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Simon, Uriel  
*Jonah*

The JPS Bible Commentary

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David Marcus  
Jewish Theological Seminary  
New York, NY 10027-4649

This commentary on Jonah by Uriel Simon represents the first volume of the new JPS Bible Commentary series which now takes over from the completed JPS Torah Commentary series. The commentary is not actually new but is a translation of a Hebrew original which appeared as part of the series *Mikra Leyisrae'l: A Bible Commentary for Israel* (1992). Since the Israeli series and the NJPS series share similar aims, that of making available to the Jewish public commentaries combining modern scholarship and traditional Jewish exegesis, this English translation is a welcome first volume to the new JPS series.

This is especially so because Uriel Simon, professor emeritus of Bible at Bar Ilan University, has been one of the pioneers in literary analysis on the Book of Jonah. In this commentary he now makes available to an English audience all the various rhetorical techniques which he and others have observed in the book. These techniques include awareness of the symmetrical arrangement of the book, of repetitions, key words, chiasmus, paronomasia etc. Simon has shown that the book displays a special twofold structural arrangement of content and themes and that the book may be divided into seven scenes each of which have their own inner unity and rhetorical flourishes such as repetition of key words and inclusios. All of these devices are illustrated in the splendid introduction to the present commentary as well as within the body of the commentary itself.

In order to better illustrate certain linguistic qualities of the original Hebrew Simon has chosen not to use the new (and idiomatic) JPS translation (The Tanakh) but to utilize one of his own which ironically looks very close to the old, more literal, JPS translation of 1917. Thus repetition of key words which were concealed in the new JPS translation are now brought to the fore in Simon's translation. For example, Simon translates the key words *qûm* and *qerā* in the first verse of chapter one as "arise" and "cry out" instead of

the *The Tanakh's* "go at once" and "proclaim judgment." In this way, Simon can show that these key words with these same meanings will recur at significant points in the narrative. Similarly with the key word *gādōl*, which occurs twelve times in the story, Simon always translates it as "great" so the reader can easily see connections between "the great city", "the great wind", the great storm", "the great fear (of the sailors)", "the great fish" etc.

The format of this commentary is the same as the previous Torah commentaries. The Hebrew text of Leningrad B19a is set on the upper right side of the page with the English translation aligned with it on the left (though in this particular volume the English font is slightly larger than the Hebrew font), while in the space below is a running commentary on almost every word or phrase. Simon divides the book into seven scenes: 1:1-3, the command and its violation; 1:4-16, in the storm-tossed ship; 2:1-11, in the belly of the fish; 3:1-3a, the repeated command; 3:3b-10, in doomed Nineveh; 4:1-5, outside the pardoned city; 4:6-11, east of Nineveh. Each of these seven scenes is preceded by an introduction and the entire text is preceded by a larger introduction where there are essays on such matters as the theme of the book, its literary genre, the narrative art of the book, and links between Jonah and other books of the Bible.

One of the interesting features of the commentary is the way in which Simon integrates modern literary analysis and Rabbinic exegesis and especially when he points out that some literary features were already noticed by the medieval commentators. Thus, Simon writes that David Kimḥi (1160-1235) noted that the prepositional element *min* in the phrase *mimme ʿē haddāgā* "from the belly of the fish" (2:2) is not an indication of physical location, a mere variation on a prefixed *bet*, "in," in which case "from the belly" would be equivalent to "in the belly." Rather it is a deliberate choice to indicate that Jonah prayed as a result of his distress. Simon verifies Kimḥi's observation by pointing out the same phenomenon in the first words of the psalm: "out of my distress (*mišsarâ lî*) I called to the Lord" (2:3).

Simon classifies the book as a "theological prophetic story" (p. xx), that is, it is both a prophetic story like the stories of Elijah and a fictional tale like that of Job intended to express theological verities in artistic language. The theological issue is that of justice and mercy. Jonah argues for strict justice against a merciful God, who repents of His sentence (p. xii). The fictitious nature of the book allows for its unrealities for matters like Jonah foreseeing in advance Nineveh's repentance and God's gracious response, the fish incident, and the fantastic nature of Jonah's rapid and sweeping influence over the large population of Nineveh (p. xix). Considering his views in the Introduction concerning the unreality of the book it is somewhat surprising to find that on a number of occasions in the body of the commentary Simon analyzes events as though they were real. It is thus unclear why Simon finds it necessary to analyze Jonah's thoughts in the belly of the fish, or why he has to explain the extraordinary length of time it took Jonah

to traverse Nineveh, or why he needs to justify the inclusion of the animals in the acts of mortification in Nineveh. It would seem that stressing the unreality of these events in his line-by-line commentary (as in the Introduction) would have eliminated the need for such rationalizations.

In general though this is a most readable commentary which will both educate and stimulate its target audience. Simon has set a high standard for this new series and we look forward with anticipation to the next announced volume, that of the Five Megillot.