

## A NOTE ON JONAH 2.8: IDOLATRY AND INHUMANITY IN ISRAEL

JOHAN FERREIRA  
jferreira@crossway.edu.au

The author is lecturer in Bible and Mission at Crossway College in Brisbane, Australia.

The story of Jonah does not cease to fascinate readers and scholars today. The four short chapters can be read from many angles, offering multitudinous insights and possibilities for understanding. The book is unique among the prophets. The story is not about the message of the prophet, but rather about the attitudes and behaviour of the prophet himself. The book's theology is subtle, yet profound and revolutionary.<sup>1</sup> The author, through the main character Jonah—as the stereotypical Israelite—provides a critique of Israel's self-understanding. Jonah does not understand Yahweh's great concern to show mercy to all people. Rather, Jonah is more concerned with his own ideological and nationalistic agendas.

The debate over the literary genre and compositional history of the book is far from settled.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, regardless of how one conceives its compositional history, the four chapters of Jonah present a coherent and symmetric story. There are neither major textual problems nor different versions of the story in the documented traditions.<sup>3</sup> The apparent inconsistencies between Jonah's prayer in chapter two and the rest of the story were evidently not a problem for the final editor(s) of the story.<sup>4</sup>

---

1 See Jenson, "Recent study has shown how difficult it is to set out the message of Jonah in a way that does justice to all the parts of the book and to its unique literary character. In fact, Jonah raises profound theological questions. It was written for adults by someone who was both a superb story teller and a provocative theologian. He did his work so well that the book continues to delight and challenge the subtle scholar as much as the simple soul" (1999, 3).

2 For a review of the issues, see Bolin 1997, 33-63; and Lessing 2007, 13-18.

3 For an extensive study on the textual traditions of Jonah, see Trible 1963.

4 The place of chapter two in the context of the story of Jonah has been a major issue in scholarly debate. The text raises several questions for the reader. Why do we have poetry within narrative? Also the perspective of the poet does not accord well with the narrative context. These issues are not the focus of this short paper. However, there is no reason why the prayer cannot be regarded as an integral part of the author's overall plot. The psalm describes true repentance on the part of Jonah and teaches that there is grace even for the recalcitrant prophet. The psalm does not imply that Jonah became perfect or that he does not have inconsistencies and contradictions. Landes (1967) was one of the first scholars to make a substantial case for a contextual reading of the psalm. In his consideration of the canonical shape of Jonah, Childs spent most of his discussion on the effect of chapter two on the book as a whole. The chapter refocuses the narrative on the scope of Yahweh's mercy. "Jonah is thankful for his own deliverance, but resentful of Nineveh's inclusion within the mercy which had always been restricted to Israel" (1979, 424). Sasson concluded that most of the apparent disparities between the psalm and the adjacent story "are organic to the distinctive dictions obtaining in poetry and prose" (1990, 202). Perry, while not rejecting the idea that the psalm was a later insertion, argues

The popularity of the book and the discussion it has generated demonstrate that the narrative is eminently successful as a story within the context of the canon.

With these introductory remarks, we may proceed with the task at hand. This study provides a fresh translation and interpretation of Jonah 2.8 (MT 2.9). A review of English versions demonstrates an incredible range of different translations. It is hard to find two versions that agree. We may note the following examples:<sup>5</sup>

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. (KJV)

Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. (NRSV)

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. (NIV)

Those who worship vain idols forsake their source of mercy. (NAB)

Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness. (NASB)

Some abandon their faithful love by worshipping false gods. (NJB)

Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. (ESV)

Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies. (NLT)

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit God's love for them. (TNIV)

The different renditions show that the text has been problematic for translators. The present study proposes that the best solution to the problem is to keep the text as it stands and then to translate and interpret accordingly.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew grammar, for the most part, is simple and does not present any substantial difficulty. The greatest issue for scholars, as reflected in the range of translations, relates to the meaning of the verse within its context. This study will carefully consider the grammar of the text. But, more important, it will emphasize the canonical context as well as the narrative context in ascertaining the meaning of the text. The canonical context, apart from locating the prophet in the eighth century, encourages the reader to read Jonah in light of the preceding prophecies in the Book of the Twelve.<sup>7</sup> This study will mostly focus on Hosea and Amos. Additionally, to be most convincing, the suggested interpretation must ultimately accord with the overall message of Jonah (the textual context).

