

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

SALVATION
THROUGH
JUDGMENT AND
MERCY

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO

JONAH

BRYAN D. ESTELLE

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THE OLD TESTAMENT

*A series of studies on the lives
of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament*

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FOREWORD

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To these ends, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Also, certain themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
J. ALAN GROVES

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A number of people read part or all of this manuscript. Tremper Longman III was not only a helpful editor throughout the process, but he matched my diffidence with unexpected encouragement. My wife Lisa read the introductory chapter and asked a number of good questions that sent me back to the computer in order to strive for clarity. Without her, and the encouragement of my children, Sean, David, and Kaitlin, this project never would have seen the light of day.

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This, my first book, is dedicated to a man who throughout my life has demonstrably echoed God's character to me. To my father, Walter Estelle, I dedicate this labor.

INTRODUCTION

Shipmates, this book containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah’s deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish’s belly! How billow-like and boisterously grand! (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*)

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me. (John 5:39)

In spite of its brevity, the book of Jonah is not easy to interpret. Although the story is clear and simple enough for a child to grasp, a feature that helps to explain its popularity in the Sunday school curriculum and vacation Bible schools throughout the world, a personal letter by Augustine of Hippo sums up well the difficulties contained in this little book: “What he asks about the resurrection of the dead could be settled. . . . But if he thinks to solve all such questions as . . . those about Jonah . . . he little knows the limitations of human life or his own.”¹

Reading the book in Hebrew (something at which Augustine, in spite of his brilliance, did not excel) will not serve to simplify the difficulties because the book’s artistry is complex and richly displayed. Below the surface sim-

plicity of this biblical book, the prophecy of Jonah is an extremely subtle and complex piece of work. I continue to bump up against the reality that easy answers are not forthcoming; rather, the original author, a very thoughtful and skilled author indeed, kept questions alive for his audience. Therefore, we should not reduce this story to one simple theological message. The story of Jonah, in fact, evokes questions that will probably not find answers even after repeatedly rereading the book.

This is often what makes a classic: wonderful literary artistry mixed with many layers of meaning that motivate reading a book more than just once. Consequently, a person ought to read a classic thoughtfully, slowly, and repeatedly. A classic endures the test of time. The book of Jonah is a classic.

Reading Jonah is like standing before a great mountain. Having trained hard and being well prepared for the climb, one might assume that a successful ascent (as well as the descent) is assured. Such an attitude, as every experienced mountain climber knows, is foolhardy. And like great mountains, great books command respect. The poet William Blake said that great things happen when men and mountains meet; how much more so when people with the right orientation encounter great books.

There are numerous books and commentaries on Jonah readily available, so why write another? I believe there is room for another book on Jonah, specifically a book that fits into the aims of this series. What is necessary for today are commentaries and books that responsibly present the biblical writings in their canonical context. The present need in the church is for books that promote responsible Christ-centered reading, preaching, and teaching of the Old Testament. E. J. Young recognized years ago that the main message of Jonah is focused on Christ: “The fundamental purpose of the book of Jonah is not found in its missionary or universalistic teaching. It is rather to show that Jonah

being cast into the depths of Sheol and yet brought up alive is an illustration of the death of the Messiah for sins not His own and of the Messiah's resurrection."²

In spite of all the difficulties alluded to previously, we must give the book of Jonah a Christian reading. Jonah, first and foremost, plain and simple, has this most important message for the Christian church today: *Christ, the risen One who is greater than Jonah, brings salvation through judgment and mercy to his people, those inside and outside of Israel who call on his name.* What is foreshadowed and illustrated in Jonah becomes reality in Christ.

Acknowledging this up front gives recognition to one of the most fundamental points of theological method. Indeed, since Christ is the focal event of all salvation history and since we read the books of the Bible following that climactic event, we must read Jonah through Christocentric glasses. After surveying in great detail Jesus' own use of the Old Testament, R. T. France summed this up well: "Jesus understood the Old Testament Christologically: in its essential principles, and even in its details, it foreshadows the Messiah whom it promises. The whole theological system of the Old Testament points forward to his work, and in his coming the whole Old Testament economy finds its perfection and fulfillment."³ This conclusion does not deny the fact that the Old Testament is theocentric (God-centered); it merely points the spotlight exactly where the thrice-holy God was delighted to place it: on Christ.

Notice also the phraseology above: "salvation through judgment and mercy." As the great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge has said, it is important not to merge justice into benevolence. Other Reformed theologians have emphasized the importance of not representing mercy to the neglect of justice. This is especially important in our own culture because there is such a strong trend to suppress the concepts of divine judgment and justice to the

point that mercy and compassion become watered down into nothing more than sentimentality. Both themes, judgment and mercy, must be held forth.

With regard to mercy, we will note the mercy of Israel's God as evidenced by his treatment of so many characters in the book of Jonah: the sailors, Jonah himself, the Ninevites, and the animals as well! By saying that this is a central message I do not mean to oversimplify the book. Indeed, it is premature to state what the central message of the book is without plowing through the details of the book first. The reader will have that opportunity in the pages that follow.

