

## BOOK REVIEW

*JPS Bible Commentary – Jonah*, Uriel Simon, ed., Lenn J. Schramm, trans., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999, 95 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

The Book of Jonah defies easy classification. What is its literary genre: is it meant to be read as history? What are its themes: is there one central theme? Uriel Simon, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at Bar-Ilan University, masterfully addresses these and many other questions in this revised and expanded edition of the Hebrew original, which appeared as part of the series entitled *Mikra Le-Yisra'el: A Bible Commentary for Israel*, a scientific-historical commentary on the Tanakh. In his Introduction, Simon explains that Talmudic sages, medieval exegetes, and modern scholars have sought to identify a central theme that unites all the elements of the book. In the past, there were three popular broad definitions, each of which Simon dismisses in turn. *Atonement versus Repentance*: Tradition designates Jonah as the *haftarah* for Yom Kippur, thereby suggesting that repentance is the key element, but only chapter 3 actually deals with this theme. *Universalism versus Particularism*: Whereas this interpretation is adopted by such luminaries as Rashi, Radak, and Abraham ibn Ezra, Simon argues that this "view has no substantial anchor in the text" and is rejected by most modern Jewish Bible scholars, although "it remains attractive to most Christian scholars" (p. ix). *Prophecy: Realization versus Compliance*: This view, favored by Saadiah Gaon, Rashi, Radak, and many modern scholars, is dismissed by Simon because "there is no real sign in the Book of Jonah of the prophet's anguish that his prediction did not come to pass" (p. xi). Finally, the approach that Simon accepts is *Compassion: Justice versus Mercy*. This approach "explains the plot, the characters, and the dialogue as embodying the primordial struggle between justice and mercy" (p. xiii), and in Simon's view it provides a central theme for the entire book.

Simon deals at length with the use of irony in Jonah. He makes a good case for irony in the book, but opts for Compassionate Irony in place of Ironic

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Satire, seeing Jonah as "a genuinely pathetic figure in his hopeless struggle with his God" (p. xxi), and noting that "what irony it does contain is not particularly biting" (p. xxii). Simon buttresses his argument further on when he writes that the "paradoxical tension" between God's "inordinate severity with Jonah" and "extraordinary leniency with Nineveh" is "resolved only when Jonah comes to realize that the will of [God] is not arbitrary, but compassionate, for those who are near and those who are far" (p. xxiv). These arguments are, to my mind, not wholly convincing in light of Simon's previous statement that there is no sign of the prophet's anguish that his prediction did not come to pass.

Other features in the Introduction address the unity of the book and the provenance of the psalm in chapter two. There are some interesting parallels with the prophecy of Jeremiah (see Jer. 18:7-8). Simon looks at chiasmic elements in the book, and considers the date of Jonah's composition.

The densely written Introduction is followed by the actual commentary on Jonah, which makes up just over half of this volume. Simon divides Jonah's four chapters into seven segments which begin with *The Command and Its Violation*, feature topics such as *In the Belly of the Fish: Submission*, and *In Doomed Nineveh: The Repentance of the Sinners*, and end with *East of Nineveh: Acquiescence*.

Simon's writing is at times somewhat turgid, and he is given to over-long sentences, yet there is a wealth of material in this volume, supplemented by a good bibliography. His wide-ranging familiarity with the many comments and commentaries about Jonah, from Talmudic times to the modern period, is impressive. This volume is a welcome addition to modern scholarship on the Book of Jonah.