The text in question occurs within the context of the psalm in ch. 2. At a very basic level we may divide the psalm into eight strophes (verses), each consisting of a bicolon, except for strophe 7 (v. 8) which consists of a monocolon. In general,

---

for a contextual interpretation (2006, 13-17). Lessing (2007, 174-83) argues that the psalm is "an essential element in the plot of the narrative."

5 A review of the commentaries will add many more translations to the list.

6 A few commentators have emended the text. However, there is no justification from the textual tradition to warrant such modifications. Therefore, emending the text should not be seriously considered, especially when there is a plausible interpretation of the text. See Craig 1993, 16.

7 Many scholars have argued credibly that the books of the Minor Prophets did not have an independent compositional history, but were edited concurrently. With respect to Jonah, Dyck states, "One cannot take lightly the fact that both the subject matter of the story and the context it is given in the collection point to the eighth century. It was the obvious intention of both the author and shapers of the collection that the reader interprets the book with that context in mind" (1990, 73). On the canonical shaping of the Twelve, see Scheider 1979; House 1990; Nogalski and Sweeney 2000; and Biddle 2007.

the cola follow the *qinah* metrical stress pattern (3+2 rhythm) commonly found in lament.<sup>8</sup>

<p><b>Stanza I</b> Strophe 1: bicolon</p>	<p>אֶל־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי<sup>3</sup>      קָרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי שָׁמַעַתָּ קוֹלִי      מִבֶּטֶן שְׂאוֹל שׁוֹעֲתִי</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> I called from my distress to the LORD, and he answered me. From the belly of Sheol I cried out, and you heard my voice.</p>
<p><b>Stanza II</b> Strophe 2: bicolon</p>	<p>וַתִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִצּוֹלָה בְּלִבֵּב יָמִים וְנָהָר יִסְבְּבֵנִי<sup>4</sup> כָּל־מַשְׁבְּרֵי־יָד וְגִלְיָדָה      עָלַי עָבְרוּ</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> You threw me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me. All your billows and waves passed over me.</p>
<p>Strophe 3: bicolon</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר אֶמְרָתִי נִגְרַשְׁתִּי מִנְּגַד עֵינָי<sup>5</sup> אֲדָ אוֹסִיף לְהִבִּיט      אֶל־הַיְכָל קִדְשֶׁךָ</p>	<p><sup>4</sup> But I said, “Even though I have been driven from your eyes, yet I will look again towards your holy temple.”</p>
<p>Strophe 4: bicolon</p>	<p>יַמֵּינַי וְיָמֵינִי עִבְּרוּ מִיָּם עַד־נַפְשִׁי תְהוֹם יִסְבְּבֵנִי<sup>6</sup> סוּף חִבּוּשׁ לְרֹאשִׁי      לְקַצְבֵי הָרִים<sup>7</sup></p>	<p><sup>5</sup> Waters encompassed me up to my soul, the deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head, to the roots of the mountains.</p>
<p>Strophe 5: bicolon</p>	<p>יָרַדְתִּי הָאָרֶץ בְּרֹחֶיהָ בַּעֲדֵי לְעוֹלָם וַתַּעַל מִשְׁחַת חַיִּי      יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי</p>	<p><sup>6</sup> I went down into the earth, its bars <i>tried</i> to enclose me forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.</p>
<p>Strophe 6: bicolon</p>	<p>בְּהִתְעַטֵּף עָלַי נַפְשִׁי      אֶת־יְהוָה זָכַרְתִּי<sup>8</sup> וַתְּבוֹא אֵלַיִךְ תְּפִלָּתִי      אֶל־הַיְכָל קִדְשֶׁךָ</p>	<p><sup>7</sup> When my life was withering away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.</p>
<p>Strophe 7: monocolon</p>	<p>מִשְׁמֵרִים הַבְּלִי־שׁוּא חֲסֵדָם יַעֲזֹבוּ<sup>9</sup></p>	<p><sup>8</sup> Those who keep vain idols are abandoning their kindness.</p>
<p><b>Stanza III</b> Strophe 8: bicolon</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר בְּקוֹל תּוֹדָה      אֲזַבְחָה־לְךָ<sup>10</sup> אֲשֶׁר נִדְרָתִי אֲשַׁלְּמָה      יְשׁוּעָתָה לִיהוָה</p>	<p><sup>9</sup> Indeed, with the voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will fulfill. Salvation belongs to the LORD.</p>

