the book. It seems clear that the story drives to one particular point, given its unity and its didactic qualities, the final verse underscoring the unifying message of *Jonah*.¹⁹ However, it is also important to recognize the fundamental prophetic nature of the book as well, given its protagonist and its place among the other prophetic writings of the OT.

Audience

Debates rage over the composition and audience of the book, based on historical and linguistic grounds. Cary contends that the audience of the story is most certainly the Southern Kingdom.²⁰ Ellison argues for a pre-exilic date, contending that the book functioned as an encouragement to Judah in anticipation of their impending exile.²¹ Many scholars put it in a post-exilic context, both because of linguistic usage (which is highly debated) and also of the context of the Jews during this time: struggling over unfulfilled prophecies, nationalistic and exclusivist, and depressed.²²

While it is impossible to determine whether the work is pre-exilic or post-exilic, it seems likely that the original audience was Judah, not the Northern Kingdom. However, given the fact that Jonah was a northern prophet and the story of his mission to Nineveh survived until composition centuries later, it also seems likely that the original message of *Jonah* would have also been a message to the Northern Kingdom. If this is the case, the meaning of the book of *Jonah* is two-pronged: an original meaning to the Northern Kingdom given at the time of Jonah the prophet and a subsequent meaning attached to the original composition of the work for the sake of Judah. Understanding this is a significant aid in understanding the meaning of the book of *Jonah*.

¹⁹ Kennedy, *Studies*, 89-90. Limburg notes that the story is riddled with questions: 14 questions, and 9 of which are directed at Jonah (which, in turn, are directed at the reader since we are to identify ourselves with the protagonist). Of course, the end of the book ends on a question. The question motif is very common in wisdom literature (particularly, Proverbs, Ecc. And Job). Thus, Jonah is a book of instruction that calls the reader to *consider* and *attend*. Limburg, *Jonah*, 26.

²⁰ Phillip Cary, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 31.

²¹ VanGemeran, *Studies*, 146.

²² Bolin, *Freedom*, 38. See Payne for a lengthier discussion on audience and the significance of determining original audience to the meaning of the book. David F. Payne, "Jonah from the Perspective of Its Audience," *JSOT* 13, (1979): 3-12.

Pertinent Historical Background

Little space needs to be spent overviewing the historical background of *Jonah*.²³ Nevertheless, it is important to root the character of Jonah within his historical context as the same prophet of 2 Kings 14 (Jon. 1:1). The rabbinic traditions have universally identified Jonah with the prophet of 2 Kings.²⁴ In Jonah's ministry to Israel, he prophesies the expansion and abundance of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II despite their wickedness.²⁵ Since the reign of Adad-nirari III (810-783), Assyria was on the decline and during Assur-dan's reign, things were in turmoil and disrepair. Israel had taken advantage of this and had reclaimed many of their holdings, according to the prophecies of Jonah, and Assyria had hit a low point.²⁶ In this, Yahweh has shown mercy on Israel despite her wickedness. Thus, *Jonah* contains a message about Yahweh's mercy and justice to a people who, like Nineveh, have experienced his gracious deliverance (2 Kgs. 14:26-27).

Narrative Background: Jonah 1-4:4

Jonah 1-2

Most scholars note that *Jonah* is divided into two parts: chapters 1-2 and chapters 3-4.²⁷ The book begins with Jonah refusing to obey Yahweh's command to prophesy to the Ninevites, because he anticipates that Yahweh will be gracious to them and deliver them from their distress (4:2). Jonah runs not because he fears for his life or fears the repercussions of prophesying, but because he despises Yahweh's compassion to those who don't deserve it and desires a world where strict justice triumphs over the wicked.²⁸ The rest of the book narrates Yahweh's pursuit of his prophet and attempt to address

²³ For an in-depth discussion of the historical background of Jonah, see: J.H. Stek, "the Message of the Book of Jonah," *CTJ* 4, no. 1, (1969), 23-26; Eugene H. Merrill, "The Sign of Jonah," *JETS* 23, no. 1 (1980), 25-27.

²⁴ Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom*, 17.

²⁵ Merrill, "Sign," 389.

²⁶ Merrill, "Sign," 403.

²⁷ For an in-depth look at the narrative structure of Jonah, see: Simon, *Jonah*, xxiv-xxxii.

