

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JONAH 4:1-11

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Introduction and Message Statement

At last, we come to the end of the story. Jonah has obeyed God (3:1-4), Nineveh has repented (3:5-9), and God has relented from destroying the city (3:10). One might expect all to live happily ever after. Sadly, however, they do not. Instead, Jonah struggles angrily with God's mercy. But God will again reveal His gracious character – His *hesed*. Indeed, “what transpires between God and Jonah in this, their last meeting, controls our grasp of the whole book.”¹

Translation – Jonah 4:1-11

¹ This seemed to be a great evil to Jonah, and he became angry. ² And he prayed to the LORD, and said, “YHWH, was this not what I said before, when I was still in my country. Because of this, I intended to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a merciful and tenderhearted God, slow to anger and abounding in *hesed* [saving covenantal mercy], relenting from disaster. ³ And now, YHWH, please take my life from me, because it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴ But YHWH said, “Should you be angry?”

⁵ Then Jonah went out from the city, and sat down east of the city. He made for himself there a booth, and he sat under it in its shade until he saw what YHWH [would do] in the city. ⁶ And the Lord God appointed a plant, and it grew up above Jonah to be shade above his head in order to save him from his misery. And Jonah rejoiced with great joy because of the plant.

⁷ Then God appointed a worm to go up at dawn on the following morning. It attacked the plant, and [the plant] withered. ⁸ Then, just as the sun came up, God appointed a scorching east wind. And the sun beat down on Jonah's head, so that he became faint, and he asked his soul to die, saying, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

⁹ And God said to Jonah, “Should you be angry about this plant?” And [Jonah] replied, “I am justified in being angry unto death!”

¹⁰ But YHWH said, “You have pity on the plant, for which you did not labor, which you did not cause to grow, and which is born in a night and in a night [it] perishes. ¹¹ Should I not [then] have pity on Nineveh, this great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know [the difference] between their right hands and their left, as well as many cattle?”

¹ Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary and Interpretation*, vol. 24B, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (Yale University: Doubleday, 1990), 270.

Commentary and Analysis

As chapter 4 begins, Jonah is immediately portrayed as bitter and angry, standing in judgment over God’s merciful actions toward Nineveh. The opening verb רעע in the Qal is most often translated “to be bad, not fit for use, evil, or displeasing.”² When combined with the cognate accusative רעע, I lean toward the stronger end of its semantic range: “evil” rather than “displeasing.” This is further emphasized by the attributive intensifier גדולה. Taken together, the mercy God demonstrated in the prior chapter גדולה רעע גודלה (“seems to be a great evil”) אֶל־יוֹנָה (“to Jonah”). The narrator used רעע to describe God’s judgment of the people of Nineveh and their actions (1:2), but now he applies it to Jonah’s judgment of God and His actions. The use of the cognate accusative here is part of a pattern in which “the vocabulary chosen for paronomastic treatment³ actually rehearses major Jonah themes,”⁴ in this case “evil.”

The sequencing of waw-consecutive verbs in the final circumstantial clause indicates the result of this judgment: גִּיָּחַר לוֹ (“he became angry”). Although some commentators translate חרה here as “depressed,”⁵ I see no warrant for that given the semantic range of the Qal in HALOT,⁶ and the frequent translation “anger” in the ESV and others.

Jonah isn’t passive in his anger either. He lashes out. The narrator says וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה (“he prayed to the Lord”; 4:2), but I see his comments as, effectively, a temper tantrum. He begins almost begging, אָנָּה יְהוָה (“please, YHWH!”). The next phrase הֲלוֹא־יְהוָה דְּבָרֵי is introduced by an interrogative, but signifies a rhetorical question. דְּבָרֵי is a noun + 1CS possessive suffix (“my

² Ludwig Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Study ed. (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2001), 1269.

³ The use of a pun.

⁴ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:272.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24B:274–275.