<sup>8</sup> The breaking down of the regular metrical pattern in strophe 2 (v. 3) enhances the description of the chaotic predicament of the psalmist. The regular metrical pattern is restored in strophe 3, when the psalmist returns to Yahweh. Literary structure often augments the meaning conveyed by the text. On *qinah* metre, see Watson 1986, 98, 106-7, 176, 363; and Sasson 1990, 209.

The psalm is a combination of lament and thanksgiving. The prophet both describes his ordeal and gives thanks for deliverance.<sup>9</sup> In terms of its thematic units we may divide the psalm into three stanzas. The first stanza (v. 2) is a summary statement. The second stanza (vv. 3-8) describes the psalmist's experience of disaster and deliverance. Stanza 3 (v. 9) contains the psalmist's vow (conclusion).<sup>10</sup>

From this brief and simple analysis of the psalm's structure it is evident that strophe 7 (v. 8[9]) stands apart or outside the overarching frame (or storyline) of the psalm. Both in terms of form and meaning the monocolon is not directly related to the immediate literary context. Instead of a bicolon, we have a monocolon, and the references to idolatry and kindness do not flow all that logically from the preceding strophes. It is possible, therefore, that this line belongs to a later layer of redaction within the composition history of the book of Jonah. We will return to this point in our final observations. The Hebrew text reads as follows:

מְשַׁמְרִים הַבְּלִי־שׁוֹא חֶסֶדָם יַעֲזֹבוּ

The five-stress monocolon (3:2 rhythm) consists of two hemistichs (clauses) forming a single sense-unit. In the first hemistich the plural participle (מְשַׁמְרִים) governs the object (הַבְּלִי־שׁוֹא) and therefore functions as a finite verb.<sup>11</sup> The participle also incorporates the subject of the sentence and may be translated as "the ones keeping vain idols" or "those keeping vain idols." We are more concerned, however, with the translation of the second hemistich of the line, חֶסֶדָם יַעֲזֹבוּ. The direct object of the verb (חֶסֶדָם "their kindness") is placed at the beginning of the clause for emphasis. According to the immediate context, the subject of the verb is "the ones keeping vain idols." The verb יַעֲזֹבוּ is quite common and means "to abandon" or "to forsake."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, a direct translation of the imperfect will be "they are forsaking their kindness." Translating the imperfect as a future tense is also a possibility; however, the present continuous is preferred in the context of the psalm, and, as we will argue, in the context of the book of Jonah. We may then translate the whole line as follows:<sup>13</sup>

Those who keep (revere) vain idols are abandoning their kindness.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the Hebrew grammar of the passage is plain enough. However, three contextual questions have puzzled translators and interpreters. Who is being

9 See Perry 2006, 101-5.

10 Sasson likewise divides the psalm into three stanzas (1990, 165-66). For a detailed study of the psalm, see Craig 1993.

11 Barré (1991, 239-41) has proposed a more imaginative interpretation of the grammar, taking the whole line as a prepositional phrase with the preceding strophe (reading the *mem* prefix as a preposition). However, note Perry's criticism (2006, 110-12).