²⁸ Pinchas Kahn, "The Epilogue to Jonah," *JBQ* 28, no. 3 (2000), 148.

the fundamental error that lies at the root of Jonah's initial flight, namely Jonah's insistence that Yahweh's mercy is deviant, extending to those who don't deserve it because they are idolaters.

Jonah's fierce insistence upon divine justice drives him throughout chapter one as he asks to be thrown into the sea for his disobedience rather than call out to Yahweh for mercy as the gentile sailors have done. As Hauser states:

Jonah is prepared to deal with a God of wrath and in fact seems incapable of relating to God in other ways, even when God's wrath must, of necessity, be directed against him. [. . .] Since Jonah has passively submitted to his own punishment, he rages when others escape their rightful doom. Perhaps one might say that what Jonah fears is not so much God and his wrath but rather a world in which God's wrath does not come to bear equally on all who are guilty.²⁹

It is the gentile sailors, not the self-attested "fearer of Yahweh" (1:9), who asks for divine mercy and receives it.³⁰ Upon reception of Yahweh's mercy, they "feared Yahweh exceedingly," offered sacrifices and made vows, becoming converts and "God-fearers."³¹

If Jonah's theology of justice prevailed, the book would end after chapter one. However, in his mercy, Yahweh delivers Jonah through the fish and gives Jonah an opportunity to learn the goodness of his grace. Jonah's hymn in chapter two even seems to indicate upon a cursory reading that Jonah celebrates Yahweh's mercy and comes to appreciate it. However, upon closer evaluation, it seems Jonah has not learned his lesson. The prayer is not for deliverance, but of thanksgiving for Yahweh's deliverance, and although he did cry out for help (2:2), nowhere does the text indicate that Jonah repents or seeks forgiveness for his sin.³² Rather, it seems Jonah believes he has been delivered because he is a Jew and deserves deliverance, indicated by his insistence that while his prayer was heard in Yahweh's holy temple, "those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love" (2:9). It is clear at

²⁹ Alan Jon Hauser, "Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove," *JBL* 104, no. 1 (1985), 27.

³⁰ It is significant that they call upon the covenant name of Yahweh, rather than Elohim, indicating that they entered into a covenant relationship with him, unlike the Ninevites, as will be discussed below.

³¹ David C. Timmer, "The Twelve," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (ed. Miles V. Van Pelt; Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 334.

³² Hauser, "Jonah," 29.

the end of part one that Jonah has not yet learned his lesson, a lesson which, ironically, is stated at the end of his hymn: “salvation belongs to Yahweh” (2:10).

Jonah 3:1-4:3

Part two of the book functions as Yahweh’s primary method of instructing Jonah on the nature of his error. It is clear from chapters 1-2 that Jonah despises Yahweh’s benevolent mercy in favor of strict justice and believes mercy is something that should be merited. This becomes clear after Yahweh spares Nineveh upon seeing their repentance (3:10). While some contend that Nineveh’s repentance is genuine and analogous to radical conversion, it is clear from the text that Nineveh’s repentance is shallow and temporary at best. Their belief merely consists of assenting to the message, which was that Nineveh would be overthrown in 40 days (3:4-5). This is akin to the same linguistic parallel in Numbers 20:12, when Moses did not believe God’s promise that water would come out of the rock by speaking. It is not that Moses did not have saving faith (believing *in* God) but that he did not believe God’s words. In the same way, it is not that Nineveh believed *in* God, but that they believed him and his message.³³ Furthermore, it seems Jonah only preached destruction, not Yahweh or the law. The response by Nineveh is ritualistic repentance. It does not show a holistic turning to Yahweh worship or of putting away all their idols. It is not that God saw their faith, but that he merely saw their works—and feeble works at that.³⁴

Yahweh’s mercy to Nineveh for their shallow repentance presents a test for Jonah, meant to illustrate that Jonah has yet to change his own faulty worldview. Thus, chapter 4 opens with Jonah exceedingly angry because of Yahweh’s benevolence to undeserving idolaters. Jonah believes Yahweh’s

³³ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 53-54. Some take Jesus’ description of Nineveh rising up in condemnation on the Jews as evidence of Nineveh’s saving faith (cf. R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 238). This is a weak argument, however, given that Jesus never states that they had saving faith, but that they serve as a condemnation on those who had more light and yet refused to even repent like Nineveh. It is akin to Jesus in other passages using Sodom and Gomorrah: “it will be more bearable,” does not mean that they enjoy eternal rest, but rather, their judgment is not as harsh. Given that Jesus also places the Queen of the South in the same discussion—who Scripture in no way indicates a conversion or even repentance—the connotation seems clear.