In fact, much more will be said in the following chapters to unpack this general theme of the Christocentric (Christ-centered) nature of Jonah. Although I affirm that the Old Testament is Christocentric, that does not mean that every Christocentric reading of an Old Testament text is a legitimate one. There have been times in the history of the church (and the practice has not completely passed away) when Christ-centered readings of Old Testament texts have run amuck. Some preachers and teachers are too quick to make the typological jump from the Old Testament without responsibly informing their audiences how they got there.

Jerome (an early Latin church father, born about 347 A.D.), for example, suggested that "Jonah is like Christ because Christ fled the heavens to come to Tarshish, that is, 'the sea of this world,' and Jonah in flight is a sign of the incarnate Christ, who 'abandons his father's house and country, and becomes flesh.'"⁴ Augustine interpreted the worm that devours the plant in chapter 4 as Christ, since in him the privileges of the Old Covenant are devoured. Despite such unfettered imaginative freedom, it does not follow that we should be bashful about observing the pervasiveness of Christ in the book of Jonah or in other Old Testament books.

Some very modern commentators warn against the Christian colonization of the book of Jonah. Such a warning, it seems to me, is enslaved to the discourse of power structures (a very modern manner of interpretation) when it comes to reading texts rather than being truly in touch with the pulse of Scripture. It is true that we must take care not to foist an unwarranted understanding upon the text of Scripture. Nevertheless, what is needed is a thoughtful approach toward a Christocentric understanding of the book of Jonah.

With this goal in mind, Scripture must be understood as an organic unity. The Hebrew Bible is not a self-contained unit, for there is the expectation of fulfillment throughout. This truth necessitates that one will find the ultimate meaning of the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, in the New Testament. More precisely, the interpretation of any given particular text must be considered in the light of its canonical context within Scripture itself. This is not the first step in understanding a text, but it is a necessary step. Nor is this approach to be practiced in such a way that it does injury to the individual character of books of the Old Testament. With this caveat in mind, the following pages will situate the book of Jonah in its canonical context and examine its Christocentric focus. Discovering Christ in the Old Testament literature takes work and is not easy. Applications must be made slowly and carefully. In short, such an approach must not be overly facile.

A few more introductory comments will aid the reader. The book is written first and foremost for pastors and laypeople, not for the guild of professional biblical scholars. Therefore, although the reader will notice in places that I have presented different possible interpretations, in the main I have taken pains not to obscure the text by evaluating every competing opinion on the passage under consideration. I have written with pastors especially in mind since this is the aim of this series, and since I have received

many requests from our knights in the pulpit for help on this little book. But this book was written also with laypeople in mind. This aim is equally important. Some parts will probably stretch certain readers because of their difficulty. I am a great believer in education, however, and hope that any exertion on the reader's part because I've not been clear enough will reap multiple dividends in the end. For example, chapter 1 has some important historical background to the book of Jonah. I've tried not to make it too cumbersome. If the reader will work through it, the rest of the book will probably make more sense.

I have included—unobtrusively, I trust—some comments about the Hebrew text so that the reader may have a greater appreciation for the beauty and meaning of this little masterpiece, the book of Jonah. Just as I desire to help my Hebrew students see in color as well as black and white when exposing them to the beauties of reading Scripture in the original language, I hope to do something similar for the general reader of this book. In other words, by including some simple comments about the Hebrew, I want to help the reader both smell the rose and see it, so to speak.

All dates for kings and rulers, whether inside or outside Israel, are taken from the excellent two-volume history of the ancient Near East by Amélie Kuhrt. I have also given a number of Scripture references where this is appropriate. Often when I am reading a book with Scripture references, I will pause in my reading and take time to look up those references in order to appreciate the point the author wishes to make. Generally I have found such a practice to be instructive and edifying. The Scripture references peppered throughout this book are given for similar reasons. The reader would do well to keep a Bible in hand.

Taking my cue from the Italian poet Vittorio Imbriani who quipped, “Traduttore, traditore,” which roughly translated means something like “Every translator a traitor,” I have left a few words from the Hebrew text of Jonah in

simple transliteration because they defy translation. That is to say, something is always lost in translation. For example, the plant that quickly grows up over Jonah's head to provide shade for him is called a *qiqayon*. Commentators debate back and forth as to what this plant was or could have possibly been. In fact (if one can imagine it!), emotions ran so high concerning the translation of this word that a riot almost broke out in Augustine's day over translation preferences. I simply signal the transliteration to the reader when the word first appears, explain why I am choosing to leave it in transliteration, and then proceed to use the Hebrew word in the remainder of the book. The reader having been warned beforehand will have no difficulty following along. I have chosen this practice for only a few words that the reader will encounter in the book of Jonah.

CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION

Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending.
(Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*)

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai . . .
(Jonah 1:1)

DATE AND COMPOSITION

Modern men and women often possess an arrogant attitude toward the people who have gone before them. This is especially the case with respect to antiquity. C. S. Lewis called this the chronological fallacy: a mode of thinking that is dismissive of ideas simply because they are not new. Ancient men and women, it is alleged, had no capacity for abstraction and metaphor and must have been simpletons accepting everything in a literalistic manner. Doubtless, it is assumed by many as well that the ancients had no facility for beauty, aesthetics, or superior taste. Such notions betray an arrogance that is pitiable in many modern minds.

We live in an age that often does not appreciate the past and the lessons to be learned there. That requires sitting still for long periods of reading, not something in which our culture is very proficient. Our hectic velocity of life drives us to search the Internet for information while gaining only a superficial knowledge about many things, but is this natural? Studying the past, let alone the art of writing about past events, requires slow and careful reading and is essential to a proper understanding of the Bible.

This very common modern neglect impoverishes our cultural lives, and when it spills over into our reading of the Bible, it will impoverish our appreciation of the riches of Scripture as well. Understanding the Bible correctly entails that we exert a little effort to understand the past, even a very ancient past.

For its mere forty-eight verses, the book of Jonah has attracted a stunning amount of attention from the scholarly community. Yet, despite all the discussion, very little consensus exists on introductory matters such as when Jonah was written. Dating a biblical book, if one is confidently able to do so, is important because dating could alter the interpretation of the book's contents.

From the perspective of the book of Jonah as it comes to us, the events related are portrayed as occurring in the eighth century B.C. In other words, this is the historical context in which the author wished to portray the events he describes. The biblical narrative here is often very selective, artistically arranged, and didactic. In other words, it is not merely a journalistic reporting of events; on the contrary, the narrative is describing and interpreting the events that are being reported. It is typical in this day to pit historical narration over and against artistic literary arrangement. Consider, for example, the following questions asked by one recent commentator on Jonah: "Is it [i.e., Jonah] a prophetic story like those of Elijah, clearly intending to narrate actual facts? Or is it a fictional tale like that of Job,

intended to express theological verities in artistic language?”¹ Many commentators recognize that Jonah has similarities with the records of Elijah and Elisha. Even so, this kind of statement is problematic at a number of levels that space limitations do not allow me to discuss at the present time. However, at least one thing this statement seems to be doing (among others) is placing the issues of historical narration and artistic representation on the horns of an unnecessary dilemma. This is wrong, as we will see later.

We know the author wished to portray the events as occurring in the eighth century B.C. because of the very first verse, which alludes to “Jonah ben Amittai” (Jonah the son of Amittai). According to 2 Kings 14:25, the prophetic words of Jonah son of Amittai were fulfilled during the reign of King Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.). Of course this does not prove that the prophet and the king were immediate contemporaries. Nor does it prove that Jonah himself wrote the book of Jonah (*contra* E. J. Young). Nowhere does the book declare that Jonah wrote it. What can we say confidently, then, about the book’s composition?

While the book has been dated as early as the eighth century, it definitely cannot be dated any later than the third century B.C. because it is mentioned in an apocryphal work entitled Ben Sira, usually dated to approximately 180 B.C. Attempts at reaching a firm conclusion about both the date and the composition of this little prophetic book are made more difficult by many other complex issues: our present knowledge of ancient languages, the genre to which the book belongs, historical awareness of the ancient world, and pinpointing the book’s specific audience. If language alone were the sole criterion, then the book was probably composed during a late period, since the stage of Hebrew represented is most likely very late according to our current understanding of the development of Hebrew. However, dating books on linguistic criteria alone is a risky

endeavor, and the results of such studies are often debatable for a number of other reasons. In short, beyond the portrayal by the author (i.e., the events described occur during the eighth century B.C.), the book of Jonah does not assign a specific date or author to its composition.

So then, dating the composition of the book should not be an orthodox litmus test for a preacher or teacher of this masterful short story. The didactic message of this sacred history—a history which is also selective, artistic, and covenantal—communicates effectively and accurately despite the differences of opinion with respect to dating, authorship, and composition. Even so, a bird’s-eye perspective of Israel’s situation in the unfolding developments of God’s plan for his people at the time represented in the biblical story may provide a very important interpretative grid through which a reader may understand the book of Jonah.

Although the author situates the book against a broad historical backdrop, some scholars have attempted to suggest a more precise date for the composition of the book of Jonah based on the probable presence of questions of theodicy.² Theodicy is literally the “justification of God.” Often the term arises in theological and philosophical discussions when the problem of evil and suffering is under consideration. Specifically, some scholars suggest possible dates for Jonah as sometime following the fall of the capital of the Northern Kingdom (i.e., 722 B.C.) when questions of theodicy probably surfaced. The remaining Israelites may have asked themselves if all this suffering could really be part of God’s sovereign plan. Could Israel’s own covenant God allow Assyria (Israel’s enemy) to do this to God’s chosen people?