12 The verb occurs 214 times in the Hebrew Bible.

13 Craig presents a similar translation of the verse (1993, 16).

14 The participle in the Masoretic Text is pointed as a *pi'el*. However, it is possible to read it as a *qal*. The *mem* is then the inseparable form of מִן, and used here to introduce a causal clause. Defective writing occurs throughout Jonah (cf. 1.9, 10, 11, 12, 13; 2.1, 7; 3.2). The *qal* masculine plural participle is always written defectively in the MT (cf. Num 3.38; 1 Chr 12.30; Neh 12.25; 13.22; Ps 130.6; Isa 62.6; Jer 51.12; Mal 2.9). The translation will then be, "By keeping vain idols, they are abandoning their kindness." However, since this rendering is not self-evident and will not significantly alter the meaning of the text, we will not pursue it here.

addressed or described here? What does the abandoning of kindness (mercy) mean? And, how does the passage relate to the overall theme of the book? The answers to these questions, basically assumptions regarding context, have produced the diversity of translations.

In answer to the first question, I propose that Israel is being addressed. The intended audience of the book of Jonah was Israelite. The original language is Hebrew. The main plot of the story concerns the disobedience of the Hebrew prophet. Regardless of how one defines the purpose or main message of the book, all commentators are agreed that the book addresses Israel. It provides a critique of Israelite attitudes toward Gentiles. These observations, which are more or less stating the obvious, have important implications for interpreting this text. The “keepers of vain idols” (משמרים הבלי־ישוא) may well be a description or a critique of Israel. It is not our concern here to speculate about the historical circumstances of the author/editor or what situation is being addressed; suffice it to say that several suggestions could provide a plausible historical context.

The construct chain הבלי־ישוא has been variously translated, e.g., “vain idols,” “worthless idols,” “lying vanities,” “false gods” (lit. “vapours of emptiness”).<sup>15</sup> The term הַבֵּל means “vapour” or “breath” and so figuratively may denote “emptiness,” “vanity,” or “nothingness.” It is often used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to idols, particularly in Deuteronomistic traditions (cf. Deut 32.21; Jer 8.19; 10.3, 8, 15; 14.22; 16.19; 51.18).<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of our argument, it is important to point out that the Hebrew Bible also charges Israel with following idols (הבל) (cf. 1 Kgs 16.13, 26; 2 Kgs 17.15; Jer 2.5). This interpretation of הַבֵּל fits well with the eighth-century canonical context of Jonah. A perennial problem in Israel during the eighth century was idolatry. According to the eighth-century prophet Hosea, Israel had idols (cf. Hos 2.13; 2.16-17; 4.12, 17; 8.4; 10.6; 12.11; 13.2; 14.8). In particular, we may also note that the term is used in 2 Kgs 17.15 to describe the idolatrous practices which Israel adopted in the eighth century from its neighbours. The Deuteronomistic Historian regards this idolatry as one of the reasons for Israel’s destruction.

The governed noun in the construct chain, the term שָׁוְא, carries a variety of connotations, including “emptiness,” “worthlessness,” “vanity,” “falsehood,” etc. Its meaning overlaps to some extent with הַבֵּל. As with הַבֵּל, the term שָׁוְא is frequently used to describe religious deceit and corruption within Israel, the covenant community (Pss 12.2; 26.4; 41.7; Ezek 12.24; 13.6-9, 23; 21.28, 34; 22.28; Hos 10.4; 12.12). Again the use of the term in Hosea, the eighth-century prophet, is significant for reading Jonah. The prophet charges Israel with making covenants deceitfully (אָלוֹת שָׁוְא כָּרַת בְּרִית, Hos 10.4). In other words, the expression “those keeping vain idols” may well be used in Jonah to describe the

<sup>15</sup> The two words may be regarded as a hendiadys, emphasizing the utter senselessness and futility of idolatry. Or, according to Hans Walter Wolff, “The construct chain הבלי־ישוא intensifies the meaning of the individual, almost synonymous nouns into a powerful superlative” (1986, 137-38). The expression also occurs in Ps 31.6 (7).

<sup>16</sup> The term הַבֵּל occurs frequently in Ecclesiastes, where it denotes that which is empty, vain, meaningless, or futile. See Seow 1997, 101.

