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From coercion to conversation: Reimagining divine mandate and cross-cultural engagement through the lens of Jonah

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Traditional Christian missiology, rooted in exclusivist soteriology, struggles to offer a coherent and ethically responsible framework for engagement in Ghana's religiously pluralist context, yet theological resistance to redefining mission persists. This article aims to demonstrate that the Book of Jonah provides substantive biblical warrant for a redefined, contextually sensitive missiology, one rooted in radical compassion rather than coercive proclamation. The article seeks to distil operative principles that can reframe Christian missionary practice in Ghana while respecting religious difference and maintaining confessional integrity. This will be achieved through a synchronic literary analysis of the Book of Jonah to critique religious exclusivism and propose models of a divine mandate rooted in compassion rather than coercive declarations. The Jonah narrative deconstructs nationalist zeal and rather highlights Yahweh's concern for the pagan 'other'.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This yields five operative principles for mission: moral imperative as foundation, qualitative transformation over quantitative expansion, rejection of coercive evangelistic methods, a missional ethic grounded in creation theology and the humility of the missionary. Therefore, the study seeks to develop an ethically sound, biblically based missiological alternative that shifts from forceful proclamation to compassionate discourse.

Keywords: coercion; conversation; divine mandate and cross-cultural engagement; Jonah; inter-religious dialogue; creation theology.

Introduction

The contemporary Ghanaian pluralist context presents a significant theological and practical challenge to traditional Christian missiology, which has often been predicated on paradigms of exclusivity and replacement (eds. Asante & Kpobi 2018; Asima 2023). Theologians such as Knitter (1985, 1987) and Smith (1963) have argued compellingly for a redefinition of missionary goals, advocating for an approach grounded in interreligious dialogue, mutual respect and a recognition of divine activity beyond the confines of the Christian tradition (Brown 2023). While this proposition offers a more coherent framework for peaceful coexistence, it has been met with robust theological resistance, particularly concerning the perceived compromise of the finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ (D'Costa 2000; Jacobs-Vandegeer 2017; Ten Kate 2015).

This article enters this debate to posit that the impetus for a redefined, contextually sensitive missiology is not merely a modern concession but finds support within the biblical narrative itself. Through a close literary and theological exegesis of the Book of Jonah, a text profoundly concerned with the tension between prophetic particularity and divine universality, this study argues that the biblical witness critiques religious exclusivism and models a divine mandate centred on radical compassion rather than coercive proclamation. The narrative's deconstruction of Jonah's nationalist zeal and how it culminates in Yahweh's concern for the pagan 'other' provide a critical hermeneutical key for contemporary mission. Consequently, this article aims to move beyond theoretical debate to stimulate discussion on developing ethically responsible and theologically robust practices for Christian mission in the religiously pluralistic context of modern Ghana.

This discussion proceeds in four parts. Firstly, I establish the theoretical landscape by examining the historical and theological underpinnings of traditional Christian mission, with its exclusivist soteriology, juxtaposed with the realities of religious pluralism. Engaging theologians like Knitter

and Smith, I frame the central tension between the particularity of Christian confession and the universality of divine grace. Secondly, I undertake a synchronic literary analysis of Jonah to illuminate its subversive theology of mission, focusing on Yahweh's transnational compassion, the ironic contrast between prophetic disobedience and pagan repentance and the rhetorical force of the concluding divine interrogative (4:10–11). This analysis reveals a divine critique of tribalistic exclusivism and a missional paradigm centred on God's concern for the Other. Thirdly, I come up with operative principles from the exegetical findings and bring them into critical dialogue with contemporary Christian missionary practice in Ghana, proposing a reframed, contextually sensitive missional ethic. Finally, I synthesise the arguments into a conclusion that outlines a compassionate, dialogical model for Christian mission, one that respects religious difference while maintaining confessional integrity as a faithful response to the theological vision of Jonah.

Christian mission and pluralism

Christian missionary work constitutes a deliberate endeavour to propagate the Christian faith. For many Christians, the primary theological impetus for this global mission is derived from the Matthean passage known as the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 (Bosch 1991; Pettengill 2024). However, to view mission solely through the lens of religious obligation is to overlook its profound philosophical and ethical dimensions. Missionary activity is inevitably freighted with a constellation of underpinnings: it makes specific epistemic claims about truth and revelation; it participates in the construal of a social reality by introducing new symbols, rituals and worldviews; and it is deeply implicated in negotiations of identity, morality and power relations (Mahieddin & Boissevain 2022; eds. Van Mulder, Coomans & Vanysacker 2025). This is because religion, particularly for the devout, transcends the category of a mere belief system. As anthropologist Geertz (1973:87–125) argues, religion functions as a cultural system: a framework of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. Consequently, religion is not merely an element within culture; for many communities, it is the very bedrock of cultural identity, implicitly shaping behaviour and informing worldviews at both conscious and unconscious levels (Sanneh 2009). The missionary encounter, therefore, is not simply a transfer of beliefs but a meeting of entire cultural systems, with all the potential for both enrichment and hegemony that such a meeting implies (eds. Van Mulder et al. 2025).

