

A small Hebrew word, רעה (in some older dictionaries it may be found under the root רע or רעע, you may have to search using the Strong's number or the English translation), weaves in and out through the book of Jonah. It first appears in 1:2: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil (רעה) has come up before me" (ESV). This seems simple enough (evil/wickedness followed by all translations) until one dives further into a lexicon and discovers that the same Hebrew root can also be translated "distress." So, Jonah was sent because of their "distress"? What are the implications of this? Is it possible that their evil relates to their distress? What is Jonah's perspective?

For nearly 300 years, the brutal Assyrian Empire was the dominant world power from 911 B.C. through 612 B.C. God's message concerning them is one of condemnation. Though denouncing the sins of other nations was familiar to Israel, their prophets rarely preached to them. God's purpose of Jonah's call to Nineveh is "that their evil has come before me" (Jonah 1:2). The Lord would judge Assyria for its arrogance even though it was his will to use the empire to discipline his people Israel.

Jonah's rendering of רעה (*ra'ah*) occurs ten times, in more than a few meanings: wickedness (1:2; 3:8, 10); destruction (3:10; 4:2); calamity (of the storm, 1:7, 8); and distress/discomfort (Jonah's, 4:1, 6). Examining רעה determines that its potential translation as "distress" is perhaps the result of Nineveh's evil against Israel, though this idea is never specified. In 3:10, there is wordplay between the inference of wickedness and destruction: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their *evil (ra'ah)* way, God relented of the *disaster (ra'ah)* that he had said he would do to them." They ceased their *ra'ah*, and as a result, God ended His. Finally, Jonah's *ra'ah* experience (4:1, 6) is two-fold. According to Jonah, (*ra'ah*) describes God's mercy: "it was evil to Jonah, a great evil"), which itself is wicked.¹ One finds that Jonah's message is never directly stated, leaving open the chances of reply for both Nineveh and God. The lack of necessary information requires one to wait behindhand to see the complete picture for the reader.

"There is no inherent delight in the judgment of those who give themselves to wickedness. Jonah, in wanting to see Nineveh destroyed, represents a natural inclination for Israel, but it is an inclination that must be repudiated. As a reading of the entire book demonstrates."² In light of רעע, one believes that the presentation of evil, misery, *distress*, and injury (rendered רע) associated with Jeremiah 42:6, is related to those who fall into the judgment of God, as did the Ninevites for attacking Israel, and Jonah, for his disobedience. Jonah is simply called to pass on the message which he has received—God's judgment for Nineveh's רעה (evil) so that they would repent. God's graciousness to Jonah was no different than Jonah's graciousness to Nineveh. He is thankful for his deliverance, but not for theirs. "While God is always the enemy of evil, and although that evil is often attached to the nations in the OT, he is no less its enemy when it appears in his own people."³

¹Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: *A Reader's Edition* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2014), 1083-1086. (רעה), word study analysis: "evil, wickedness, misfortune, calamity, disaster," + 3 m p ps.

²Thomas R. Schreiner., *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 408.

³Daniel C. Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Mission, Salvation and Spirituality in the Book of Jonah*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 26.