Israel of the eighth century as depicted in the canon. The writer or final editor of the book of Jonah would have been familiar with this characterization of Israel. Hence, the expression “those keeping vain idols” does not necessarily refer to non-Israelites or Gentiles. In fact, the sailors and the Gentiles are protagonists in the story. It is also in a covenantal context that the verb *עָזַב*, used in the second hemistich, makes most sense. In theological usage the term mainly functions within a covenantal context.<sup>17</sup> Israel is frequently charged with abandoning the covenant (e.g., Deut 29.25; Jer 2.13, 17, 19; 22.9).<sup>18</sup> According to Hos 4.10, the people of Israel had abandoned (*עָזַב*) Yahweh. They are following other gods (cf. Hos 1.2; 4.12).<sup>19</sup> Therefore, according to its eighth-century canonical context, one may argue that the text does not describe the sailors or the Gentile nations. The text describes Israel and serves as a warning for the covenant people. The story is intended to awaken Israel from her slumbers in order to be the people of Yahweh.

In answer to the second question, I propose, against the *consensus communis*, that translations should retain the plain meaning of the words. It is not necessary to paraphrase the text. The author/editor of the book of Jonah is concerned that the Israelites are abandoning their kindness.<sup>20</sup> The pronominal suffix makes the author’s intention unambiguous. The kindness in question is not Yahweh’s kindness or a veiled reference to Yahweh; rather, the text refers to the kindness or mercy that should be present within the covenant community.<sup>21</sup> Israel is abandoning its “kindness” or “mercy” (*חַסְדָּם* “their kindness”).<sup>22</sup> The problem is that Israel does not have or understand *חַסֵּד*.<sup>23</sup> Again this interpretation fits the eighth century as portrayed in the canonical sources. In Hosea, Yahweh’s charge against Israel is that there is no faithfulness, mercy (*אֵי־חַסֵּד*), or knowledge of Yahweh in the land (Hos 4.1). Hosea reprimands Israel for corruption (cf. Hos 4.1-10; 8.1-3). The people have abandoned Yahweh (*בִּי־אָתְּיָהוּהוּ עָזְבוּ לְשֹׁמֵר*, Hos 4.10). They urgently

17 See Stähli, “In about 100 passages ‘*zb* appears in a theological usage, whether God abandons people (about 40×), or people abandon God or his covenant, his commandments, etc. (about 60×)” (1997, 2:868).

18 Also note Alden, “The root ‘*zb* is a covenantal term that is frequently used to describe the act of breaking the covenant” (1996, 3:365).

19 In contrast, the Hebrew Bible portrays Yahweh as not abandoning his covenant mercy (*לֹא־עָזַב חַסְדּוֹ*, Gen 24.27; Ruth 2.20).

20 Almost all commentators understand *חַסֵּד* here as a divine attribute. Wolff is representative of most interpreters when he states that *חַסֵּד* “stands for the true God and his merciful faithfulness” (1986, 127).

21 The interpretation of *חַסְדָּם* presents the crux of the problem. For Price and Nida it is “one of the most controversial words of the psalm.” The question revolves around the meaning of *חַסֵּד* and “also whether it refers here to a divine or a human quality.” Unfortunately, Price and Nida did not consider the latter (1978, 47). Sasson made the following comment: “Because it is not likely that the poet is warning idolaters that they may lose their capacity to shower favors on others, scholars have had to pose more plausible threats” (1990, 198). Sasson also cannot find a solution to the problem (199). I am arguing that it is plausible in light of the wider narrative and canonical context that the author is indeed warning idolaters—Israel—that they are abandoning their humanity.

22 Targum Jonathan here inserts two words before the text (*לֹא כַעֲמֻמִּיּוֹת*), “*I am not like the nations, who worship idols, who do not know the source of their welfare,*” applying the description to the Gentiles. See Cathcart and Gordon 1989, 107. It appears that this (erroneous) interpretation has influenced subsequent translators.