⁶ Köhler et al., *HALOT*, 351.

word”), which I have smoothed out with the idiomatic translation “what I said.” The phrase carries the sense, “I told you this would happen!” It is disturbing that Jonah is impetuous enough to draw God’s attention to *his* word when Jonah has found it so difficult to embrace *God’s* word, which as a prophet he is called to proclaim. Sasson thinks the various תי endings in this sentence are an intentional rhyming technique,⁷ but I suspect this is simply Jonah’s egocentrism run amuck. He’s throwing a tantrum: “what *I* said when *I* was in *my* country [where] *I* intended to flee... because *I* knew....” Jonah is of course referring back to his foolish attempt to flee from God in 1:3. He states, קָדַמְתִּי לְבָרֶחַ תַּרְשִׁישׁ (‘‘I intended to flee to Tarshish’’) using a לְ prefix to indicate purpose and a הָ suffix to indicate directional movement. He also shares his motive: ‘I intended to flee ... כִּי יָדַעְתִּי (causal; ‘because I knew’) you, God!’

The next כִּי is a content marker, signaling that what follows is what Jonah says he knew. Here, he ascribes to God four distinct characteristics, all centered on His grace. God is first אֱלֹהֵי רַחֲמִים (‘‘a merciful and tenderhearted god’’). While רַחֲמִים is straightforward, typically translated ‘‘merciful’’ or ‘‘gracious,’’⁸ רַחֲמִים is more nuanced, implying the compassion of a mother for your child.⁹ Used together in adjectival form as they are here, these words (often with others in this verse) form the well-known ‘‘Yahweh compassion creed,’’ which appears 11 times in the Hebrew bible (c.f. Ps 103:8, Joel 2:13, etc).¹⁰ Second, God is אֱלֹהֵי אַרְיֵה אֶפְרַיִם, which is an idiomatic construct phrase meaning ‘‘slow to anger’’ (literally, ‘‘long-suffering of the noses’’¹¹). Third, God is רַב־חֶסֶד (‘‘abounding in *hesed*’’). The meaning of *hesed* is difficult to pin down in a few words, but might be best described as ‘‘an act of extraordinary compassionate mercy or generosity on behalf of

⁷ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:277.

⁸ Köhler et al., *HALOT*, 333.

⁹ Younger, Dr. K. Lawson, Jr. OT 5242 class lecture: Jonah 2. TEDS, Deerfield, IL. Conducted 11/2/2017.

¹⁰ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 448–449.

¹¹ James Strong, *Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary of the Bible*, Blg Con Edition. (BN Publishing, 2012), 750.

someone in dire need springing from loyalty to a covenant / treaty relationship.”¹² Due to the myriad nuances in meaning, *hesed* is best transliterated. Lastly, וַיִּחַן עַל־הַרְעָה (“God relents from calamity”). This is worded as a general statement, but it describes exactly what God has just done in Nineveh (3:10). Read in isolation, we would take these statements as praise, but here Jonah turns them into an accusation. He is angry precisely *because* God is and does these things. Jonah wants Nineveh to be punished, and is angry that God has instead shown them mercy. Jonah’s former obedience (3:1-3) “obviously was not in a spirit of submission.”¹³

Finally, in v3, Jonah comes to the punchline: וְעַתָּה יְהוָה קַח־נַפְשִׁי אֶת־נַפְשִׁי (“And now, YHWH, please take my life”). “Hebrew literature cites very few occasions on which individuals ask God to shorten their lives”¹⁴ (e.g. Job 6:9-14, Jeremiah 20:14-18, Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:2-4, etc.); Jonah may very well have joined their ranks back in 1:12, but now he definitely has. He is so selfishly distraught that he wants to die. But God again shows mercy, refusing to answer Jonah’s prayer.¹⁵ Instead, He calls him out, asking הֲהִיטֵב תִּרְהָ לָךְ. The Hiphil form of the verb יטב + ל appears often in Scripture (e.g. Gen 12:16; Ex 1:20; Num 10:29; etc) and communicates “to be friendly toward or deal well with.” Thus, God is asking Jonah a rhetorical question, “Should you be angry [lit: Is it good to you to be angry]?” or “Do you have a good reason for being angry?”¹⁶ This is “for the benefit of the reader as well. Can we ... ever resent God’s compassion [even] on our enemies?”¹⁷

¹² Younger, Dr. K. Lawson, Jr. OT 5242 class lecture: Jonah 2. TEDS, Deerfield, IL. Conducted 11/2/2017.