While this is a possible scenario, the fact of the matter is that God’s people have dealt with, and will have to wrestle with, questions of theodicy in every age. Suffering is part and parcel of the existence of God’s pilgrim people in

this life. Furthermore, a precise date of composition is not crucial for our understanding of the book, nor does predicating an “early” date give further weight to the historical veracity of the material reported in the book. In the final analysis, the date of composition, although possibly enhancing our understanding of the book, does not matter a great deal to the ultimate theological message or the issue of the historicity of the book of Jonah. If that were the case, then “much of that which we read in our history books would rest on shaky ground indeed.”³

Although these and other issues could be discussed in great detail, it is quite outside the aims of this series to do so (see the foreword by Tremper Longman and Alan Groves). Instead, broader features of the setting as portrayed by the author of the book of Jonah can and should be discussed.

First, the way in which Jonah is introduced in the Hebrew text indicates that the prophet was a figure who was already known to the audience or at least had been mentioned previously. In other words, Jonah is an established figure given the manner in which he is introduced in Hebrew idiom. This is an insuperable fact with which commentators wrestle in various ways.

Second, an appreciation of what Assyria (and hence Nineveh, the great city of the Assyrians) meant to Israel may help the reader understand the book of Jonah better. If we assume that the perspective of the book is the eighth century B.C., then Assyria probably had been, or currently was, and more than likely soon would be a threat against Israel. Since the book is portrayed from the perspective of the time when Jonah the son of Amittai mentioned in 2 Kings was probably active (in the reign of Jeroboam II, i.e., 786–746 B.C.), it is important to note that Assyria had already exacted tribute from another earlier Israelite king named Jehu (842–815 B.C.). In fact, Jeroboam II was the fourth king in Jehu’s dynasty.

Jehu, a king of Israel, eradicated (at least outwardly) Baal worship from Israel (see especially 2 Kings 9 and 10). Because of this work, God said he would reward Jehu's dynasty for four generations (i.e., down to Jeroboam II; 2 Kings 10:30). King Jehu is represented on the famous Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) from Kalhu. This Assyrian obelisk is well preserved and may be seen at the British Museum in London (copies may be seen in some American universities as well). The obelisk serves as a symbol of Assyrian expansionistic policies shortly before the time in which Jonah prophesied. At one place on the obelisk the subjugation of Jehu is depicted. The obelisk reads in the Akkadian language, "I [Shalmaneser] received the tribute of the inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon, and of Jehu, son of Omri."⁴ The crucial point is this: Assyria as a threatening neighboring superpower during the eighth century B.C. was probably still a recent and ominous memory in the collective conscience of the Israelites.

Furthermore, even though Assyria's former power and glory had receded temporarily at the time of Jeroboam II's reign, the time at which some of Jonah's prophecies were fulfilled, the Assyrian superpower was soon to return to and even exceed its former position of power and expansion. The prophecies of Hosea and Amos, for example, predicted imminent disaster at the hands of the Assyrians. In fact, in 743 B.C. and the following years, when Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 B.C.) and his sons Shalmaneser V (726–722) and Sargon II (721–705) reigned, there would be a reassertion of Assyrian power against neighbors to the west (e.g., Israel). As is well known, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and its capital Samaria were destined to fall to the mighty Assyrians in 722 B.C. It is well nigh impossible, therefore, to imagine that any Israelite during or after this time—including a period when Assyria receded from expansionistic policies to shore up her strongholds—would

have had a neutral emotional reaction when the name of Assyria was mentioned.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF ISRAEL AND COVENANT INFIDELITY

Although a specific date of composition cannot be assigned to the book of Jonah, we can determine a broader historical view from the perspective of the book as we have received it. The little book of Jonah forces the reader right at the beginning to ask the question, “Why is Jonah, a prophet of God, called to go to a Gentile nation, when the mission of most of the prophets of Israel and Judah (though not exclusively) is to prophesy to or against God’s chosen people, that is, Israel and Judah?” In other words, “Why is Jonah commissioned to go to a foreign nation rather than to his own people?” Furthermore, “What is the relationship between Israel and the nations at this time in history?”

Many have tried to respond to these questions by asserting a kind of universalism (defined as communicating God’s compassion for the nations outside of Israel) that pervades the book of Jonah. This answer, however, as pointed out many years ago by Edmund Clowney, is only superficially satisfying.⁵

We need to stand back and distinguish the forest from the trees before we begin looking at the details of the book. We need to ask what the big picture was with respect to God’s interactions with the people of Israel at that time in history. By doing so, we are not in danger of reading a message into Jonah that is not there; on the contrary, we are recognizing that discerning a broad context can help us understand the particulars and details of the book. Also, we are sensitizing ourselves to the particular period of redemptive history in which the contents of this book are

portrayed. This is one of the first and necessary important steps in the process of interpretation.