What theology underlies Christian mission? The dominant theological framework animating much of Christian missionary endeavour is that of God as Redeemer. This framework posits a fundamental estrangement between humanity and God, originating in the archetypal rebellion of Adam and Eve (International Theological Commission 1995). The divine solution to this state of sin is redemption accomplished through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The cross is thus the pivotal event, simultaneously expressing God's judgment on sin and his loving grace (McGrath 2017). It serves to vindicate divine righteousness while offering universal, potential salvation to all who profess faith in Christ. Within this soteriology, Jesus is the exclusive gateway to reconciliation; through faith in him, sinners are deemed righteous by God, resulting in transformed lives characterised by faith, hope, love and obedience (Anatolios 2020). The resurrection confirms God's ultimate victory over sin and death, finalising this redemptive narrative (Thiselton 2015).

This theology, with its specific claims of universal sin and exclusive salvation through Christ, forms the core message of traditional missions. Its insistence raises a pressing contemporary question: Can a missiology grounded in such exclusivist tenets continue to thrive, or even be considered ethically viable, within the context of today's religiously pluralistic world? In the context of an increasingly pluralised global society, a critical re-examination of the theological presuppositions underlying Christian missionary work is both urgent and necessary. The reality of sustained interaction and tension between diverse religious traditions and their adherents demands a move beyond exclusivist paradigms towards a more theologically sensitive missiology. This imperative for theological redefinition was notably advanced by scholars such as Langdon Gilkey (1975, 1991), who, reflecting on the geopolitical transformations following World War II, argued that Western Christian thought could no longer legitimately interpret world affairs through a singularly Judeo-Christian lens (Stenger 1991). Gilkey contended that the twin forces of decolonisation and the rapid industrialisation and militarisation of non-Western nations revealed a world where Western Christendom was no longer the central geopolitical actor (Tracy 1999). The civilisations of Asia, the Near East, the Middle East and Africa, whose cultural and social structures are profoundly shaped by religious and philosophical traditions distinct from Christianity, asserted their autonomy and ontological parity, thereby challenging the hegemony of Christian theological frameworks and necessitating a more dialogical approach to interreligious engagement and mission (Gilkey 1999; Hartman 2025).

Theological and political scholarship underscores the imperative of rethinking mission in a pluralistic world. Gilkey's (1976) post-war analysis, which argued for a move beyond a Judeo-Christian hermeneutic for global affairs, finds a potent analogue in political scientist Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis (Fox 2019). Huntington (1996) posited that post-Cold War conflict would originate not between nations but between distinct cultural blocs, identifying Western civilisation as fundamentally shaped by Christianity. He predicted this bloc would face challenges from other cultural-religious systems, notably Islam, a dynamic fuelled by the assertion of identity and demographic strength (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol 2019).

From a theological perspective, pluralism signifies more than mere diversity; it is the normative acknowledgement of

multiple, valid faith traditions, each contributing unique depth and value to the human experience. This stands in stark contrast to exclusivist or inclusivist paradigms. A pluralist approach often understands religions as distinct cultural systems, each comprising an integrated body of knowledge and a unique framework of values that constitutes its philosophical and ethical foundations. Consequently, each tradition possesses its own internal rationality. Christianity, for instance, is justified by its own totality of values and cannot be adequately apprehended through an Islamic or Buddhist conceptual framework and vice versa. This cultural pluralism therefore asserts the coexistence of multiple truths or ultimate realities, directly challenging inclusivist models (Atkinson 2016; Grzelak 2018; Kvanvig 2021; Lynch 2001; Nedelea 2015).

In an era defined by a plurality of value systems corresponding to distinct religious cultures, the project of securing global harmony presents a formidable challenge. This complexity has fuelled a significant backlash against multiculturalism, often rooted in anxieties about the 'Other' and a nostalgic yearning for homogenous communities bound by thick, shared identities (Donnelly 2025). This dynamic is elucidated through the concept of 'othering', a process whereby a group or individual is cast in the role of the 'other' to establish one's own identity through opposition and frequent vilification (ed. Eriksson 2016; Pableo 2020). This process transcends mere scapegoating as it operates by systematically denying the 'other' the defining characteristics of the 'same', such as rationality, dignity and nobility. The consequence is a pervasive sense of alienation within othered groups, which can precipitate demands for acceptance and equality or in extreme cases, strategies aimed at reverse domination (Pableo 2020; Habermann 2024).

