

**JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY- UNIVERSITY OF JEWISH STUDIES
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Thesis of PhD dissertation

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A parabolic prophetic short story of the Tanakh

**Traditional Jewish and other interpretations of the
Book of Yonah, with a short introduction,
word explanation and translation**

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I. Choice of subject and research task

The books of the twelve small prophets (תרי עשר) can be found among the late prophets (נביאים אחרונים) within the collection of the prophets (נביאים) which is part of the Tanakh (תנ"ך), i.e. the "Old Testament" according to the tradition of Christianity. The fifth book, in between the writings of Obadiah (עבדיה) and Micha (מיכה), is the book of Yonah (יונה), composed of 4 chapters and 48 sentences altogether. This book is a prophetic short story as its narrative is lacking all kinds of historic motives. The prophetic short story is not exempt of irony and didactics, is not a prophet's story, per say, but that of God. The author of the story uses Yonah's person in order to make the lesson of the Almighty clearer and easier to understand. The Book of Yonah is unique, from several aspects, within the prophetic literature. While other prophetic books contain mainly the speeches of prophets, Yonah's book, however, tells about the prophet himself. There is only one sentence of his prophecy which is not really a prophecy but the announcement of God's judgment. This book is a unique one in the sense that a prophet, Yonah, refuses to obey God, first, he does not carry out God's commandment, then only after "some" teaching. When someone has already read and carefully reread this comprehensive and simple story about the disobedient prophet, the big fish swallowing the man, the giant sinful city worthy of God's mercy and the rapidly growing and drying plant, he will experience how much the second reading makes the difference. Compared to what he has first read, he will soon realize that the comprehensiveness and the naivety of the story are nothing more than an illusion. Almost each word of the Book seems to be ambiguous, pushing the reader to further thinking, demanding rereading and searching for a deeper sense. This pressure for search is the stimulus which is the source for constant rereading and attempts to new interpretations and discovering new, up-to-date meanings. The most detailed and complex knowledge of traditional Jewish interpretation and exegesis of the Book can be acquired through midrashim and commentaries. The main characteristic of Jewish commentary is its lack of authoritativeness. It exposes various opinions, refers to sources but does not make any preferences or normative decisions; thus suggesting that a given issue can be approached in different ways. The Jewish commentary is nothing else than the explanation of ever renewing situations and thoughts of life. And this is what I tried to grasp. My aim was to write a new traditional Jewish interpretation that is clear and simple to understand, stemming from the traditions and keeping in mind the spirit of traditional Jewish commentaries. No translation, thus neither a compilation, has been made of the midrashim

and commentaries of Yonah's Book neither in Hungary nor in the Hungarian language up until now. Thus, no interpretation of these has been made in Hungarian until this day.

II. Sources and the structure of the dissertation

Quotations of the Hebrew text of Yonah's Book are from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), which is a common standard in scientific life. The basis for the traditional editions of the Jewish Tanakh was the Biblia Rabbinica (מקראות גדולות), edited by Yakov ben Chayim ibn Adoniya in the 16th century (republished since then several times with an increasing number of commentaries), published in Venice. The editor of this book compiled a version of the text he himself thought to be the most reliable one, based on Hebrew manuscripts he could have access to, dating mainly from the 12th century or later. The text he has created (textus receptus) became so respected that it was considered, up until the middle of the 20th century, to be the most reliable document of the original Hebrew Tanakh, becoming the usual basic text. The editors of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, however, have broken with this tradition and took the most ancient complete Tanakh, the Codex Leningradiensis, the B 19^A sign codex located in St Petersburg as their basis. This codex originates from 1008 and is the most complete and authentic text of the Tanakh.

The source of traditional commentaries (אברהם אבן עזרא, מהר"י קרא, מצודת דוד, רד"ק, רש"י) is the מקראות גדולות while in the case of רבינו בחיי, I translated from a reliable CD (Tanach Plus - Your Digital Library). I have translated מלבי"ם from the aforementioned CD and from the נביאים וכתובים עם פירוש מאיר ליבוש מלבים-ספרי תרי עשר עם פירוש גיא הזיון.

תרגום יונתן בן עוזיאל was also the source for מקראות גדולות.

Excerpts from midrashim and citations from the Mishnah and the Talmud are from two reliable CDs (Tanach Plus - Your Digital Library and חברותא ללומד) with due control and double-checking. I translated the text of מדרש יונה from the collection of אייזענשטיין, י' ד': אוצר מדרשים - למאתים מדרשים קטנים ואגדות ומעשיות.