Let the reader understand that this is a different issue than determining exactly who the intended audience is. Since the exact date of composition is unknown, the answer to that question is that the intended audience is simply God's people in each successive generation. The book of Jonah was intended for God's people in ancient Israel, and it was intended for God's people after Christ came. Even so, we are about to embark on another important preliminary task: we are going to determine in broad strokes what God's relationships with his people and with the Gentiles were during the period in which the author has placed the events described.

God's relationship with his chosen people is the lens through which one may understand the history of Israel correctly. To state it simply, the essence of God's relationship with his people can be summed up in a word: covenant. A covenant may be broadly defined as a commitment with divine sanctions.⁶ Biblical covenants often have solemn oaths attached to them. God promises to be the God of Israel, and the Israelites promise to be exclusively his people.

Jonah's commission in chapter 1 must be understood against the backdrop of the Mosaic covenant. However, the Mosaic covenant must in turn be understood against the backdrop of the patriarchs, particularly the covenant with Abraham. In what is often alluded to by theologians as the covenant of grace, God promised that all the peoples on the earth would be blessed through Abraham's seed (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18). Here is eschatology already present in God's dealings with his people. That is, it is forward-looking. Clowney states this felicitously:

Even in the Abrahamic period of revelation there comes, along with the development of particularism

of grace, a revelation that in Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. The setting up of the seed of Abraham is a particularistic means to a universal end of blessing. Even in this period it is to be noted that this blessing has an eschatological position. It is connected with the seed (Gen. 17:7), which, as Paul reminds us, is not the many, but the one, that coming One whose day Abraham saw and was glad (Gal. 3:16).⁷

Some recent commentators on the book of Jonah have stated that "explicit references to the covenant theme are noticeably absent from Jonah."⁸ If we were to accent the term "explicit," then that statement could be considered true enough. Nevertheless, that there are no explicit references to covenant does not mean that the concept of covenant is absent from the book. The Israelites were a covenantal people. Let me explain.

Covenant is an essential background belief for the book of Jonah. God's covenantal dealings with the Israelites are taken for granted. When doing biblical studies, one needs to discriminate between the term and the idea behind it. Even without an explicit reference we can still assume a historical covenant. This touches on an axiom (i.e., a principle that doesn't need to be proven) of both theology and linguistics: a term or word does not have to be present in order for the concept to be present. As a New Testament colleague of mine is fond of saying, "If it quacks like a duck, then it is a duck." In short, the book of Jonah assumes God's dealings with Israel through covenant; this concept was so pervasive to the Israelites that it didn't need to be explicitly mentioned.

Thus the backdrop of God's covenant dealings with Israel is assumed in the book of Jonah. The idea lay in back of the words of the book of Jonah even though the exact word for "covenant" (*berit*) is not present in the book; indeed, it may

be correctly asserted, as Peter Craigie did in fact assert, that Jonah “had a strongly-based covenant theology.”⁹

This is a crucial step in the process of interpreting biblical books correctly: knowledge of both the historical background and the covenantal context will often enhance our understanding of a particular text. A couple of historical examples will serve as an illustration. An awareness of the availability of iron in Israel or lack thereof might explain the great anxiety and distress experienced by an Israelite losing a borrowed axe (2 Kings 6:1–7). Or, for example, the interpretation of the language and book of Esther is illuminated by familiarity with the history of ancient Persia.

It is true that the book of Jonah doesn’t begin with the same kind of specific and detailed historical references that many of the other prophetic books do (e.g., Jer. 1:1–3; Ezek. 1:2; Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1). Caution is warranted when searching for historical connections, especially if one has a theological axe to grind. However, I would suggest that an acquaintance with the general historical period in which the story is couched is crucial to a correct understanding and interpretation of the story.

The author has taken pains to connect our Jonah with the Jonah alluded to in 2 Kings 14 by the way he opens his story in the Hebrew language. Additionally, the way in which the Septuagint—an ancient Greek translation (third century B.C.) of the Hebrew text—rendered 1:9 is further evidence that those in the ancient world took pains to connect the Jonah at the beginning of our little book with the prophet Jonah alluded to in 2 Kings. Similarly, early rabbinic interpretation unanimously connects the prophet of the book of Jonah to the prophet of 2 Kings 14.

Although one should recognize that this connection between Jonah 1 and 2 Kings 14 is one of the most difficult issues in interpreting the book, the connection should not be quickly dismissed. As already stated above, the narrator has given us the story of Jonah to be read in proximity

with the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.). We do not know how long our protagonist lived, yet his life, or at least his influence, seems to have overlapped with Jeroboam II's reign. Therefore, it behooves us as readers to ask how God was interacting with the world during this period and, more specifically, how God was dealing with his covenant people during this historical period and why.

Jonah's mission occurred during the Israelite theocracy under the Mosaic period. Theocracy is the grid through which this period is to be understood. God had crafted this particular nation to be the apple of his eye. He had entered into a special covenantal relationship with them, setting the people and their land apart from all others to demonstrate that he would be their God and they would be his people.