23 Commenting on the verb *עָזַב* Gerstenberger notes, “Beyond persons and inanimate things, abstract entities can also be left or forsaken, since such abstractions can represent relationships, values, or other features that can be actualized concretely or personally” (1999, 10:587).

need to return to Yahweh and keep (observe) mercy and justice (חֶסֶד וּמִשְׁפָּט שָׁמַר; cf. Hos 12.6[7]). Likewise, Amos reprimands the covenant community for its injustice and corruption (cf. Amos 2.6-8; 3.15; 4.1; 5.11, 15, 24; 6.1-4, 12; 8.4-6). In other words, in the eighth-century prophets there is a persistent and strong accusation that Israel has abandoned Yahweh and has no kindness (חֶסֶד). Instead, the nation has adopted idols and fostered corruption and injustice. It is in this canonical context that Jonah should be read.

The identification of the prophet by name also strongly suggests that the book should not be interpreted as a parable or an allegory in isolation from its canonical context.<sup>24</sup> The reference in 2 Kgs 14.25 to this prophet situates the political and social context of the prophecy during the time of King Jeroboam II (793–746 B.C.E.). Jeroboam II secured the borders of Israel and presided over a period of peace and unprecedented economic prosperity. The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III curtailed the power of Syria with the capture of Damascus in 802 B.C.E. As a result, Israel experienced a period of political strength and economic prosperity. Most of the power and wealth, however, was enjoyed by the elite, whereas the peasantry increasingly suffered exploitation and deprivation (Premnath 2003, 43). Taking their success as an indication of divine favour, the elite did not see any inconsistency between their luxurious living and the plight of the poor.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the prophets Amos and Hosea castigated the nobility and priesthood for inhumanity, corruption, exploitation, and injustice.<sup>26</sup> It appears that Jonah is depicted as being very much a part of this national mentality. The figure of Jonah, under the cloak of theological orthodoxy and religious zeal, was in the end more concerned for his own comfort than for matters of humanity and fairness. The message of the book of Jonah is world-shattering. It breaks down all self-serving nationalistic, religious, and economic structures that lead to exploitation and injustice. It calls the reader back to a true understanding of Yahweh, one whose mercy extends to all people and even to the animals. It is only when Israel understands and reflects this divine attribute that the nation will become the true people of Yahweh.

The term חֶסֶד, occurring 246 times, is a central theological term in the Hebrew Bible. Among other things, it refers to Yahweh's covenant mercy and loyalty towards his people Israel. It has been variously translated by scholars. Holladay provides a rich smorgasbord of choice, including "obligation to the community," "loyalty," "faithfulness," "favor," "kindness," and "grace" (1972, 111). Brown, Driver, and Briggs list "goodness," "kindness," "mercy," and the traditional "loving-kindness" (1952, 338-39). Stoebe gives the general meaning as "kindness," and describes it as "an expression for magnanimity, for a sacrificial, humane willingness to be there for the other" (1997, 456). Others have stressed the covenantal context of the term and translated it as "loyalty" or "faithfulness" (Baer

24 Contra Childs 1979, 426.

25 "As foreign successes increased domestic prospects and sense of security, people could be forgiven for believing that the golden age of Israel's empire had returned and that the sister kingdoms had entered upon an era of unsurpassed wellbeing. According to popular and prevailing theological norms there was a permanent correlation between divine favor and prosperous existence" (Anderson and Freedman 1980, 31).

26 See the discussion in Newsome 1984, 16-43; and Matthews 2001, 67-80.



and Gordon 1997). However, it appears that the theological prominence of the term as a divine attribute and action has distracted the attention of translators from considering other possibilities in Jonah 2.8(9). The term does not only describe a divine attribute, it also operates on a human plane. Zobel pointed out that “in *hesed* we are dealing with something belonging to the sphere of human intention” (1986, 5:46). Thus, a significant number of passages in the Hebrew Bible describe חסד as a human attribute. The servants of Ben-hadad, the Syrian, heard that the kings of Israel were kings with חסד (1 Kgs 20.31). Israel had to be people of חסד (Isa 57.1; also cf. Prov 3.3; 11.17; 19.22; 20.6). Within the covenant context, חסד entails the moral obligation to show compassion and justice.<sup>27</sup> Most commentators have interpreted חסד in Jonah 2.8(9) as a divine attribute. Sometimes reference is made to Jonah 4.2, where חסד is an attribute of Yahweh. However, that does not demand that it has to be the case in Jonah 2.8(9) as well. The book of Jonah does not regard grace, mercy, and compassion as attributes belonging only to deity. Both Jonah and Yahweh express compassion (חסד, Jonah 4.10-11).<sup>28</sup>