The mechanisms of othering, whether real or perceived, are often imperceptible to those belonging to the dominant, 'normalised' group. An individual within a racial majority, for instance, is less likely to recognise institutional racism because majoritarian frameworks are implicitly accepted as the standard, rendering alternative experiences and institutions 'abnormal' (Bracey & McIntosh 2020). This analytical lens remains potent when the term 'racism' is substituted with 'religion'. Religious majorities can similarly normalise their worldview, inadvertently or systemically framing religious minorities as the aberrant other (Mulugeta 2024; Ryan 2020). A frequent response to this marginalisation is a retreat into religious fundamentalism, which Nagata (2001) defines as an extreme, irreducible attachment to beliefs considered sacrosanct and non-negotiable. Fundamentalism often emerges from a sense of perceived othering and seeks to impose its particularistic interpretation universally, thereby exacerbating inter-religious tensions (Mulugeta 2024; Pratt 2010).

Addressing religious othering requires a reimagined approach to Christian mission that balances evangelistic zeal with a deep respect for other religious cultures. This necessitates identifying a common foundation upon which constructive dialogue can be built. While commonality cannot be found in theism (as evidenced by non-theistic traditions like Theravada Buddhism) or a unified soteriological goal (as traditional African religions prioritise communal fulfilment over afterlife salvation), a viable candidate emerges: a shared moral interest in human flourishing (eds. McDaniel & Kilgoe 2024; Penn, Groff & Kourosh 2020). Across diverse ritualistic and supernatural frameworks, religions fundamentally function as systems oriented towards creating, shaping and solving human needs (Geertz 1973). The common ground for productive engagement, therefore, is a universal commitment to humanist concerns, the service to humanity and the promotion of human dignity. By prioritising this shared ethical imperative over parochial theological interests, evangelism can proceed in a manner that avoids offending sensibilities and instead wins admiration through a demonstrated commitment to the common good (G20 Interfaith Forum 2025). It is from this foundational premise that I proceed to the textual engagement.

Reading Jonah

While the motif of divine concern for the nations is present elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, notably in the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 12:1–3; 22:15–18), the mediatorial role of Moses and the psalmist's calls for universal praise and proclamation (Ps 47:1; 67:1–3; 100:1), the Book of Jonah stands as the Old Testament's most sophisticated and explicit narrative exploration of mission (Timmer 2011; Van Groningen 1990). Its primacy lies not in being the only text but in its unique literary and theological form; it is a sustained narrative that dramatises the tension between Israel's particular election and Yahweh's universal sovereignty and compassion (Sasson 1990; Trible 1994). Critics, however, note its hyperbolic characterisation, abrupt silences and lack of a formal missiological manual. Although Jonah is not a textbook for didactic missiology, its paradigmatic potential should not be ignored, lest we misunderstand Hebrew narrative as theological ethics. Biblical storytelling uses irony, indirection and rhetorical gaps to encourage reader engagement and ethical inference, as Alter (1981) and Sternberg (1985) show. Jonah serves as a literary paradigm intended to reshape moral imagination through its symmetries, pointed silences (notably the absence of Jonah's final response) and concluding divine interrogative.

Three textual features support this claim. Firstly, the modification of the commissioning formula (Jnh 1:1–2; 3:1–2) from 'cry against' to 'cry to' indicates theological correction. Secondly, the contrast between Jonah's expectations and Yahweh's actions forces readers to choose between competing visions of divine compassion. Thirdly, the open-ended conclusion (Jnh 4:10–11) invites self-examination. As Trible (1994:183) notes, 'The question hangs in the air, unanswered by the prophet, waiting for an answer from all who hear the story'.

Nevertheless, the book's status as a missionary text has been contested (Timmer 2008). A primary objection concerns Jonah's proclamation: a message of imminent judgment devoid of explicit mercy or call to repentance, seemingly lacking 'good news' (Lubeck 1988). While textually valid, this critique overlooks the narrative's deeper architecture (Hays 2024). The core message is not contained in the prophet's brief oracle but revealed through divine actions framing it (Sasson 1990). Jonah's radical contribution is its demonstration that God's concern extends to the archetypal enemy, and divine judgment is subordinated to the greater purpose of mercy (Jnh 4:2, 10–11). Thus, the mission's validity rests not on the prophet's limited message but on God's universal concern for all creation, a paradigm urgently needed for pluralist contexts like Ghana.

This section employs a synchronic, literary-critical methodology to engage the Book of Jonah, privileging its final form as a coherent narrative. Historical-critical questions of authorship, dating and redaction are set aside to focus on the text's literary architecture, which includes plot, characterisation and diction as the primary means for discerning its theological message on mission. My exegesis is heuristic and question-driven, focusing on the nature of Jonah's commission, the portrayal of the Divine and emergent missiological principles. This analysis is not exhaustive but aims to isolate key themes for subsequent contextual application in the next section.

