

Jonah's Sermon Method In Nineveh: A Contextual Study Of Prophetism And Emotion In Nigeria

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Abstract

There are a number of tensions evident in Jonah's character and the lessons to be drawn from the canonical book bearing his name. Modern studies of the characterization of Jonah tend to view him negatively, but this study will debate that assessment as too 'flat' or simplistic. Jonah is a complex, 'round' character whose spiritual struggles are able to inform the character formation of God's servants, Christian ministers, today. Many scholars have argued that the book of Jonah has much to teach Christian ministers about the struggle to understand God's purposes, to obey God's command and the spiritual dynamics of responding to a call from God. Less attention has been to the human emotions that could have possibly triggered Jonah's flight to Tarshish against the divine command to go to Nineveh and his method of sermon and reaction. The study adopted textual and contextual approaches in interrogating the prophetic mission of Jonah as it relates to the assignment on a foreign mission to Nineveh. This method of research takes the text primarily and contextualizes it in the sociological understanding. The study shows that God is always consistent, whatever He says, He means it, in contrast to Jonah's hypocritical inconsistency. The study therefore challenges and charges Nigerian clerics to live above personal and tribal prejudice in discharging their divine mandates and religious calling, making sure that the will of Yahweh (Allah) prevails over their human weaknesses.

Introduction

The main objective of this study is to examine Jonah's flight to Tarshish and sermon method in Nineveh in the context of Prophetism and emotion among the clerics in Nigeria. From the foregoing, the study raised and provided answers to the following questions: What was Jonah's attitude to his prophetic office before being sent to Nineveh? What possible condition in Nineveh could have influenced Jonah's perception and rejection to take the message of Yahweh to the country? Could Jonah's nationality and religious conviction have affected his prophetic assignment to Nineveh? What emotional and behavioural pattern could have been responsible for Jonah's sermon method and angry reaction upon the repentance of the Ninevites? To what extent do the ethno-religious and political background of some Nigerian clerics influence the pattern of their sermons and prophetic messages?

Significance of the Study

The study examines the relationship between the temperament and emotions of Jonah and the interference of such in the prophetic ministry, especially the Nineveh missions. The study is relevant for studies in the book of Jonah. The scope of the study is the book of Jonah. Passages that are relevant were selected from among the four chapters contained in the book.

Jonah's personal data and Identity

The name "Jonah" means "dove" in Hebrew. However, in Jonah 1:9, Jonah identifies himself with the sacred calling and faith tradition, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Following the other sailors' demand to know who was responsible for the calamity, Jonah witnesses to his ethnicity, his religious loyalty and practice, and testifies to the character of the Lord God. It is a positive step, despite being precipitated by Jonah's negative action of running away from the Lord (1:10). Jonah then advises them to throw him overboard, saying "I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (1:12). We see here Jonah's self-awareness, and acknowledgement of guilt in provoking the storm. This suggests a new concern for the lives of others (the sailors) and a humility or resignation to accept God's judgment on his act of running away.

Jonah's Nineveh Assignment and Alternative Migration

The catchy beginning of the narrative presents a non-ambiguous setting in which no confusion arises in both the prophetic office of Jonah and his alternative action could be easily understood.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." 3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (I'm not saying that with a lisp there. It actually is pronounced Tarshish – two "sh" in that word.) So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord (Jonah 1:1-3).

Sia and Simon argued that this negative initial response to a divine command to Nineveh set the scene for the whole book and is unambiguous. It is an act of disobedience, a rejection of a clear command from God to go to Nineveh. Whether there are subtler motives at play like cowardice, pride or confusion can only be discerned in the light of subsequent character exploration.¹

¹ Sia Kok Sin and Mark Simon, "Exploring the Spiritual Struggles of God's Servant in the Book of Jonah". *JURNAL JAFFRAY* Vol. 20, No. 2 (October 2022): 95-117

Background to the book of Jonah

The book of Jonah is contained in a section of the Old Testament known as the “minor prophets” which follows much of the history and wisdom literature that tells the story of the nation of Israel. Bruckner argues that although the books are referred to as ‘minor’ in length (each is about fifty verses), they are a crucial portion of God’s revelation to His people.² Even though it is brief and not as all encompassing as many of the other books in the Old Testament, the book of Jonah is not an afterthought or a space filler. The book is replete with irony, wherein much of its humor lies. The name “Jonah” means “dove” in Hebrew, but Jonah’s character is anything but dove-like. Jonah is commanded to go east to Nineveh but flees toward the westernmost possible point (1:2–3), only to be swallowed by a great fish and dumped back at this starting point (2:1, 11). The sailors pray to their gods, but Jonah is asleep in the hold.³