³⁴ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 54.

forgiveness is inappropriate toward Nineveh, because they are not his people and they are not given a law or a covenant. Furthermore, these are people who will soon destroy Israel: “This tension raised immense theological issues for Jonah involving the appropriateness of justice and mercy in God’s world.”³⁵ Again he seeks to die in order to challenge Yahweh to act as a God of wrath upon a rebellious prophet.³⁶

Rather than answer Jonah’s request for justice, Yahweh approaches Jonah with a series of questions and a parable to open Jonah’s eyes to his sin and inconsistency. As Simon states,

Jonah permits himself to defy the Lord’s command and holds fast to his opposition even after being compelled to execute it, all on account of his unwavering fidelity to strict justice and his foreknowledge that the Lord will indeed repent of His fatal intent. He suffers from self-righteousness and conceit; these are the traits of which the divine irony comes to wean him.³⁷

Thus, the parable of the kikayon functions as the culmination of the entire narrative, instructing Jonah on the nature of himself and the nature of God.

The Parable of the Kikayon

The kikayon parable is bookended by an *inclusio*: “are you rightly angry?” (4:4, 9), leading to Yahweh’s *coup de grace* at the end of the book. In essence, Yahweh is asking: are you *justified* in being angry because of my mercy? Who is the one who understands what is just and right, you or I?³⁸ Thus, the parable of the kikayon challenges Jonah’s conception of justice and reveals to Jonah that it is he, not Yahweh, who has a deviant sense of the appropriateness of justice and mercy.

³⁵ Kahn, “Epilogue,” 148.

³⁶ Hauser, “Jonah,” 37.

³⁷ Simon, *Jonah*, xxii.

³⁸ Kim argues that the correct translation of this Hebrew phrase is: “are you exceedingly angry?” because the adverb *הַיָּטִב* can be taken as an “adverb that specifies the degree of the verbal action,” thus rendering it “extremely” or “greatly” angry. This cannot be, however, given that the author is clearly creating a verbal link between *הַיָּטִב* and Jonah’s insistence that it is *טֹב* for him to die than to live (4:3, 8). They are thus debating the nature of what is right and good. Yoo-Ki Kim, “The Function of HYTB in Jonah 4 and its Translation,” *Bib* 90, no. 3 (2009), 393.

The Parable of the Kikayon

While it is obvious that the episode with the kikayon is a parable, interpreters differ radically as to the didactic meaning of the booth, worm, and plant. Many associate the plant with Nineveh and Jonah with Israel, given the analogy Yahweh uses in 4:10, stating that the kikayon illustrates that Yahweh cares for Nineveh like Jonah cares for the plant, and that Israel, like Nineveh, should repent. However, this is only a tertiary connection, not central to the message of the parable itself.³⁹ The key to understanding the meaning of the parable is to understand the use of God's name in verse 6.

Before this, whenever God is acting toward Jonah, he is referred to as Yahweh. Whenever he is acting toward Gentiles, he is referred to as Elohim. In 4:6, the compound is used, and subsequently Elohim is used for the object lesson. By this, the narrative indicates that through the object lesson, Yahweh puts Jonah in the position of Nineveh.⁴⁰ This point is underscored linguistically, for both Jonah and Nineveh are described as experiencing a “רָעָה.”⁴¹ The sequence is as follows: 1. Nineveh and Jonah both experience calamity from which they want to shield themselves. 2. Both seek to prevent it (Nineveh through weak repentance and Jonah through building the booth). 3. God shows grace and mercy to both. 4. God removes his grace from Jonah for the sake of the object lesson, underscoring the insufficiency of Jonah's own attempt to shield himself with the booth.⁴² In this understanding, the booth that Jonah builds represents Nineveh's inadequate repentance. As Walton states, “The important characteristic of both Nineveh's repentance and Jonah's hut is their insufficiency. Neither is capable of achieving its intended goal—neither can prevent the calamity on its own.”⁴³

³⁹ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 49-50.

⁴⁰ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 48. Additionally, the parable may be drawing a connection between the themes of mercy and justice, which are central to the argument Jonah has with Yahweh. The rabbis note that the use of God's name is contextual: Elohim is (generally) used in relation to law and justice, while Yahweh is (generally) associated with mercy. Kahn, 149.

⁴¹ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 48.

⁴² Walton, “Object Lesson,” 49.