Jonah 1:1–2: Yahweh commissions Jonah

The narrative commences with the conventional prophetic commissioning formula, *wayĕhî dĕbar-yhwh ʾel-yônâ* [the word of Yahweh came to Jonah], a literary device that establishes Jonah's authoritative status as a divine envoy within the tradition of Amos and Jeremiah (Limburg 1993; Sasson 1990). The divine speech is structured around three imperative verbs, *qûm* [arise], *lēk* [go] and *qĕrāʾ* [proclaim]. This defines the relationship as one of sovereign command and expected obedience. Nineveh is identified as a 'great city', its significance matched by the gravity of its condition: its wickedness [*rāʿâ*] has come up before Yahweh [*ʿāltâ rāʿātām lĕpānāy*].

This phrasing is profoundly allusive, evoking two pivotal moments of divine judgment: the pre-deluge assessment of human corruption (Gn 6:5) and the investigation of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 18:21) (Limburg 1993). In both instances, the *coming up* of wickedness precipitated imminent annihilation. The theological innovation in Jonah 1:2, however, lies in what is absent: an immediate decree of destruction (Hays 2024). Instead, Yahweh's declaration functions as a conditional indictment, initiating a judicial process suspended pending prophetic mediation. The commission thus becomes an act of prevenient grace, signalling a stay of execution contingent upon the prophet's proclamation (Lacocque & Lacocque 1981; Sasson 1990).

Jonah 1:3–16: Jonah's flight

Jonah's response is overt disobedience, articulated through actions that invert Yahweh's commands. Commanded to go east to Nineveh, he instead flees west, *millipnê yhwh* [from the presence of Yahweh]. This phrase signifies more than spatial relocation; it denotes theological rebellion, an attempt to remove himself from Yahweh's sovereign authority (Tucker 2006). His descent to Joppa and boarding of the ship execute this flight. Yahweh's response is a violent storm, initiating a series of contrasts between Jonah and the pagan mariners. While the prophet descends into the ship's hold and falls into stupefied sleep [*rādam*], the sailors actively engage the crisis, crying out to their gods and jettisoning cargo. Their earnestness serves as a narrative foil to Jonah's apathy. The ship's captain, mirroring Yahweh's command, orders Jonah to *qûm* [arise!] and call upon his god, an irony that the pagan sailor exhibits more theological awareness than the Hebrew prophet.

Forced by lot, Jonah confesses: 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' (Jnh 1:9). In declaring Yahweh's universal creatorship, he implicitly negates the sailors' localised deities (Stuart 2002:461). Paradoxically, his attempt to escape results in partial fulfilment of his mission among the mariners. The sailors, displaying moral compunction absent in Jonah, first attempt to row to safety. When they finally cast him overboard, the sea calms, validating Yahweh's sovereignty. They respond with fear and offer sacrifices and vows (Jnh 1:16). As Greenberg (1983:16) observes, the pagan sailors function as a 'spiritually sensitive foil to the unresponsive, finally lethargic, prophet'. The episode critiques parochial theology and outlines a missiology grounded in Yahweh's universal sovereignty.

Jonah 2:1–11: Jonah's prayer

Scholars have debated the psalm's place in the narrative; some view it as a later interpolation, others as integral to the composition (Beatty 2006; Landes 1967). Following the methodological commitment to read the final form, this study treats the psalm as essential to the theological architecture. Yahweh sends a great fish to swallow Jonah 2:1, and the prophet remains three days and nights in this liminal space. Within the fish, Jonah surrenders, articulating submission through a psalm of thanksgiving. Yahweh frames the scene, sending the fish and commanding its release (Jnh 2:11), directing the plot as the principal actor. Jonah's transformation captures attention. The unyielding prophet who slept while sailors prayed now reconciles with the God he fled. The psalm's dominant metaphor of drowning waters encompassing the soul, descent to the roots of the mountains, evokes the underworld as a realm of chaos from which only Yahweh can deliver. The scene functions as a narrative hinge, effecting inner transformation that makes possible the mission to Nineveh.

Jonah 3:1-10: Mission to Nineveh

The narrator signals a new beginning by repeating the commissioning formula (Jnh 3:2). Jonah now rises and goes

'according to the word of Yahweh'. A significant variation appears in Jonah 1:2; he was to call against [*'al*] the city; now he is to call to [*'el*] its inhabitants, foreshadowing the transformation to unfold (Lessing 2007). Jonah's message is stark: 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' (Jnh 3:4). Notably, the text provides no divine authorisation for these exact words, and the narrator devotes more space to the city's response than to the message itself. The reaction is immediate and total. The Ninevites believe in God [*wayya'ămînû … bē'lohîm*]. The verb *'āman* denotes steadfast faith, used of Abraham and Israel. Yet the narrator avoids Yahweh, using 'ĕlohîm throughout, suggesting the goal is not conversion to Israelite religion but a changed way of life. The people proclaim a fast, don sackcloth and repent from least to greatest. The king surpasses his subjects, rising from his throne, clothing himself in sackcloth and sitting in ashes. His decree calls for extreme fasting and earnest prayer, culminating in theological humility: 'Who knows? God may turn and relent' (Jnh 3:9). God relents, and the emphasis on action over speech reinforces that authentic transformation is demonstrated in conduct, not merely professed in words.