Purpose of the Book of Jonah

The book is a revelation to God's people of His sovereign power and loving concern for all of His creatures, even cattle (4:11). This revelation came first to Jonah personally, and then through him to the Jews. It was not primarily a revelation to the Ninevites. The Ninevites' responsibility was simply to repent and humble themselves. This revelation should have moved the Israelites to respond like the Assyrians did, namely, with repentance and humility. They faced similar threats: first from the Assyrians, and then from the Babylonians. Jonah's lack of concern for the Ninevites contrasts with God's concern for them that was to be the pattern for His people. "The main purpose of the book is to teach Israelites that God loves other nations than their own; or, in fact, to teach the prophets who peddle selfishness that he loves other nations and people. Jonah hopes all along that somehow God won't turn out to be consistent with his own well-known character (4:2).⁴ But God is consistent throughout, in contrast to Jonah's hypocritical inconsistency. What happens to Nineveh and to Jonah happens precisely because of what God is like. The audience of the book is thus invited implicitly to revise their understanding of what God is like, if they have indeed shared Jonah's selfish views.

BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

I. The disobedience of the prophet chapters 1—2

A. Jonah's attempt to flee from God 1:1-3

B. Jonah's lack of compassion 1:4-6

C. Jonah's failure to fear his sovereign God 1:7-10

² James K. Bruckner, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah. Vol. Epub ed. *The NIV Application Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)

³ *The Book of The Prophet Jonah An Introduction to this sacred text* The Anglican Parishes of Whittington, Weeford and Hints. <http://ourvillagechurch.org.uk>

⁴ Stuart, pp. 435-38; Alexander, pp. 69-77. For further discussion of genre, see Ernst R. Wendland, "Text Analysis and the Genre of Jonah (Part 1)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:2 (June 1996):191-206.

D. The sailors' compassion and fear of God 1:11-16

E. Jonah's deliverance by God 1:17—2:1

F. Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving 2:2-9

G. Jonah's deliverance from the fish 2:10

II. The obedience of the prophet chapters 3—4

A. Jonah's proclamation to the Ninevites 3:1-4

B. The Ninevites' repentance 3:5-10

C. Jonah's displeasure at God's mercy 4:1-4

D. God's rebuke of Jonah for his attitude 4:5-9

E. God's compassion for those under His judgment 4:10-11

The Land of Nineveh in the Time of Jonah

In the Hebrew Bible, Nineveh is first mentioned in Genesis 10:11: "Ashur left that land, and built Nineveh". Some modern English translations interpret "Ashur" in the Hebrew of this verse as the country "Assyria" rather than a person, thus making Nimrod, rather than Ashur, the founder of Nineveh. Raleigh argues that it was Nimrod who built Nineveh, and the cities in Genesis 10:11–12. The discovery of the fifteen Jubilees texts found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls has since shown that, according to the Jewish sects of Qumran, Genesis 10:11 affirms the apportionment of Nineveh to Ashur. The attribution of Nineveh to Ashur is also supported by the Greek Septuagint, King James Bible, Geneva Bible, and by Roman historian Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*.⁵ Nineveh was the flourishing capital of the Assyrian Empire (2 Kings 19:36), and was the home of King Sennacherib, King of Assyria, during the Biblical reign of King Hezekiah (יְהִיזְכְּיָהוּ) and the lifetime of Judean prophet Isaiah (ישעיה). As recorded in Hebrew scripture, Nineveh was also the place where Sennacherib died at the hands of his two sons, who then fled to the vassal land of *ʾrrt* (Urartu) (Isaiah 37:37-38). The book of the prophet Nahum is almost exclusively taken up with prophetic denunciations against Nineveh. Its ruin and utter desolation are foretold. Its end was strange, sudden, and tragic.⁶ Archaeological discoveries show the ruins of Nineveh are surrounded by the remains of a massive stone and mudbrick wall dating from about 700 BC. About 12 km in length, the wall system consisted of an ashlar stone retaining wall about 6 metres (20 ft) high surmounted by a mudbrick wall about 10 metres (33 ft) high and

⁵ Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*.⁵ (*Antiquities*, i, vi, 4)

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15 metres (49 ft) thick. The stone retaining wall had projecting stone towers spaced about every 18 metres (59 ft).⁷

Jonah's attitude and His emotional interference in the Nineveh Mission

A constable observes that unlike his two predecessors, Elijah and Elisha, Jonah also ministered in and to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, as well as in Phoenicia and Aram. Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet on record whom God sent to a heathen nation with a message of repentance.⁸ Nahum's later ministry to Nineveh consisted of announcing certain overthrow, although, had the Ninevites repented again, God might have relented again. Jonah was Israel's "foreign missionary," in that he went with a message from God to a foreign people, whereas Jonah's fellow Israelite prophet, Hosea, was Israel's "home missionary." However, Jonah did not have a missionary's proper attitude, a missionary's message of hope, or a missionary's objective of bringing his audience into a personal relationship.⁹ He regretted the repentance of the Ninevites, while wishing them instant divine judgment and punishment.