This was the essence of covenant. Israel alone was Yahweh's treasured possession (*segullah*), a term pregnant in meaning especially now that we know its Akkadian cognates.¹⁰ It seems that this term originally had to do with physical and private savings, but was extended to include a spiritual sense of being attached "to objects diligently and patiently acquired. Thus *segullah* comes to mean a dear personal possession, a 'treasure' only in the sense of that which is treasured or cherished."¹¹ This fits well with the biblical contexts (see also Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17).

In Israel, at this particular time, there would be a theocracy that would find its reason for existence in the fact that God had chosen to dwell in the midst of this particular people among all the nations of the earth. God's dominion would be visible and external in a special manner. In other words, the reign of God could be seen in the geopolitical dimension in Israel and Judah. Although God has always ruled over his whole creation throughout all times by virtue of his providence and general care, a particular locale would especially be God's holy realm in this historical

period. Here, among all the places in the earth, divinely sanctioned theocracy existed. As one Israeli biblical historian sums it up:

The Pentateuch and historical books (Former Prophets), for example, consistently represent the world as divided into two realms, Israel and the nations, with Israel alone “the portion of YHWH.” Deuteronomy goes so far as to assert that YHWH himself has “allotted” the worship of the host of heaven to the heathen (Deut. 4:19). . . . Thus while YHWH governs and manifests his activity everywhere—in Sodom, Shinar, Egypt, Nineveh and Tarshish—the area of his sanctity is restricted to the boundaries of Israel. The rest of the lands are the domain of the idols, the host of heaven, or the *shedim*—“no-gods” (Deut. 32:17). The early cult is entirely restricted to the sanctified territory of Israel (except for the desert cult, performed in a kind of portable sacred area). Outside it there is no sacrifice and no festival, but only impure ground where idols are worshiped.¹²

God’s kingdom rule in the Israelite theocracy was not merely the invisible rule in people’s hearts at this point in time; in this period of redemptive history, his reign was visible and earthly in the land of Israel. There, God’s name would dwell.

According to Exodus 19:3–6, God revealed to Moses his divine blueprint for the theocracy:

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’

wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession [*seg-ullah*]. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

This is the essence of God’s relationship to this people: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” Israel is God’s servant. Privilege also entails responsibility. This chosen people of God, the theocracy of Israel, was to set apart God’s name before the surrounding nations. Theocracy entailed a mission, a mission that implied certain distinctiveness.

It is against this backdrop that the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles is brought to the foreground. Israel must distinguish herself in many ways from the surrounding nations. She must distinguish herself religiously from the surrounding nations. Although other nations may serve and worship many other gods, Israel is to serve only one (Deut. 6:4–19). Accordingly, there must be unequivocal commitment to the Lord’s command: worship God alone at the place he chooses (Deut. 12). This command became crucial for how the kingdom of Israel and Judah and her kings would fare in the future.

During this period God will bless his chosen people if they do not go whoring after other gods. The nations will note that Israel is different and fear her (Deut. 28:8–10). Israel is to unswervingly obey the law. Other nations may practice all kinds of perverse ethical practices, but Israel must be marked off by purity of ethical behavior according to God’s holy standard. Otherwise the land will vomit them out (Lev. 18:24–30).

Furthermore, within this theocratic relationship between God and his people, Israel had a temporary set of cultic regulations (i.e., ceremonial distinctiveness) and judi-

cial practices (see the Westminster Confession of Faith 19.3–4). Israel was constituted a nation with a special purpose conditioned by the period in which she found herself; therefore, she had a distinctive, albeit temporal, set of ceremonial and judicial practices that were followed.

God had promised Abraham a land as well (Gen. 15:18–21). We begin to see partial fulfillment of that promise during this time. Israel's charter did not entail world domination; her charter did encompass, during that particular historical period, the subjection of the land of Canaan and the defeat of the Canaanite peoples who practiced idolatry. At that period in world history, then, a particular parcel of land in the world was divinely sanctioned as God's own possession for the dwelling of his name. However, when the theocracy passed away (we are using "theocracy" in this book to mean more than just the time of the monarchy; rather, in a general sense, the concept of theocracy may apply to the period before the monarchy, the monarchy itself, and even the postexilic period as well), so did the judicial and penal sanctions associated with it. When the theocracy passed away, so did the ceremonial regulations. Additionally, the divinely sanctioned geopolitical domination, that is, conquering land for Israel on behalf of God and subduing the Canaanites, also passed away. Shadows and types pass away once the substance has come. Fulfillment brings cessation. Christ brought fulfillment. Christ is the fulfillment.

As Clowney notes, the establishment of a distinct kingdom with an earthly king is a further development within the theocratic period. In the military battles of David, which culminated in the building of the temple by Solomon his son, the climax of the theocratic program becomes clear. David, a mighty warrior, has subdued the enemies of the land. He builds up the kingdom and places his capital in Jerusalem. It is left to Solomon, a man of peace, to erect the temple where God's name would preeminently dwell. Under

Solomon the temple is constructed as the dwelling place of God. God makes his abode in the midst of his people.