Jonah 4:1–4: Jonah's wrath

The disbelief of Jonah's initial rebellion reemerges. After Nineveh receives grace, Jonah is indignant. The narrator captures his mood with two descriptions: disgruntled [*wayyēra'* … *rā'āh gĕdôlāh*] and displeased [*wayyiḥar lô*]. His prayer (Jnh 4:2) lays bare his rationale: he had always suspected Yahweh would take the merciful path. A close look at Jonah 4:1–2 reveals the theological depth of Jonah's disobedience. The narrator's choice of *wayyiḥar lô* [it burned him] is significant. This same verb is used elsewhere to describe divine wrath (cf. Ex 32:10; Nm 11:10). Jonah burns with anger because Yahweh has not burned with wrath against Nineveh. His prayer recites Exodus 34:6–7, which is the foundational creed of Israel's covenant identity; yet his prayer transforms confession into accusation. What should be Israel's hope becomes Jonah's despair. Jonah's heart is rebellious: not because of ignorance of Yahweh's character but deliberate resistance to it. Jonah flees to Tarshish not from fear of failure but from certainty that Yahweh would show mercy; a mercy he deems unacceptable for enemies. The creed he recites is the very reason for his anger, revealing that Israel's problem is not divine severity but divine generosity. This anticipates the book's climax (Jnh 4:10–11), where Yahweh expands compassion from covenant to creation. For contemporary mission, Jonah's anger exposes the temptation to circumscribe divine grace. A temptation missionaries must confront through self-examination and humility.

Jonah 4:5–11: Divine pity

Jonah builds a shelter on the city's east side, hoping to witness Nineveh's destruction. Yahweh appoints a plant to provide shade; Jonah is pleased. But God sends a worm to wither the plant, followed by scorching wind and sun. Jonah again wishes for death. Through these object lessons, God exposes the absurdity of Jonah's priorities. How could the prophet be 'angry enough to die' over a plant he did not make, yet be willing to let Nineveh, with its 120 000 people and animals, perish. As Stuart (2002:506) observes, the question cuts to the heart: 'What right do we have to demand that God should favour us and not others?'

God's final question (Jnh 4:11) captures the book's theological intention. Grace is extended to those who, like Jonah, do not deserve it. The plant was a provision Jonah neither earned nor sustained; Nineveh's deliverance was a gift grounded in repentance they may not have fully understood. Yet God's compassion flows from his identity as Creator. The rhetorical crescendo of concern for the great city, its inhabitants and its animals affirms that divine concern extends to all creation. God's wish is not destruction but salvation. The book concludes without Jonah's response, leaving the question suspended for each reader to answer.

Jonah and contemporary Christian missionary practices

Having familiarised ourselves with the narrative contours of the Book of Jonah, I now distil for discussion five principles that frame the context of mission within the story. These principles are then brought into critical dialogue with contemporary Christian missionary practice in Ghana, demonstrating that the impetus for a redefined, contextually sensitive missiology is not merely a modern concession but finds substantive foundation within the biblical narrative itself.

The first principle concerns the moral foundation of mission. Moral ineptness on the part of the Ninevites constitutes the fundamental reason for Yahweh's commissioning of Jonah (Allen 1976; Lessing 2007). Although the Old Testament consistently presents Yahweh as the God of Israel, there are numerous instances where divine concern extends to other peoples. Yahweh's interest in a people means that he is concerned with their behaviour and their lot. Conceived as the God of all creation, Yahweh places upon all peoples, including gentiles, the obligation to obey natural law and morality (Lessing 2007). In this respect, the Book of Jonah stands with Amos in declaring God's disdain for human actions that violate the norms of justice and compassion (Allen 1976; O'Collins 2008). It is these corrupt actions labelled as their wickedness [*rā'ātām*] that Yahweh seeks to stamp out among the Ninevites. The divine motivation for mission is therefore fundamentally moral rather than sectarian.

The second principle centres on repentance, developed along two lines: human repentance and divine repentance. The author develops the idea of human repentance through the inhabitants of Nineveh (Craigie 1984). They perform terrible deeds that bring God's anger, but they repent of their deeds and turn away when they learn of the approaching judgement. For his part, God abandons his plan to destroy.