The third question that we have raised is perhaps the most important one. How does the passage relate to the overall theme of the book? The interpretation suggested above also makes good sense within the narrative context of the story of Jonah. The main point of the author is that Jonah—Israel—does not understand Yahweh’s great concern to extend mercy to all people. Jonah was reluctant to carry out Yahweh’s mission because he knew that Yahweh was “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Jonah 4.2)—a graciousness which extends even to Gentiles.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, there were other concerns that were more important for Jonah. We may speculate that he was more concerned for theological orthodoxy or for his own nationalistic agenda. If Yahweh said that he would destroy Nineveh but then did not, Israel may regard Yahweh’s word as unreliable. Hosea’s and Amos’s prophecies about impending judgment may not be taken seriously. The prophet’s hope for a reformed Israel may then not be realized.<sup>30</sup> Whether Jonah’s main concern was theological, political, or personal we may never know. However, we do know that he was not as concerned about the welfare and salvation of others as Yahweh was. Hence, when Yahweh relented from judging Nineveh, showing compassion instead, it displeased Jonah greatly. Jonah’s main problem was that he lacked mercy (חסד). He appears to be like one

27 See the comprehensive discussions of Glueck 1967; Sakenfeld 1978; and Clark 1993. Glueck and Sakenfeld analysed *hesed* under the three categories secular, religious, and theological. With respect to secular use, Sakenfeld criticized Glueck for stressing the idea of reciprocity in the operation of *hesed*; rather *hesed* is providing for essential needs in tangible situations. Clark concludes that although *hesed* “is a characteristic of God rather than human beings . . . Yahweh expects his people to emulate this quality” (1993, 267).

28 Of course, it may be possible that the author intended a double reference here. However, such an interpretation does not flow naturally from the text.

29 Dozeman (1989) regards Joel 2.13 and Jonah 4.2 as midrashic interpretations of Exod 34.6-7. A mutual relationship exists between these texts, but whereas Joel appropriates Yahweh’s compassion for Israel, Jonah goes beyond Israel and also extends Yahweh’s grace to Gentiles. Jonah does not understand and misuses Yahweh’s grace. See also Kim 2007.

30 Jonah is identified as the son of Amittai. The name Amittai is derived from the noun אִמְתַּי, which means “faithfulness.” The name may be intended to depict Jonah as belonging to a family with traditionalist beliefs.



of the prophets whom Hosea and Amos criticized for not showing compassion and for being unjust. Jonah's behaviour with respect to the sailors and the Ninevites shows that he lacked basic humanity. When the pagan sailors did everything in their power to save the ship, Jonah went for a nap; and when Yahweh relented from destroying Nineveh, Jonah became very angry. The prophet's behaviour, in fact, revealed that he did not know or worship Yahweh.<sup>31</sup> He was more committed to the idols of his own ideology and nationalism. In other words, the monocolon at Jonah 2.8 not only describes the situation of Israel during the eighth century, but also delineates the central theme of the book. The idolatry of economic progress (materialism), nationalism, and dogmatic ideology caused Israel to abandon the weighty matters of the law—compassion, mercy, and justice.

Finally, I have noted earlier that the monocolon under discussion stands outside the frame of the psalm. This may indicate that it did not belong to the original psalm but was a later insertion into the text. If that is the case it will further underscore the importance of the monocolon for understanding the main point of the book. In order to lend further support for this suggestion, we may note that the monocolon occurs right at the centre of the story. The book of Jonah in the Leningrad Codex contains 688 words. The first word of the monocolon (בַּשְׁמַרִים) is word number 344.<sup>32</sup> The final editor of the story may have inserted an editorial comment at the centre of the story, capturing the main problem that the book was addressing.<sup>33</sup> The centre of the narrative would be an apt location to state the main issue being addressed.<sup>34</sup> By following idols, the people of Israel are abandoning basic humanity and kindness.