¹³ Michael Rydelnik and Michael G. Vanlaningham, eds., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1367.

¹⁴ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:283.

¹⁵ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1367.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th Ed. (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 821.

Jonah's response is to continue to pout. The scene is fairly bizarre. Jonah leaves – I see him storming off silently in “response” to God's question – and finds a spot east of the city to sit and wait to see what God will do. There is debate as to whether this is a flashback to before God decides to spare the city, explaining why Jonah has to wait *וַיֵּשֶׁב מִהַיְהִיָּה בְּעִיר* (“[to see] what is to be in the city”). “Perhaps Jonah hopes that his vigil will persuade God to reverse His decision to forgive the Ninevites.”¹⁸ I think his actions are best understood as sulking after the fact.

In any event, planning to be there a while, Jonah *וַיַּעַשׂ לָּו שֹׁמְרָה* (“makes for himself there a booth [or hut or thicket]”). The word *שֹׁמְרָה* is used often (31x) in Scripture, often in the construct phrase, *מִגַּד הַשֹּׁמְרוֹת* (“the Feast of Booths”), and it seems to indicate pavilion, cottage or tent of some kind.¹⁹ Since “Mesopotamia is largely treeless, he would have made his shelter of stone, without a roof.”²⁰ Either way, Jonah's human efforts are clearly not sufficient to protect him from the sun, so God graciously *וַיִּמְנָן* (“appointed”) a plant to provide shade for him. This is a key thematic verb in the book. God *appoints* the fish to swallow Jonah (2:1), the plant to shade Jonah (here in 4:6), a worm to kill the plant (4:7), and wind and sun to get Jonah's attention (4:8). All Piel stems, these usages speak directly to God's sovereignty in directing nature – whether elements or flora or fauna – to do His bidding. The irony is that “all of God's creation followed God's sovereign appointment, [except for] His prophet, who refused the initial appointment to preach (1:3) and even resented the success of his second appointment (4:1).”²¹

¹⁸ D.A. Carson, ed., *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1799.

¹⁹ Strong, *Strong's Dictionary*, 5521.

²⁰ Carson et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 821.

²¹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1367.

Now, God appoints a plant to grow up על־ראשו (‘‘to be shade over his head’’; purpose). ‘‘The קִיקָאִין (‘‘plant’’) occurs only this once in Scripture.²² Like the fish, it is depicted ‘‘with minial realism; in less than a full day, [it] grows to remarkable stature and then withers.’’²³ Although the narrator continues to include timeframes and commentators discuss them vociferously, I discount their importance compared to the deeper meaning of the text. Whether this language is metaphorical or the timeline is accelerated for literary purposes or God is performing miracles, the point is that God is sovereignly intervening. And His design for this plant is clear, stated in the second purpose clause: לְהַצִּיל לוֹ מִרָעָתוֹ (‘‘to save [Jonah] from his misery’’). The word רָעָה is very general, used in Scripture to describe ‘‘evil’’ (3:8) or ‘‘calamity’’ (3:10) or ‘‘distress and misery’’ (4:6).²⁴ The key takeaway is that Jonah’s rebellion and bitterness are רָעָה – ‘‘evil’’ before God which deserves ‘‘calamity’’ from God. Jonah even goes so far as to accuse God Himself of רָעָה. Now Jonah, just like Ninevah, needs to be rescued. And that’s exactly what God does; He relents from anger, shows mercy, and rescues both Ninevah and Jonah from their רָעָה. It’s an amazing story of grace. ‘‘As Nineveh’s repentance shielded it from eternal calamity, so now the plant shielded Jonah from the bitter heat.’’²⁵ וַיִּשְׂמַח יוֹנָה עַל־הַקִּיקָאִין (‘‘And Jonah rejoiced with great joy because of the plant’’).

The problem is that Jonah’s change of heart is still essentially self-serving. God continues to show him unreasonable love and mercy, but Jonah remains fundamentally unrepentant, which God will now demonstrate. Again, God וַיִּמְנֶן (‘‘appoints’’) a creature – a worm – to a task, demonstrating His sovereignty over nature. מִנָּה is used with an infinitive (בְּעֵלֹת); ‘‘in order to go

²² In fact, it occurs 5 times, but only here in Jonah 4:6-10.