⁴³ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 53.

Jonah believes Nineveh's act of repentance (which is weak) is unworthy of God's grace—it does not merit it—and therefore Nineveh deserves Yahweh's justice. But like Nineveh, Jonah was a beneficiary of God's gracious gift of the kikayon when his own self-protection was insufficient.⁴⁴ By appointing the harsh wind, God shows Jonah the harsh nature of a world directed by strict justice.⁴⁵ By removing the plant, God responds to Jonah's lack of merit in the way Jonah wanted God to respond to Nineveh's.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the kikayon resembles in sound the Hebrew word for “vomit,” drawing parallels with Jonah's past deliverance from the fish. Thus, the plant functions as a way to draw together this present deliverance of Jonah as well as the past deliverance, underscoring the fact that Jonah's deliverance from the fish was also unmerited.⁴⁷

Yet Jonah does not understand the parable and again rails against God's sense of justice. He receives God's justice in the removal of the plant, but because Jonah believes he deserves the plant, he again insists his anger is justified and asks for death as a plea for justice. When Jonah asks for death “he is praying for death because the Lord's attributes—so frequently stated to praise Him—are loathsome to the prophet, and his unwilling participation in their application has deprived his life of meaning.”⁴⁸ As Guillaume states, “Jonah insists that his execution be immediate [. . .], not in order to shorten his agony, but to salvage divine justice and with it the foundation of the universe.”⁴⁹

But God is not done with Jonah. In verse 10, Yahweh states, “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,” and with these words, Yahweh reveals to Jonah the first lesson of the kikayon: Jonah is as much an idolater as Nineveh, for he has made an idol of the kikayon.⁵⁰ Thus, the scorching wind of justice proves Jonah's

⁴⁴ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 51.

⁴⁵ Kahn, “Epilogue,” 152.

⁴⁶ Walton, “Object Lesson,” 51.

⁴⁷ Bolin, *Freedom*, 155.

⁴⁸ Simon, *Jonah*, 34.

⁴⁹ Guillaume, “End of Jonah,” 248.

⁵⁰ Goodhart, “Prophecy,” 52.

words true: “those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love” (2:8). And, in turn, Yahweh shows Jonah that his own insistence on strict justice has become an idol, which has made Jonah’s understanding of justice and mercy deviant and chaotic.

By drawing the connection between Jonah’s deliverance from the fish and Jonah’s reception of the kikayon, Yahweh shows Jonah that from the beginning Jonah was never consistent in his desire for strict justice. While Jonah wanted Yahweh to be just on Assyrian idolaters, Jonah himself believed he merited Yahweh’s mercy. Jonah’s request for death is merely a shallow ploy to convince himself and Yahweh that Jonah is the one with the balanced understanding of right and wrong, and that Yahweh’s insistence upon mercy for the undeserving is chaotic. Yahweh’s answer, given in perfect symmetry, critiques Jonah’s flawed perspective, demonstrating that like Nineveh, Jonah, too, is an idolater and is therefore inconsistent.⁵¹

Thus, the kikayon parable illustrates to Jonah that he is in the place of Nineveh, an idolater who merits the wrath of God. His status as an Israelite cannot shield him from God’s wrath any more than Nineveh’s shallow repentance. By establishing Jonah’s place as an idolater in need of mercy, Yahweh then leads Jonah to understanding the second lesson of the kikayon: mercy can never be merited, for all are idolaters who have forsaken Yahweh; rather, his unmerited mercy drives sinners to repentance. Therefore, Yahweh is not unjust for bestowing mercy on idolaters, for strict justice has no power over the nature of mercy. He is free to show mercy and he is free to show strict justice. In the words of Jonah, “salvation belongs to Yahweh” (2:9).

The Final Verse: Intentional Ambiguity

Having established that salvation belongs to the Lord, Yahweh moves to his *coup de grace*, which has been a consistent cause of confusion for interpreters. There are three primary interpretations of the final verse:

⁵¹ Kahn, “Epilogue,” 152.