### References

- Alden, Robert L. 1997. "עֲזָב." Pages 364-65 in vol. 3 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Anderson, Francis I., and David Noel Freedman. 1980. *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Baer, David A., and Robert P. Gordon. 1997. "חָסַד." Pages 211-18 in vol. 2 of *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Barré, M. 1991. "Jonah 2,9 and the Structure of Jonah's Prayer." *Biblica* 72: 237-48.
- Biddle, Mark E. 2007. "Obadiah-Jonah-Micah in Canonical Context: The Nature of Prophetic Literature and Hermeneutics." *Interpretation* 61: 154-66.

---

31 Jeremiah 9.24 links knowing Yahweh with understanding that Yahweh does mercy, justice and righteousness.

32 Another observation that may underscore careful construction on the part of the author or final editor is that the monocolon consists of 22 letters, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

33 Limburg correctly pointed out that the verse under discussion "is one of the few clues in the book that reveal something about the audience that is being addressed" (1993, 70). However, he did not explore the possibility that חָסַד may refer to human activity.

34 According to Limburg, "this sentence stands out as a word to the congregation, almost as a maxim or motto, with a clear didactic intent" (1993, 69).

- Bolin, Thomas M. 1997. *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. 1952. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cathcart, Kevin J., and Robert P. Gordon. 1989. *The Targum of the Minor Prophets. Translated, with Critical Introduction, Appendices, and Notes*. The Aramaic Bible 14. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Childs, Brevard. 1979. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM Press.
- Clark, Gordon R. 1993. *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Craig, Kenneth M. 1993. *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Science of Ideology*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- Dozeman, Thomas B. 1989. "Inner-biblical Interpretation of Yahweh's Gracious and Compassionate Character." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108: 207-23.
- Dyck, Elmer. 1990. "Jonah Among the Prophets: A Study in Canonical Context." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33: 63-73.
- Gerstenberger, Erhard. 1999. "עֵיבֹ." Pages 584-92 in vol. 10 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Glueck, Nelson. 1967. *Hesed in the Bible*. Translated by Alfred Gottschalk. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College.
- Holladay, William L. 1972. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- House, Paul R. 1990. *The Unity of the Twelve*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Jenson, Philip. 1999. *Reading Jonah*. Grove Biblical Series 14. Cambridge: Grove Books.
- Kim, Hyun Chul Paul. 2007. "Jonah Read Intertextually." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126: 497-528.
- Landes, George M. 1967. "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm." *Interpretation* 21: 3-21.
- Lessing, R. Reed. 2007. *Jonah*. Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture. Saint Louis: Concordia.
- Limburg, James. 1993. *Jonah: A Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox.
- Matthews, Victor H. 2001. *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Newsome, James D. 1984. *The Hebrew Prophets*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox.
- Nogalski, James D., and Marvin A. Sweeney, eds. 2000. *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*. Atlanta: SBL.
- Perry, Theodore A. 2006. *The Honeymoon Is Over: Jonah's Argument with God*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Premnath, Devadasan N. 2003. *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.

- Price, Brynmor F., and Eugene A. Nida. 1978. *A Translators Handbook on the Book of Jonah*. Stuttgart: United Bible Societies.
- Sakenfeld, Katherine Doob. 1978. *The Meaning of Heseḏ in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press.
- Sasson, Jack M. 1990. *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*. Anchor Bible 24B. New York: Doubleday.
- Scheider, Dale. 1979. "The Unity of the Book of the Twelve." Ph.D. dissertation, Yale.
- Seow, Choon Leong. 1997. *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 18C. New York: Doubleday.
- Stähli, H.-P. 1997. "עֶזֶב." Pages 866-68 in vol. 2 of *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Stoebe, H. J. 1997. "חֶסֶד." Pages 449-64 in vol. 2 of *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Trible, Phyllis. 1963. "Studies in the Book of Jonah." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.
- Watson, Wilfred G. E. 1986. *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*. 2d ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Wolff, Hans Walter. 1986. *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House.
- Zobel, H.-J. 1986. "חֶסֶד." Pages 44-64 in vol. 5 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.