By doing nothing, God shows that he is concerned about both human evil and the need for people to turn away from evil and find the good (Craigie 1984). God's willingness to give in shows how kind he is. According to some, God reacts to human behaviour, and the Ninevites' repentance sparked heavenly grace (Knight & Golka 1988). While this observation has merit, it is equally plausible to see God as a deity who operates within standards and principles guarded by divine sensitivity. Justified to annihilate the people of Nineveh, God instead grants them a second chance because the goal is to guide humans towards salvation rather than to destroy them (Youngblood 2013).

God witnessed the Ninevites' behaviour: they 'turned from their evil way' (Jnh 3:10), and it is this change in behaviour that causes God to relent. Yet the narrative also embeds repentance within a relational framework: the king's decree to cry out to God (Jnh 3:8) implies an orientation towards the divine. Significantly, however, the narrator refrains from portraying the Ninevites as adopting Yahwism (they use *ʾĕlohîm*, not Yahweh). Therefore, although turning towards God is part of repentance, the content of that turning is specifically moral. The book thereby challenges any notion of repentance that is merely cultic or cognitive without tangible ethical transformation. For contemporary mission, this implies prioritising changed lives over altered religious designations.

The third principle addresses the troubling role of threat in the narrative. Enveloping the conversion of the Ninevites is the threat of violence. Although the narrator gives this element little emphasis, concentrating instead on the response of the people, the fear of destruction was undeniably a factor in their change (Jnh 3:9) (Trible 1994). The psychological link between fear and belief in a deity was a common strategy in the ancient world. Yet today's sensitivities rightly question the appropriateness of such an approach for evangelism. A close reading of Jonah reveals that the validity of the threat of destruction is highly questionable, in no small part because of the personality of the prophet himself (Lefebvre 2025; Waruiru 2025). Throughout the story, Jonah emerges as self-centred, particularly in his attitude towards gentiles, and cannot be easily trusted as a reliable witness. More importantly, his proclamation to the Ninevites abounds in unstable properties. Unlike the standard prophetic formula, thus says Yahweh, or oracle of Yahweh, we read simply he called and said [*wayyiqrs' wayyo'mar*]. Because of this deviation, Trible (1994) questions the authenticity of the entire message. Nowhere in the story has Yahweh given Jonah these exact words to speak. The storyteller declares that Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of Yahweh (Jnh 3:3a) but then does not use that phrase when reporting what Jonah 'called and said' (Jnh 3:4b). The prophecy, in other words, abounds in unstable properties (Trible 1994).

The fourth principle emerges from the parallel portrayal of the deity as God of Creation and God of Redemption. Significantly, the latter derives its meaning from the former and not vice versa (Scialabba 2019). This theological ordering implies that all creation deserves mercy and love. As Creator, God is deeply bound to his creation and does not delight in any of it perishing. Yahweh's final question (Jnh 4:10–11) argues from the lesser to the greater: if Jonah pities a plant he neither made nor sustained, should not God pity the great city? The logic is one of divine moral consistency, not human entitlement. Furthermore, the Ninevites receive mercy not through covenant membership or prescribed sacrifice but through repentance born of God's prevenient concern. Thus, 'right' here means divinely ordained access to mercy rather than legal entitlement. Creation theology affirms that God's compassion flows from his identity as Maker, not from human merit. Salvation, therefore, is not earned but graciously extended to all creatures because their Creator wills their flourishing over their destruction (MacArthur 2023; Scialabba 2019).

A crucial missiological tension is revealed by Jonah's dissatisfaction with Nineveh's repentance: the missionary may oppose the very result God seeks. This leads to the fifth principle, which is the missionary's humility. Jonah believes he can set the limits of God's mercy and would rather destroy than show mercy to his adversaries. His desire to end his life (Jnh 4:3) reveals a heart detached from God's own nature. This requires missionaries to develop self-awareness and give up their expectations to God's erratic grace for modern practice. Repentance may emerge when none was anticipated, and success may come to people the missionary believes to be undeserving. The missionary's job is to align with divine compassion, not to manage results. Therefore, a true mission involves continually analysing one's own resistance to God's all-encompassing kindness.