²³ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:292.

²⁴ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1367.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

up”) to identify purpose. Worms are commonly used in Scripture as “an instrument of God’s disfavor (Deut 28:39) and a voracious consumer of human remains (Isa 14:11, 66:24).”²⁶ Here, God sends one to take back the gift of the plant, which will expose Jonah’s heart. These events take place *הַשָּׁחַר לְמָחָר* (“at dawn the next day”), which can simply be “a prelude to a day’s activities (c.f. Josh 6:15)”²⁷ But again, the timeframes aren’t the focus; rather, it is that God is “appointing” these events for salvific purposes, possibly at miraculous speeds, which matters.

Verse 8 brings to Jonah another day of blazing sun and unbearable heat, but now without God’s protective plant. Starting early in the morning – *כַּזְרוֹחַ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ* (“as the sun rose”) –, we again see that God is sovereignly manipulating nature. *וַיִּמְנָן אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ קְדִים הַרְיֵשִׁית* (“[God] appoints a scorching east wind”) to assail Jonah. This specific construction is uncommon. *רוּחַ קְדִים* by itself appears a dozen times in Scripture and refers to one of God’s routine chosen instruments – one of the four winds God summons (from the four quarters of the earth) to bring either good or ill to people. They “alert readers to God’s controlling presence.”²⁸ And this is not a cool afternoon breeze; it is a “hot, scorching wind, normally called ‘sirocco,’ blowing off the Arabian desert. The shelter Jonah made for himself (4:5) would not exclude this ‘agent’ of God’s sovereignty.”²⁹ In fact, I suspect “the purpose of the wind is to sweep away the hut that Jonah himself had built.”³⁰ With the worm and the plant, God demonstrates first that Jonah’s human efforts are inadequate; he should have turned to God for help. Second, God demonstrates His grace by sending the plant in the first place. Third, God shows that He can and will take away gifts He has given if, in His sovereignty, He deems it necessary.

²⁶ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:301.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24B:301–302.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24B:303.

²⁹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 1012.

³⁰ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:304.

But Jonah continues to see only his circumstances. וַתִּהְיֶה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ עַל־רֹאשׁ יוֹנָה וַיִּתְעַלֶּף (“The sun beat down on Jonah’s head, so that he became faint”). He is “eventually in such misery that death would be a relief to him.”³¹ The sequence of waw-consecutive verbs here indicates a result chain. The sun beat down, *so* he became faint, *so* he wanted to die. But he doesn’t ask God for death again, he asks his own soul: וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוּת (“he begs his soul to die”). “When people discuss death with their own souls, we could take it as a fanciful way of asking God to take their life,”³² but I see this as subtly different. I think Jonah knows God won’t do it. God has spared Ninevah (3:10) and even the sailors (1:15), though they are not even His people, and He has spared Jonah twice now (1:17; 4:6), despite his rebellious attitude. Jonah is sure that God will spare him again, even against his will, so I imagine him sitting there, muttering angrily in the sun. The verb שָׁאַל can be “to ask, beg, demand, or wish.”³³ Jonah is (still) so focused on self-pity and escapism, that he “begs his soul to die.”

Simultaneously, “as his body temperature rises, so does his anger.”³⁴ So, when God again asks, הֲהֵיטֵב תִּרְהֶ־לֶּךָ (“Should you be angry?”), this time specifically עַל־הַקִּיקָיוֹן (“about the plant”), Jonah erupts furiously, הֵיטֵב תִּרְהֶ־לִּי עַד־מָוֶת (“I am justified in being angry unto death [lit: it is good to me to be angry until death]!”). Jonah’s use of עַד־מָוֶת “turns [his] answer into a hyperbole and thus underscores his essentially petulant character.”³⁵ Essentially, he is insisting his anger is justified (he is right and God is wrong), and declaring that he will nurse that anger until the day he dies (which he hopes will be today). That’s incredible.

³¹ Carson et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 821.

³² Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:305.

³³ Köhler et al., *HALOT*, 1373.

³⁴ Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1799.