1. The overwhelming majority position contends that the verse should be read as a rhetorical question with an implied “yes.” Thus, Yahweh states that he shall have pity on Nineveh just as Jonah pitied the plant, which is far less valuable and of no intrinsic worth to Jonah, because it was not the work of his hands. Against this position is the fact that grammatically the Hebrew does not contain the ‘interrogative ן’ that would clearly designate it as a question. Nevertheless, Youngblood states: “The context suggests that YHWH is continuing his Socratic approach to Jonah’s education that began with his initial question in 4:4. Hebrew frequently poses questions with no interrogative markers in situations where the question can be easily inferred from the context (Arnold and Choi, *Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 187). This is especially true of negated clauses.”⁵² Most interpreters see the implied interrogative as linguistically possible and consistent with the meaning of the parable. As Ehud ben Zvi states, “It is worth stressing that readings of Jon. 4.11 as a rhetorical question do not create any grammatical or syntactical difficulty. Moreover, they are coherent with the well-known and widely attested principle of ‘from minor (v.10) to major premise (v.11).’”⁵³
2. A minority position also recognizes that it should be read as a question, but with an implied “no,” thus rendering the meaning that Yahweh will not show mercy on Nineveh in the future. In this position, Yahweh is saying that just as Jonah should not care about the death of the plant over which he has not labored, so, too, Yahweh will not weep over the destruction of Nineveh, “over which he has not labored and whose inhabitants are foolish.”⁵⁴ This is attested by the use of ‘לֹא אֲחַיֵּם’ which is used almost exclusively in the prophets to denote the fact that Yahweh will not show mercy on Israel, and therefore would communicate to Jonah and the original audience that Yahweh would not show future mercy on Nineveh.⁵⁵
3. The other minority position holds that the original grammar underscores the intended meaning, thus rendering the final verse an affirmation that Yahweh will not, in fact, have mercy on Nineveh in the future. The Septuagint translated it as an affirmation (“I will not spare...”), and only later additions coming out of the late Byzantine period punctuated it as a question.⁵⁶ The three questions in Jonah 4, if any are taken as rhetorical, might lend weight to a rhetorical reading of the final verse, but Guillaume argues that none of them function this way: “Reading a question where the context does not support it suggests that the interrogative rendering of [Jonah 4:11] is pure dogma.”⁵⁷ The ending either confirms or reverses Yahweh’s original decree that Jonah was commanded to proclaim. According to Guillaume, “Nineveh’s impressive repentance produces a complication which hangs unresolved until JHWH claims that contrary to Jonah he will not grieve and that punishment will be meted out.”⁵⁸ The destruction of the plant represents the future destruction of

⁵² Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah*, Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament 28 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 173.

⁵³ Ehud ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*, Journal JSOTSup367 (London: Sheffield, 2003), 14 n. 1.

⁵⁴ Bolin, *Freedom*, 163.

⁵⁵ Bolin, *Freedom*, 164. Bolin notes the common theme in Scripture (especially seen in Jeremiah 18) that if a city repents then God will repent of the disaster he has prophesied toward it. However, in most of these cases, when Yahweh relents from his promised destruction, it is also followed by an act of destruction (cf. Genesis 6:6; Exodus 32; Judges 2:18; 2 Sam. 24; Amos 7:1-9). Thus, “it cannot be assumed that Nineveh does escape destruction because it cannot be assumed that when Yahweh repents he will forego an act of destruction.” 141-43.

⁵⁶ Guillaume, “End of Jonah,” 244.

⁵⁷ Guillaume, “End of Jonah,” 245-46.

⁵⁸ Guillaume, “End of Jonah,” 247.

Nineveh, in accordance with Yahweh's faithfulness to his word—the only attribute from Ex. 34:6 which Jonah leaves out.⁵⁹

Given that the final statement is obviously ambivalent, it seems likely that Yahweh creates an intentional ambiguity by leaving out the one marker that would clearly designate it has a rhetorical question.

Intentional ambiguity would seem to remain consistent with the thrust of Jonah as a discussion of the Yahweh's freedom to show both mercy and justice. Having established in verse 10 that Jonah is an idolater and deserves justice, Yahweh has moved Jonah to the proper footing on which he can now appreciate both Yahweh's justice and his unmerited mercy, and the ambiguity of the final statement thus underscores both. On the one hand, Yahweh concludes the parable by reaffirming to Jonah that he is free to show mercy to anyone. Yet, if this were the only meaning of the parable and the final statement, then the parable may not have been needed at all, given that Jonah already knows Yahweh has this freedom to show mercy (4:2). Through the parable, Yahweh has helped Jonah be able to properly appreciate the inherent goodness of Yahweh's free mercy. Having established this, Yahweh uses the ambiguity and the use of 'לֹא אֶחָיוֹס' to also indicate that in the future he has the freedom to show justice to Nineveh if they do not respond to his mercy by proper conversion: like the final statement, their future is ambiguous.