These five principles carry significant implications for the practice of mission in Ghana. However, before I venture into that discussion, let me indicate that I do not argue that morality is the sole motivation; rather, I contend that the narrative prioritises moral transformation as the explicit trigger for divine action. This can be seen in three ways. Firstly, in line with Genesis 6 and 18, where moral decay leads to divine intervention, Yahweh commissions Jonah because Nineveh's 'wickedness' has come before him (Jnh 1:2). The narrator criticises Nineveh mainly for destructive, oppressive acts, not for worshipping false gods or not having the Torah. Secondly, instead of responding with Yahweh (Israel's covenantal name), the Ninevites use *'elohîm* [generic God], indicating behavioural repentance rather than religious conversion (Jn 3:5–10). Their behaviour, not their religious affiliation, is what shifts. Thirdly, Yahweh refers to creation rather than covenant in his last speech (Jnh 4:10–11). God's identity as Creator, who is concerned for all living things, is the source of divine pity. Morality, therefore, is a primary motivator in Jonah: moral depravity triggers divine action, and moral change is the goal. This reverses traditional orthodoxy-over-orthopraxy priorities. Canonical support from Amos and Hosea allows Ghanaian mission to reframe around justice, education and ethical governance without compromising confessional integrity.

On this basis, the first implication is that the starting point of missions should be to confront the inhumane acts that people commit against one another. Mission ought to advance a moral agenda. As depicted in the story of Jonah, God was moved to intervene in the lives of the Ninevites because their wickedness had risen before him, and not because they were non-Israelites or because they espoused no faith in Israel's God. Indeed, the narrator's diction, by making the Ninevites refer to the deity as ĕlohîm (Jnh 3:5–9) rather than by the national name Yahweh, indicates that the goal was not to convert the people to the religion of Israel but to guide them away from deeds deemed an affront to God and, by extension, to humanity. From this perspective, I propose that missionary practice in Ghana should be framed by the principle of moral imperative (Bediako 1992). While what constitutes morality is admittedly a contentious issue, there exist common grounds on which Ghana's diverse peoples can agree as acceptable behaviour. This implies a shift away from the traditional systematic agenda of converting people from one faith to another towards offering a message that enables them to become better humans wherever they are. A joint communiqué from Ghana's major Christian bodies, for instance, calls for 'ethical governance', 'moral and ethical education in schools', and the protection of 'family values'. The religious leaders state that 'churches must play a central role' in fostering national unity and moral renewal, emphasising that faith-based institutions must contribute to 'public education, spiritual guidance, and justice'. This demonstrates that Ghana's Christian leadership collectively understands mission as encompassing moral transformation of society (Christian Council of Ghana and Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference 2025).

Secondly, the goal of mission should transcend the parochial aim of attaining quantitative growth in favour of the qualitative goal of transforming lives. As discernible from the story of Jonah, the narrator aimed to change the lives of the Ninevites rather than convert them to Israelite faith. Kaufmann (1960) notes, regarding the mariners who pray and sacrifice to Yahweh in Jonah 1:16, that this does not mean they abandoned their pagan creeds and adopted the faith of Israel; it is simply a magnification of the glory of the Lord among the nations. This observation can be extended to the Ninevites. Their repentance upon hearing Jonah's message did not entail abandoning their religion. Too often, the dominant interpretation of the Great Commission has been to Christianise the entire world, an interpretation that has assumed quantitative significance and created waves of competition even among Christian bodies themselves (Morris 2017). A quantitatively driven mission is not laudable in current times. Jesus' command was given in a context when those who adhered to his message were in the minority. Today, the situation has changed dramatically: Christianity is the most popular religion in the world and in Ghana. A quantitative reading of the Great Commission is therefore a misplaced priority. The story of Jonah challenges Christians to seek qualitative conversion; transformation that flows from within the individual, as with the Ninevites who resolved in their hearts to change their ways, an inner decision that found expression in outward acts such as fasting and wearing sackcloth (Coster n.d).

Thirdly, the psychological exploitation of people's emotions to ignite change of heart requires critical evaluation in contemporary evangelism. Two questions arise: what caused the people of Nineveh to change, and in whose interest did that change occur? Per the story, the change was premised on the threat of destruction. Yet when we shift our focus from what caused the change to who benefited from it, we realise that it was society itself that benefited. The entire story is premised on Yahweh's displeasure with the Ninevites because their wickedness had risen before him. The key term *rā'āh* denotes that which is harmful, unwholesome or disagreeable (Baker & Carpenter 2003; Holladay 1971). The Ninevites were engaged in acts harmful to humanity. Their change, therefore, meant they moved away from committing such acts, and this transformation ultimately served their own interests (Lefebvre 2025). They benefited from the conversion from an inhumane society to a compassionate one. I therefore argue that the use of violent language and threats should have no place in mission practice today (Sikka 2012; Stanford 2008; Thiessen 2011). Rather, mission should be premised on the interests of humanity and the wellbeing of society. The call for change should appeal to the moral conscience, on the basis that behavioural change is most effective when effected through rational evaluation rather than when achieved through emotional manipulation.

