

Article of the Month – January 2011

Missiological Observations in the OT (4) – Jonah

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The last topic in our short series on Old Testament mission perspectives is the book of Jonah. This unique, fascinating story teaches us *different aspects* of missions. ‘Jonah’ means ‘dove’ – a meek, peaceful animal – and the crux of his story seems to be the turning of a rebel into a man of compassion. Apparently, the book is more about God’s work *in* man than His work *through* man. Like Jonah, God wants *us to be* (a Godly person) before we can *do* (His work properly). Why had Jonah become such a

difficult man?

There were different reasons. Jonah had received a word from God for king Jeroboam II (793-753 BC), like: ‘King, retake your territory from the Arameans! I empower you to do so. Go, take what belongs to Israel!’ Jeroboam acted upon that word and reclaimed the territory from the Syrians.¹ That established Jonah’s reputation at the court and caused a nationalistic attitude in his thinking with regard to defeating Israel’s enemies. During his life-time Syrian influence had decreased, but a more powerful enemy now loomed at the horizon. The Assyrian Empire had built up power and its threat became real in Jonah’s day. No wonder that he, used to friend-foe thinking, refused to proclaim God’s salvation to them. In Jonah’s opinion, enemies were to be beaten, not blessed. Why bless a danger towards Israel? His loyalty, sympathy and compassion only applied to Israel but God wanted to create more space *for the nations* in Jonah’s heart.

Jonah’s role in missions is still not popular because we too, tend to shrink away from vocations that call us to countries that have poverty, disease, rough terrain and climates, the threat of persecution or lack of comfort.² Do we understand why God challenged Jonah’s ‘political’ theology? And is it not equally hard for Him today to thrust forth laborers into His harvest?³ Jonah needed to be kicked into the right direction; sometimes so do we!

God assigns duties to His laborers, but what if they disobey? Does He fire them? On the contrary: He showed compassion to Jonah, wanting *him* to learn to display compassion to others. We don’t know whether he ever did. Important is that we don’t make the same mistakes. God took ten steps to bring Jonah back to obedience: He sent a storm on the sea (1:4); the gentile (!) captain of the ship called Jonah to prayer (1:6); Jonah was found guilty by the dice (1:7); he was interrogated by the sailors (1:8); he had to explain his sins to God in front of unbelievers (1:9,10); he had to plead guilty (1:12); he was shamed by the prayers of the gentiles (1:14); he had to undergo God’s uncomfortable ride back in a fish (1:17); and

¹ 2 Kings 14:23-25

² Maybe the 10⁰-40⁰ Window for today’s missionaries can be compared with what Assyria meant to Jonah?

³ Matt. 9:38 The Greek word in that text for ‘thrust forth’ is *εξβαλλω* (*exballoo*) which means ‘to kick out’

although he learnt to pray again, he failed to confess his sin (2:1-10). Finally, he obeyed his original assignment (3:1-3).

However, choosing to be obedient did not mean that Jonah was now convinced of his wrong attitude or that he retook his original assignment willingly. It is remarkable, that God arranged circumstances to fit His goals: He sent a storm, then a fish that was to return Jonah to land. Once Jonah was in Assyria, God's display of power continued by providing a vine, a worm and an east wind.⁴ All events were meant to get Jonah to where God wanted him to be. What a beautiful picture of how God guides His children, and such an assurance that He is willing to go the same lengths to lead *us* to Christ-likeness!

Unwillingly the run-away missionary had become a witness to the nations by telling gentile sailors about his God, causing them to pray and to bring sacrifices,⁵ and showing them by example that it is better for one man to die than the whole people to perish.⁶ And so, even in his disobedience, Jonah became a *type of Christ*. Jesus Himself recognized this later when He compared His three days in the grave with Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish.⁷ Becoming a *type* of Jesus, beautiful as it is, is not God's ultimate goal; becoming *like* Jesus is. We see God working at that in Jonah's life throughout the book. Jonah also typifies the people of Israel in their failing witness to the surrounding nations.

When he finally started his 900 km walk towards Nineveh – a desert trip of five weeks – he was still not in the mood to preach the God he knew so well.⁸ He decided for a hell-and-damnation approach,⁹ with a positive result he had *not* desired. He did have a good God-image: if only he had believed with his heart what he confessed with mouth!

God wanted Jonah to intercede, just like Abraham, praying for Sodom or Moses, praying for Israel.¹⁰ This would have turned him into a meek man. In spite of his un-prayerful and bad-attitude preaching, the whole city repented in sackcloth and ashes with prayer and fasting.

But God did not give up on His uncompassionate servant: in their dialogues the contrast between the three times 'but Jonah...'¹¹ and three times 'but the Lord' or 'but God'¹² is vividly expressed. The sad end of Jonah's story is that he apparently hardened his heart.¹³ He had become used to hardening because he had not humbled himself by confessing his earlier disobedience.¹⁴ The last we see of him is the 'Elijah syndrome'¹⁵: he wanted to die after his assignment was over. Jonah shows us that whoever allows the poison of moaning in his life usually continues in that attitude. Maybe, God sometimes has bigger headaches in bringing His children to obedience, than in reaching the Gentiles with the Gospel!

⁴ Jonah 4:6-8

⁵ 1:14-16

⁶ Compare with John 18:14;

⁷ Matt. 12:40

⁸ Jonah 4:2

⁹ 3:4

¹⁰ Gen. 18:16-33 and Ex. 32:7-14, 30-34 respectively

¹¹ Jonah 1:3,5; 4:1

¹² 4:4,9,10

¹³ 4:1-9

¹⁴ 2:1-10

¹⁵ 1 Kings 19:4

