

DID GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

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Dr. Douglas Blount
Dallas Theological Seminary

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by
Karl Hanschen
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11509 Mayo Street, Austin, TX, 78748

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Jonah 3:10 gives great fodder for dispute when it comes to understanding God. At issue in this verse is whether or not God can and did change His mind. This paper will explore briefly the context of Jonah 3:10, probe the usage of the term creating this dispute, and present this author's opinion to solving the conflict.

The Context

Perhaps the most misunderstood and misapplied Old Testament book in churches today, Jonah depicts a peculiar journey, one apropos to the fantastic stories of the Bible. While many errantly believe that Jonah is a hero worthy of adulation because of survival and preaching, the truth is that he is a racist, hell-bent on preventing any mercy being shown by God to nations other than his own.

The story begins with God instructing Jonah to journey to Nineveh and there pronounce judgment against its people. Not too keen on the idea, Jonah decides to head to the other end of the known world in defiance of his marching orders. To get Jonah's attention, God stirs up a great oceanic storm on Jonah's escape route. Once his fellow passengers had thrown him overboard, God then has a giant fish swallow him. After Jonah was vomited up, God proceeds to commission him again to go and speak His words to Nineveh. This time Jonah does as he's told.

Jonah, instead of going to the heart of the city, remains on the perimeter and declares that Nineveh has 40 days until God overthrows it. Word of the pending doom reaches the ears of Nineveh's king, and a state of emergency is declared. The king dons mourning attire and mandates everyone and everything in the city is to do the same. In addition, everyone is to fast and pray and repent—all in the hope that God might change His mind and issue a stay of

Nineveh's execution. Then comes the contentious verse, 3:10, where the text says that's precisely what happened: God relented.

Does One Word Make All the Difference?

Did God relent? To answer, first one must assess the translation of the original Hebrew. The term in question is נָחַם. The NASB95, the ESV, and the NKJV translate it as 'relented', which in present tense means "to become less severe, harsh, or strict usually from reasons of humanity."¹ Rather than just dialing down what God was about to do, the NRSV and the NLT emphasize a more significant overhaul in the course of events by interpreting נָחַם as 'changed his mind'. To altogether avoid any theological turmoil, the NIV renders נָחַם as 'had compassion'. Of the 98 instances of נָחַם in the Old Testament, only 12 in the NASB are some form of relent. On the other hand, 44 are converted to a variation of comfort and 8 pertain to the changing of one's mind. Thomas explains that נָחַם is a form of נָחַם (nacham), which is a primary root word meaning "to be sorry, console oneself."² Wilson takes this definition a step further to include "repent, regret, be comforted, [or] comfort."³ The Septuagint understood the word נָחַם to mean μετενόησεν, from the Greek word μετανοέω, meaning "repent"⁴ or "to change ones mind or purpose".⁵ While I am not a specialist in the conversion of ancient Hebrew to contemporary English, this data certainly suggests that the word נָחַם is rightly understood to mean a change of heart and mind coupled with a change of action. Nonetheless, the absence of repentance and of

¹ Merriam-Webster Inc., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, eleventh ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

² Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

³ Marvin R. Wilson, "נָחַם," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 570.

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 161.

⁵ H.G. Liddell, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 503.

needing to change found in God is boldly asserted by Balaam and Samuel (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29), so there must be an explanation for such a choice in diction.

The Case for Anthropomorphism

In the opinion of this author, the debate as to whether or not God can or did change His mind created by **נִנְּאָה** can be settled by the assertion that the author of Jonah—presumably Jonah himself,⁶ though some scholars disagree⁷—used an anthropomorphism.

“Anthropomorphism refers to descriptions of God’s being, actions and emotions ... in human terms. God is invisible, infinite and without a body, but human characteristics are frequently ascribed to God in order to communicate information about his nature or acts.”⁸ In other words, saying that God changed His mind, repented, or relented is a means of putting human understanding on Divine behavior.

Three arguments substantiate such an assertion: the text, the concept, and the other occurrences. Closer examination of the text of Jonah reveals three facets that support this claim of anthropomorphism. In Jonah 3:7-9, the king of Nineveh issues a decree for the city to humble themselves by fasting and wearing sackcloth, to pray, and to repent of their violence and wickedness. Why? The king hopes that if they change course, then maybe God will too (Jonah 3:9). The same base word, **נָחַם**, which is used in verse 10 to describe what God’s course of action is used to by the pagan king to describe his hope. The author appears not to be making a statement about the character and nature of God but rather that God approved of what Nineveh’s king and people had done in response to the pronouncement of judgment.

⁶ John D. Hannah, “Jonah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 1460–1.

⁷ Donald F. Ackland, “Jonah,” in *The Teacher’s Bible Commentary: A Concise, Thorough Interpretation of the Entire Bible Designed Especially for Sunday School Teachers*, eds. Franklin H. Paschall and Herschel H. Hobbs (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1972), 556.

⁸ T. Longman III, “Anthropomorphism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 30.