Fourthly, the Book of Jonah balances the principles of God as Creator and God as Redeemer. Traditional mission practice has tended to emphasise the God who redeems over the God who creates, but redemption theology has the tendency to segment, create fear and division and present God as a vindictive deity. Kwesi Dickson argues that to perceive the Christian God solely from the perspective of redemption is to deny God's love for all creation (Dickson 1984; eds. Dickson & Ellingworth 1969). Every society, he contends, has its own native revelation of God, and this native knowledge should serve as the basis for Christian missions. I amend Dickson's argument by positing that this universal knowledge is not only the foundation for a people's redemption but the edifice through which they attain salvation. God's revelation to a people is the prism through which they can truly comprehend God and relate to him. Any addition should seek not to replace but to affirm native traditions. Like the Ninevites, Jonah's message was not entirely new to their socio-cultural milieu; an additional value was added to their faith that is the revelation of a merciful and gracious God who desires the best for humans. In the closing of the story, God's response to Jonah depicts his essence as Creator, deeply attached to his creation. Missionary practice in Ghana must take this theology seriously. Creation theology places all humans and the entire cosmos under God's sovereignty (Bender 2009; Tanner 1988). Christians, Muslims and traditionalists are all special to God because he created them all. God's redemptive acts flow from his identity as Creator, and his love for his creation takes precedence over the will to destroy (Burrell 1993). God's redemption comes in many forms, and Christian

missionary practice cannot continue to tread the monolithic path of declaring that salvation comes only through believing in Jesus. The issue is not that salvation cannot be attained through this path, but that God's saving grace cannot be monopolised into this absolute claim.

Finally, the humility of the missionary carries distinct implications for the Ghanaian context. Ghana's religious landscape, marked by peaceful coexistence between Christians, Muslims and traditionalists, nonetheless harbours subtle tensions. Missionaries and evangelists may unconsciously harbour Jonah-like expectations: that God's mercy should align with their own religious boundaries, that success means numerical growth within their own communities, or that divine compassion has limits. In practical terms, this principle calls for three adaptations. Firstly, Ghanaian mission practitioners must cultivate self-reflexivity regarding their motivations. Is the anger at a Muslim or traditionalist neighbour's well-being rooted in theological conviction or in a Jonah-like resistance to God's expansive grace? Secondly, mission training programmes in Ghanaian seminaries should incorporate spiritual formation that explicitly addresses the prophet's syndrome that is the desire to control rather than participate in divine compassion. Thirdly, ecumenical and interfaith engagements should include spaces for confessing missionary pride, acknowledging that the hardest conversion may be the missionary's own. Finally, Ghanaian churches should prepare their agents for the possibility that God's mercy might surprise them by (extending to those they least expect). This does not abandon evangelistic conviction but situates it within humility: the missionary announces grace but does not presume to dictate its boundaries. In a pluralist Ghana, such humility becomes not weakness but the very condition for credible, non-coercive witness.

Conclusion

The growing reality of religious pluralism in Ghana and beyond demands that Christian missions undergo serious theological and practical re-evaluation (Asuming 2025). Traditional missiology, often animated by exclusivist soteriological claims, struggles to offer a coherent framework for engagement in contexts where multiple faith traditions coexist as integral components of social identity. This article has entered that conversation by arguing that the resources for a redefined, contextually sensitive missiology are not merely concessions to modern sensibilities but find substantive warrant within the biblical narrative itself.

Through a close literary and theological exegesis of the Book of Jonah, I have demonstrated that the biblical witness critiques religious exclusivism and models a divine mandate rooted in compassion rather than coercive proclamation. Jonah's narrative deconstructs nationalist zeal and culminates in Yahweh's concern for the pagan 'other', offering a critical hermeneutical key for contemporary mission. From this analysis, I propose the following: moral imperative as the foundation for mission, qualitative transformation over quantitative expansion, the rejection of coercive evangelistic methods, a missional ethic grounded in creation theology and the humility of the missionary, each of which challenges prevailing assumptions and opens pathways towards more ethically responsible practice.

I do not suggest that the Bible lacks exclusivist or inclusivist strands; indeed, both Testaments contain such affirmations (Dickson 1991). Rather, I contend that the canonical witness is sufficiently complex to accommodate choices (Brueggemann 1997; Childs 1979). The Book of Jonah, read on its own terms, presents a vision of God whose compassion resists containment and whose redemptive purposes extend beyond the boundaries of covenant membership. For Christians in Ghana today, this vision offers a faithful and theologically robust alternative to paradigms that prioritise boundary maintenance over neighbourly engagement.

I therefore propose a missional posture organised around dialogue rather than monologue, invitation rather than coercion, and a shared commitment to human flourishing rather than sectarian expansion (Asuming 2025). Such an approach does not diminish confessional integrity but locates it within a broader commitment to the common good. Ultimately, the goal of mission, after all, coheres with the ultimate goal of Christ: the salvation and flourishing of humanity. In a world fragmented by religious and ethnic tensions, the church bears witness most faithfully when its mission contributes to peace and understanding among all inhabitants.

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