The temple demonstrates the grandeur and splendor of the kingdom. The surrounding nations will sit up and take notice of something markedly different in this little kingdom, as evidenced in Solomon's famous prayer dedicating the temple:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name. (1 Kings 8:41–43)

Solomon goes on to conclude his sublime prayer with a similar thought:

And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time. (1 Kings 8:59–61)

If Solomon signifies the apex of the kingdom (although he himself was by no means the perfect king; see 1 Kings 11:7–13), beginning with Solomon and those kings fol-

lowing in his path a slippery slope spirals downward with only a few exceptions. From the perspective of the unknown author of the book of Kings, the kingdom is rent in two because of the syncretism and idolatry of the people. Following the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 2:12–11:43), the Northern tribes seceded and apostatized (1 Kings 12–14). King Jeroboam erected golden calves—one in Bethel and one in Dan—with the effect of drawing the people’s affections away from Jerusalem and the temple (1 Kings 12:25–33). Jeroboam committed other atrocities that are portrayed negatively as violations of God’s will. Nevertheless, God did not turn his back upon the people despite their unfaithfulness to the covenant.

Soon thereafter, Baal worship becomes a threat in the North at least temporarily. During the reign of Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, Baal worship is a dangerous attraction to Israel. Israel turns time and again from her God. If the people will not showcase God’s glory by maintaining ritual, ceremonial, ethical, and geographical distinctiveness before the nations, then God like a faithful father will discipline her by means of other nations. If the Israelites play the part of an unfaithful spouse, then God, Israel’s only true husband, will prosecute his covenantal lawsuit against the Israelites. And his servants the prophets do indeed prosecute the lawsuit (see, for example, Amos and Hosea).

It is important to our understanding of Jonah to recognize that during this time period, the blessings of two great Old Testament prophets had already come to the Gentiles. Elijah’s prophetic work as described in 1 Kings 17 had blessed a Gentile widow in Zarephath, a place within the borders of Phoenicia, not Israel. Through this narrative the point is driven home: God’s sovereignty reigns outside the borders of Israel. Already present in the Old Testament, mission finds its justification for going outside of the borders of Israel.

In Elisha's ministry also (Elijah's successor), the grace of God was extended beyond the borders of Israel: Naaman, a Syrian general (and Israel's enemy), received the blessings of God by being healed of his leprosy (2 Kings 5). The prophetic word was received with a welcome outside the borders of Israel, an allusion used so poignantly by our Lord that all his audience was filled with fury (Luke 4:27-29). There are, then, two sides to this coin. At the same time that blessings come to the Gentiles, judgment comes upon Israel.

The parallels between these prophets and Jonah should be noted. Toward the end of Elijah's ministry (1 Kings 19), he was directed to do three things: anoint Hazael as king over Aram, anoint Jehu as king over Israel, and anoint Elisha as prophet to succeed him. The latter Elijah did (in a certain sense), but the former two things he did not do. Did this thwart God's plan? No.

It was Elisha, Elijah's successor, who brought the news to Hazael that he would become king in Aram and, furthermore, that as the new king, Hazael would wreak havoc on Israel:

Elisha went to Damascus, and Ben-Hadad king of Aram was ill. When the king was told, "The man of God has come all the way up here," he said to Hazael, "Take a gift with you and go to meet the man of God. Consult the LORD through him; ask him, 'Will I recover from this illness?'"

Hazael went to meet Elisha, taking with him as a gift forty camel-loads of all the finest wares of Damascus. He went in and stood before him, and said, "Your son Ben-Hadad king of Aram has sent me to ask, 'Will I recover from this illness?'"

Elisha answered, "Go and say to him, 'You will certainly recover'; but the LORD has revealed to me that he will in fact die." He stared at him with a fixed

gaze until Hazael felt ashamed. Then the man of God [i.e., Elisha!] began to weep.

“Why is my lord weeping?” asked Hazael.

“Because I know the harm you will do to the Israelites,” he answered. “You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women.”

Hazael said, “How could your servant, a mere dog, accomplish such a feat?”

“The LORD has shown me that you will become king of Aram,” answered Elisha. (2 Kings 8:7–13)

This word of the Lord was fulfilled. In 2 Kings 13:22 we read, “Hazael king of Aram oppressed Israel throughout the reign of Jehoahaz.” No wonder that Elisha’s message brought such grief to the prophet. It was a bitter duty for him to discharge. Elisha’s own people were to suffer judgment at the hands of the Gentiles. Elisha himself was the harbinger of bad news for his own people.