Possible condition in Nineveh could have influenced Jonah's perception and rejection to take the message of Yahweh to the country

From its historical origin, the association of Nimrod to the building of Nineveh shows that the city was founded on disobedience to God. Donald argued for a more specific time within this period for Jonah's visit to Nineveh, namely, during the reign of Assur-dan III (772-755 B.C.).¹⁰ Nineveh became one of the capitals of Assyria during the reign of Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), and it became Assyria's sole capital during the reign of his son, Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.).² This city stood on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. It had walls 100 feet high and 50 feet thick, and the main one, punctuated by 15 gates, was over seven and one-half miles long. The total population was probably about 600,000, including the people who lived in the suburbs outside the city walls (cf. 4:11). The residents were idolaters and worshipped Asur and Ishtar, the chief male and female deities, as did almost all the Assyrians.

Jonah's nationality and religious conviction

In the catastrophe orchestrated by his stubbornness, Jonah somehow shows religious ego and pride, and projected his religious tradition even though he was not true to duty. "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9). Scholars who studied the pattern of prophetic ministry in Africa have emphasized that Nigerian pastors and prophets display high level of selfishness and pride even when they do not follow strictly the principles of the God who allowed them to operate in the prophetic office.

⁷ Diana Pickworth, Excavations at Nineveh: The Halzi Gate, Iraq, vol. 67, no. 1, Nineveh. Papers of the 49th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Part Two, pp. 295–316, 2005

⁸ Constable Thomas, Notes on the Book of Jonah, 2023

⁹ Constable Thomas.

¹⁰ Wiseman Donald, "Jonah's Nineveh," Tyndale Bulletin 30 (1979):29-51.

The interference of ethno-religious and political background in Prophetic ministry: The Nigerian Case Study

Studies in the prophetic and pastoral offices in the Nigerian state shows similarity between Jonah's ideology and the contemporary time. Biwul argues that many claimants to the pastoral ministry in Nigeria are more self-centred than sheep-centred.¹¹ They fail to pay careful attention to the functional descriptions of the pastoral identity and peddle certain elements tribalism and hatred, making the theological foundation for their vital ministry is slipping from their grasp. The society is witnessing a time when pastoral ministry is approached from a humanistic perspective rather than from the standpoint of biblical theology.¹² Chuga maintains that Nigerians especially the clerics engage in serious tribalism. "Always emphasise their tribe. They think first of their tribe".¹³ Scholars argue that Nigerian prophets see visions, even on political matters in favour of their tribes as well as peddling political tribalism among members.

Conclusion

The study reveals that God's dealings with Jonah are even more important than His dealings with the Ninevites, from the standpoint of the book's narratives. It shows that He does not accept or approve a ministry run by selfishness and ethnic biasness. It important to acknowledge that Yahweh's supremacy supersedes every human sociological perspective and tribal bigotry, even as the history of Nineveh's repentance and salvation from evil can be found in the Hebrew Tanak, also known as the Old Testament, and referred to in the Christian New Testament and in the Quran 37:139-148. The study shows that God was consistent throughout, in contrast to Jonah's hypocritical inconsistency. Therefore Nigerian clerics are charged and challenged to live above personal and tribal prejudice in discharging their divine mandates and religious calling, making sure that the will of Yahweh (Allah) prevails over their human weaknesses. The inclusion of the phrase 'king of Nineveh' (*melek nineveh*), which also connotes king of Assyria shows that irrespective of how horrible the political setting of a nation could be, Yahweh still has the final say. He can redeem or destroy.

¹¹ Biwul Kamsem, "A paradigm shift in pastoral ministry in twenty-first century Nigeria: An examination of the trends, causes and its implications", STJ vol.4 n.1 Stellenbosch 2018

¹² Biwul

¹³ Chuga Reuben, Tribalism root cause of crises in Nigerian churches.

<https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2019/10/20/tribalism-root-cause-of-crisis-in-nigerian-churches>

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