This reading is supported by the response of the gentile sailors in chapter one. Often overlooked in a reading of Jonah, the sailors actually provide the foil for every other character in the book. While Jonah does not ask for mercy during the storm, but rather insists on strict justice, the sailors, who are clearly idolaters (1:6) ask for mercy, and upon receiving it, they "feared Yahweh exceedingly," offered a sacrifice, and made vows (1:16). By the use of the Tetragrammaton, the author clearly indicates that the sailors have undergone a conversion and become God-fearers.⁶⁰ Nineveh, unlike the sailors, do not call out to Yahweh in covenant fidelity, but merely to Elohim as the powerful deity who has promised to destroy them. But like the sailors, they have received unmerited mercy and are now in the position to

⁵⁹ Guillaume, "End of Jonah," 247.

⁶⁰ Timmer, "The Twelve," 334.

respond by conversion or rebellion. Jonah, too, is presented with a choice. He has been an idolatrous, rebellious prophet, but has been a recipient of divine mercy, and must now choose to respond like the sailors or face the strict justice promised by Yahweh's use of 'לֹא אֶחָד' and the immanent ambiguity of his final statement. Thus, the kikayon parable shows that Yahweh's mercy is free and not contingent upon true conversion or repentance, but affirms that it is meant to drive his people to repentance. At the same time, Yahweh's justice insists that if his mercy is not heeded, he will not have mercy on those who scorn it or presume upon it. By this, Yahweh counters Jonah's claim that Yahweh is not just.⁶¹

The Message for Israel and Judah

This message has direct application to the Northern Kingdom during Jonah's prophetic ministry. Like Nineveh, the Northern Kingdom has received divine mercy under the wicked reign of Jeroboam II, but like Jonah, they seem to presume upon the mercy of God. The kikayon parable and the final ambiguous words underscore the message that the Northern Kingdom is in just as precarious position as Nineveh, idolaters who have received Yahweh's free mercy. They are challenged to respond like the sailors or be destroyed like Nineveh will be if they continue in their idolatry. The irony, of course, is that by preserving Nineveh, they become Yahweh's tool of destruction against the Northern Kingdom only 30 years later because Israel did not repent.

As the original audience of the book, Judah would also find a promise and a warning in the lesson of the kikayon and the ambiguous final verse. Having seen the destruction of Israel and the destruction of Nineveh (cf. Nahum), Judah has seen firsthand that Yahweh is consistent with his freedom to show both mercy and justice. Thus, Judah, in the midst of her own moral-spiritual crisis (whether pre-exilic or post-exilic), would read *Jonah* as a prophetic historical narrative, intended to illustrate the veracity of Yahweh's oracles in the other prophets: repent in response to my mercy or end

⁶¹ Guillaume, "End of Jonah," 248.

up like the other idolaters who presumed upon my mercy and did not respond in faith and covenant renewal like the sailors.

Conclusion

The parable of the kikayon and the ambiguous final verse function as the interpretive framework for the book of *Jonah*. It takes four chapters for Jonah to understand that he is not justified in being angry, but rather than he is an idolater and recipient of divine mercy meant to draw him back to Yahweh. Throughout the story, Yahweh is portrayed as the Divine Pursuer, longing to show mercy and grace to Jew and Gentile alike in order that they might join themselves to him in covenant fidelity. Set against the backdrop of the other prophets and the infidelity of Israel and Judah, *Jonah* is as prophetic as it is didactic, intended to call God's people out of their idolatry and wickedness before he speaks the horrible words, "no mercy" (Jer. 13:14; Ezk. 24:14).

Having established the original meaning of *Jonah* to the characters and audience, the themes and messages of *Jonah* prove to be a boon to all subsequent audiences. For we have all received mercy from the hand of Yahweh, even while we were yet enemies (John 1:16; Rom. 5:8). God has shown his mercy and common grace to saint and sinner alike (Matt. 5:45), in order to reveal his nature and lead sinners to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Thus, *Jonah* calls to readers in every age not to "despite the riches of his goodness, forbearance, and patience" (Rom. 4:2), for while Yahweh is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," he "will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:6-7). We are called not to despise the mercy of Yahweh nor presume upon it, but to recognize that, like *Jonah*, Christ was in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights for the redemption of his people (Matt. 12:40), and to respond in faith, knowing that "salvation belong to Yahweh" (Jonah 2:9).

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