³⁵ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:307.

And although God is clearly *very* slow to anger (4:2), He finally sits Jonah down and corrects his thinking. He builds His discourse around the verb הָרַס. This verb can be translated “to be troubled about, cry because of, or look compassionately on.” When it is combined with עָל, which it is here in both 4:10 and 4:11, it typically relates to people and can mean “to spare.”³⁶ God is saying that Jonah is troubled about and crying over the plant, wishing to “spare” it, while God looks with compassion on and does in fact “spare” Nineveh. We might sum up this word with the gloss “to pity,” which I have used in my translation. God uses this verb to contrast Jonah’s deplorably-selfish attitude with God’s sovereign, persistent grace.

God accentuates two specific things in describing Jonah’s beloved plant. First, the plant is transitory. God describes the plant as שָׁבוֹן-לַיְלָה הַיָּהּ וּבֹרֵן-לַיְלָה אֶבֶד (“that which is born in [lit: son of] a night and in a night [it] perishes”). Second, He underscores “Jonah’s lack of involvement with the life cycle of the plant.”³⁷ Jonah וְלֹא גִדְלָתוֹ (“did not make it grow”). This is even more obvious given that the story reads as if God grew it in a day and withered it in a night. Clearly, it is God who עָמַלְתָּ בּוֹ (“labored in it”), not Jonah.

Then, to close the argument, God asks a rhetorical question to highlight the difference between the plant and the people of Nineveh . . . and, again, to expose the great contrast between Jonah’s selfish heart and His tenderhearted mercy. “Jonah (and the reader) must learn about the relative value of human life.”³⁸ God asks, וְאַנִּי לֹא אֲחֹס עַל-יְנִינָה (“Should I not have pity on Nineveh?”). Note that God uses the same word here as in the prior verse, where he describes Jonah’s attitude toward the plant. Note also that Nineveh is again described as הַקְּעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה (“the

³⁶ Köhler et al., *HALOT*, 298.

³⁷ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:310.

³⁸ Carson et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 821.

great city”), which I take to be an indicator both of its size and God’s concern for it. To further emphasize its size, God specifies a number of people in the city: 120,000. And they are not just any people, but people *לֹא יָדְעוּ בֵּין-יְמִינָם לְשִׂמְאֵלָם* (“who do not know [the difference] between their right hand and their left”). “This [specific number] may refer to the children of the city, [but] it more likely refers to the whole city that was as morally and ethically undiscerning as children.”³⁹ The number itself doesn’t really matter; the point is the contrast between a plant and the many souls living in Nineveh,⁴⁰ and that the people are in great need of mercy. Even the animals in the city, which God also explicitly mentions here, are more valuable than the plant.⁴¹

Conclusion

This passage reveals the thoroughly-selfish heart of God’s prophet and the thoroughly-gracious heart of God. God actively demonstrates His grace to every person in the story, while Jonah repeatedly demonstrates that He is thinking only of himself. Jonah even wanted a plant to be spared for the sake of his personal comfort, more than a whole people who matter to God. “His values were completely amiss.”⁴² The story of Jonah shows us a “self-centered compassion on a temporal plant, which was wholly a gift of [God’s] grace”⁴³ contrasted with saving grace for a city “filled with eternal beings whom God loves.”⁴⁴ It reveals a God who is indeed “merciful and tenderhearted, slow to anger and abounding in *hesed*,” and it challenge us to go and do likewise, even to love our enemies (Matt 5:44).

³⁹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1368.

⁴⁰ Sasson, *Jonah*, 24B:313.

⁴¹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1368.

⁴² Carson et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 821.

⁴³ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1367.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1368.

Structural Outline

1. Jonah's Tantrum
 - a. Jonah accuses God (vv1-3)
 - b. God questions Jonah (v4)
 - c. Jonah runs away from God (v5)
2. An Object Lesson
 - a. God rescues Jonah (v6)
 - b. God tests Jonah (vv7-8a)
 - c. Jonah suffers (v8b)
3. A Vivid Contrast
 - a. God questions Jonah (v9a)
 - b. Jonah lashes out (v9b)
 - c. God reveals Jonah's selfishness (vv10-11)

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