I have used the following "classical" dictionaries and word explanations for Hebrew texts:

- מאנדלקרן, שלמה: קונקורדנציה לתנ"ך;
- Gesenius, W.: Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament;
- פאללאק, ח' י': נחלת יעקב / מלשון עברית ללשון הונגראי;
- Salamon Widder: Exact and detailed word explanations to the Haftorahs.

The brief outline about the basic principles of traditional Jewish commentaries is based on my own translation of the same topic featuring at the end of traditional editions of the תלמוד בבלי - מסכת ברכות.

My aim with the *introduction* was to provide the most essential data about the *presumed date when the book was composed, its general message, Yonah's name and life and the basic principles and characteristics of Jewish commentaries*. The purpose of the outline illustrating *the structure and brief contents of the Book* was to serve better apprehension. I have included and demonstrated *some unique units of structure* for the sake of curiosity and variety. It was Salamon Widder, a high-school teacher, who made an *exact and detailed word explanation* to the Book of Yonah, in 1927, in the Hungarian language but, as a matter of fact, it is incomplete and some inaccuracies are also featuring in it. The word explanation I have prepared takes the latest scientific results into consideration as well as context and concordances. The *translation* attempts to provide the word by word text of the Book of Yonah, making use of the word explanation and distinctly not in a literary manner. This is followed by a *traditional Jewish interpretation*, which is necessarily subjective, still it is a selection of Jewish commentaries written between Mishnaic times and the 19th century, reflecting a consistent spirituality. I have also prepared an *interpretation* to the Book with a simple emphasis on main characteristics, connections of contents and form. A broader landscape is offered in *other* (Jewish and non-Jewish) *interpretations* (mythological, allegoric, parabolic and a modern one). The Book of Yonah has a role in the synagogue and this is outlined in the chapter *The Book of Yonah in Jewish liturgy*.

The contents of the thesis are as follows:

Foreword

I. Introduction

1. Presumed date when the book was composed and its general message
2. About Yonah's name and life
3. About the basic principles of Jewish commentaries

II. The structure and brief contents of the Book

III. Some unique units of structure

IV. Exact and detailed word explanations, translation and traditional Jewish interpretations

V. One interpretation

VI. Other interpretations

1. A few mythological interpretations
 - a. "Dying-and-rising gods"

b. Hesione and Heracles; Andromeda and Perseus

c. Semiramis

d. Sun myth (Ignaz Goldziher)

e. Moon myth

f. Hindu mythology

g. Excursus

2. A few allegoric interpretations

a. Typological

b. Symbolic

c. Abravanel

d. The Vilna Gaon

e. Excursus

3. Parabolic interpretation

4. A modern Jewish interpretation (Schalom Ben-Chorin)

VII. The Book of Yonah in Jewish liturgy

VIII. Bibliography

III. List of publications in the subject matter of the dissertation

1. The Book of Yonah

Zsidó Történeti & Irodalmi Tár

(Országos Rabbiképző-Zsidó Egyetem, Budapest 2004)

ISBN 963 216 621 3

pp 158

2. Yonah's figure and story in the midrashim

In: Keresztény - Zsidó Teológiai Évkönyv, Budapest 2005. Ed.: József Szécsi

(Keresztény-Zsidó Társaság, Budapest 2005)

ISSN 1785-9581

pp 249-258

3. To the Book of Jonah/Yonah. The duty of the prophet

In: Remény 2006/No. 3. Ed.: Gábor István Benedek

(MAZSIHISZ-BZSH, Budapest 2006)

ISSN 1419-077X

pp 16-20

4. Tradicional Jewish interpretations to the Book of Jonah/Yonah, new translation
In: MAGYAR-ZSIDÓ SZEMLE, new volume, 2007/No. 4. Ed: Tamás Lichtmann
(MTA – OR-ZSE Reasearch Group of Religious Sciences and Országos
Rabbiképző-Zsidó Egyetem, Budapest 2007)
ISSN 1786-3716
pp 121-148

5. Interpretations to the Book of Jonah/Yonah
In: REMÉNY 2007/No.1. Ed.: Gábor István Benedek
(MAZSIHISZ-BZSH, Budapest 2007)
ISSN 1419-077X
pp 15-23

6. To the Book of Jonah/Yonah- another interpretation
In: REMÉNY 2007/ No.3. Ed.: Gábor István Benedek
(MAZSIHISZ-BZSH, Budapest 2007)
ISSN 1419-077X
pp 10-18