Besides, to base a theological premise on an unbelieving king's understanding of the nature of God is dangerous at best. Most deities outside Israel were made in the image of man, with all his faults and foibles included. So naturally this king would assume that YHWH was just like their own gods—that He could be manipulated or persuaded to change His mind. Here is how Nineveh's primary goddess, Ishtar, is depicted:

Two aspects of the character of Ishtar were prominent: eroticism and belligerence. She was celebrated as a goddess of war, but at the same time she was vitally involved in the realm of sexuality and fecundity. When she descends to the nether world, mating and procreation cease on earth. She was not viewed with universal admiration. Her role in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is undignified, and she is taunted by the hero Gilgamesh as a faithless lover.⁹

Nineveh's gods demonstrated no moral perfection, so why would he think Israel's had any?

Now, fast-forward to Jonah chapter four. In verse one, Jonah is upset because God relented. Jonah wanted wrath poured out on the nation oppressing his people. So this whole mercy deal did not float his boat. Looking then at the next verse, it reads: "He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2, NASB95). Notice that Jonah knew what would happen if he went to Nineveh, which means he knew how Nineveh would respond and how God would treat them. If the course of action was foreknown, then such awareness strongly supports the case that there was no change in God's plan. There was no surprise, nothing unanticipated. God did what was expected of Him. He wanted the Ninevites to turn from their evil ways. Hence He sent Jonah with a message that would accomplish such a goal—an obvious goal which Jonah opposed and wanted no part in from the get-go.

⁹ Robert M. Good, "Ishtar," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 433.

That said, Jonah, the prophet of YHWH, uses the same word, נָחַם, in verse two that the king of Nineveh used. It is hard to make the case for the same word meaning something different than two previous references in the prior three verses. But this time, נָחַם is deployed in connection with a string of descriptors of God's character. Therefore, by borrowing from a subset of the possible meanings, it seems that the author is saying that God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in compassion, and has little joy in or desire for destroying men.

The second argument for anthropomorphism stems from an appreciation for the omniscience of YHWH. "Omniscience means that God knows everything, and this includes the knowledge not only of things that actually happen but also of things which might happen."¹⁰ Jesus claims this omniscience in Matthew 11:21. Acts 15:18 and Psalm 147:4 also attribute this type of knowledge to God Himself. If a god knows all things and all things possible, then it would stand to reason that an all-powerful, sovereign deity would only choose a course of action that would accomplish the exact outcome he or she so desired. So then why would a god that knows all and all possible outcomes need to change his or her plans? Either he or she didn't know something, something unforeseen happened—both of which violate the established premise of an omniscient god—or the original plan was not going to get the job done—which defies both logic and omniscience. A god would not settle for anything other than his or her desired outcome. Therefore what happened in Nineveh is *exactly* what YHWH wanted to achieve: repentance. And He used the threat of utter ruin to bring it about. In other words, one cannot say that God changed His mind or His course of action.

The third case for anthropomorphism is found in its general use and acceptance in other passages of Scripture that describe God. How was Israel taken out of Egypt? With a mighty hand and an out-stretched arm (Deut 4:34). But does God have arms and hands? No, He is spirit

¹⁰ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).

(John 4:24). God turns a deaf ear (Deut 1:45), but he has neither ear to hear with nor body to turn. He walks without legs (Gen 3:8) and has a face without a head (Ps 27:8). “The Scriptures utilize anthropomorphic language, condescending to the limited abilities of men and women to understand God’s nature and ways.”¹¹ Thus to assert anthropomorphism is not just an end-around to uphold the inerrancy of Scripture, but a means by which mankind rightly understands both what is revealed and the God who is revealed.

Certainly the infinite, eternal God can be known to us only through human imagery, and thus he is represented as thinking and acting in a human manner. Without anthropomorphisms, we could never speak *positively* of God; to try would be to entangle ourselves in deism, which makes God so transcendent that he is never identified with us in our world. When we rush to get rid of the human forms in our talk about God, we sink into meaningless blandness.¹²

A Challenge

Due diligence on this assertion of simple anthropomorphism leads to a worthy counterargument: God’s Own words. The prophet Jeremiah records God saying, “At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy *it*; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it” (Jer 18:7-8, NASB95). The passage suggests that God operates on a contingency plan when it comes to expressions of wrath. While that may alleviate a sense of fatalism when it comes to judgment, I contend that it supports all the more the idea that God uses threats to prompt repentance. That seems to be the point for the litany of prophetic warning. “His threats are actually a tool in his program to reach the hearts of people and lead them to his salvation.”¹³ He wants change, and He knows ahead of time when road will be taken and whether or not He will have to make good on the threat.

¹¹ Longman, “Anthropomorphism,” 31.

¹² Walter C. Kaiser, et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 333.

¹³ James E. Smith, *The Minor Prophets* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1992).

Conclusion

Can God change His Mind? Can He repent or relent? No. YHWH knows all and can map the perfect plan because He also knows all possibilities. Therefore, Jonah 3:10 communicates an affirmation of the Nineveh's repentance by way of an anthropomorphism so that human readers could appreciate the situation. Otherwise God ceases to be the omniscient deity that the Scriptures exclaim Him to be, which then erodes His omnipotence, sovereignty, and supremacy.

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