Now just as Elisha loathed going to Hazael, a future Gentile king who would bring judgment upon Israel, it is possible that Jonah also loathed going to Nineveh for similar reasons. For, according to the prophets, Assyria would be the instrument in God’s hand against the Israelites. Blessings come to the Gentiles (Nineveh in Jonah’s case), but God brings judgment upon Israel through the Gentiles. Furthermore, Jonah knows God’s character (Jonah 4:2). So the charge to go to Nineveh was possibly repugnant to Jonah.¹³

Perhaps the Nobel Prize-winning author, Elie Wiesel, had it right when he gave our poor antihero the benefit of the doubt and wrote that Jonah “does not wish Nineveh to die, yet he does not wish Nineveh to live at the expense of Israel.”¹⁴ This was by no means the only possible rea-

son why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. Many commentators have noted other reasons as well.

Although there are judgment and chastisement, the book of Jonah is heavy with mercy. Jonah should have observed that there was mercy for him and that there would be mercy for the people of Israel as well. God showed great mercy while he pursued Jonah sleeping on the ship. Indeed, God rescued him. The reader can recognize in hindsight that another place we can see this mercy is in the exile and eventual restoration of Israel to its land. Moreover, the prophets declared that there would be mercy for those outside of Israel. We begin to see mercy in even fuller measure when we turn to the New Testament.

As in the rest of Scripture, judgment and mercy are both observed in the book of Jonah. Much more will be said about this in the pages that follow. Chastisement comes to Israel by foreign nations because she repeatedly broke covenant with her Lord. Mercy, however, is extended to the Gentiles as a corollary response. Indeed, mercy is primary, but never at the expense of justice, for God must be true.

Indeed, Nineveh is blessed. The mercies of God are extended to the Gentiles as well as the Hebrews. The promise previously announced to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), namely, that all the nations will be blessed, is taking further shape in preparation for the coming of the greatest prophet: Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is heavy with eschatology. With respect to the future, Nineveh will become the symbol of great rebuke against Israel (Matt. 12:41). Nineveh will also become a great symbol of mercy to the Gentiles.

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

Jonah's message has been hammered out upon the anvil of many different interpretations through the ages.

Sometimes anti-Semitism got the better of people. Sometimes their imaginations did. The traditions of the rabbis actually connected Jonah with the unidentified son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17). As alluded to earlier, the unbridled imaginations of the early church fathers concocted far-fetched meanings. Augustine saw Jonah as pointing forward to Christ, but also as a sign of the still immature Jewish nation not yet emerged into the full bloom of the Christian church.

Luther in preparation for his lectures on the book of Jonah found it difficult to escape a negative presentation of old Israel. Calvin saw the book essentially as an object lesson from the schoolhouse of discipline: Jonah provides an example of a necessary attitude adjustment for the wayward, errant, or backsliding saint. The Enlightenment brought in the theme of universalism, that is, God's love and mercy extending beyond the borders of national Israel. In the nineteenth century, many interpreters tried to turn the little book into a textbook of biology by myopically focusing on the nature, size, and plausibility of the great fish that swallowed the prophet. Finally, some postmodern interpreters foreground the threat of a "Christian colonization" of the Old Testament and warn against the New Testament exercising hegemony over the Old Testament.

What message or messages one derives from the little prophecy of Jonah is largely relative to the interpretive principles one applies to the text. The message one receives from the book of Jonah is also directly related to the questions one asks.

The book of Jonah, even on a superficial reading, is obviously taking pains to demonstrate God's mercy to those outside of Israel, as discussed above. But why? This message will find its culminating fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, whereas the advent of the Lord of history as recorded in the four Gospels discloses the inauguration of the kingdom of God in new full-

ness, a kingdom which will include both Jews and Gentiles to the ends of the earth, the book of Jonah presages that earth-shaking event many centuries in advance of its actual occurrence.

But mercy is communicated not only to those outside of Israel. Indeed, many scholars have recognized the theme of mercy in the immediate context of 2 Kings 14:25. The reader should note the goodness of God that was extended toward Israel:

He [i.e., Jeroboam II] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.

The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. (2 Kings 14:25–27)

But notice the immediate context of these verses! The author says, “He [i.e., Jeroboam II] did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit” (2 Kings 14:24). In sum, God has been merciful to Israel as well as to Nineveh.

There are other messages in the book of Jonah. Usually the commentaries give a range of views pigeonholing various authors accordingly. Indeed, this little book of Jonah is not intended to communicate merely a message, but messages. The book of Jonah is a highly complex and artistic short story as recent studies have demonstrated.

Therefore, in order to take in the kaleidoscope of lessons found in the book, the reader must approach the text

with a teachable attitude. A good student will be a reader who is persuadable and listens quietly and calmly, proceeding slowly, meditatively. This is not easy for us moderns. It is like climbing a mountain. It takes painstaking effort and self-discipline, but the rewards at the end are worth the effort. If one expects to learn from Jonah, then one must properly prepare to read it, and preparation entails openness and humility.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. When was Jonah written?
2. What can be said about the authorship of Jonah?
3. What is a covenant, and why is it important for interpreting the book of Jonah even though explicit references to the word are absent?
4. Summarize the history of the ministry of the following prophets: Elijah, Elisha, and Jonah. How are their ministries similar and how different? Why is this important for understanding the book of Jonah?