

# JONAH'S ARGUMENTS WITH GOD



THE HONEYMOON  
IS OVER!

T. A. PERRY

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## **Jonah's Arguments with God—The Honeymoon Is Over!**

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This book is dedicated to my beloved grandchildren, Noah, Caleb, Ezra, Jacob, Atarah, Andrew, Daniella, Asher.

## וראה בנים לבניך שלום על ישראל:

Ps 128:6

Bible study, a prominent Jonah scholar has reminded us, is a social activity. I have been blessed to participate in the New Haven Shabbat Study Group for many, many years. Each week we gather and puzzle over Tanakh with energy, creativity, and love. I here wish to express my gratitude and admiration for all those who have shared their insights and motivated my learning. Eric (z"l) and Marcia Beller; Neil and Nannette Cogan; Donald and Phyllis Cohen; Stanley and Donna Dalnekoff; David Dalnekoff; Toni and David Brion Davis; David and Ina Fischer; Rabbi Lina and Linden Grazier-Zerbarini; Yonatan and Adina Halevi; William Hallo and Nanette Stahl; Hannah Sokol and Oliver Holmes; Jay and Marilyn Katz; Michael and Rebecca Konigsberg; Dov and Nechama Langenauer; Arthur and Betty Levy; Bob and Adina Lieberles; Joe and Hadassah Lieberman; Daniel Nadis and Sally Zanger; Esther Nash; Howard and Willa Needler; Pamela Reis; Sydney A. Perry; Michael and Barbara Klein (z"l) Schneider; Heni and Mark Schwartz; Ina Silverman and Jay Sokolow; Shai Silverman-Sokolow; Michael Stern and Kathy Rosenbluh; Michael and Elise Wiener; Steven Wilf and Guita Epstein.

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*Yagdil Torah ve Ya'adir!*

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## PREFACE



I'm not going to stop loving you, Silly!  
But I am not going to cut myself off from  
the rest of the world either! Enough of  
this King Lear "we two alone" stuff!

Molière, *The Misanthrope* (free adaptation)<sup>1</sup>

**W**hat is the book of Jonah about: a whale? Well, at least about a large fish, but also about a *kikayon* (Heb. *qiqayon*), or gourd tree, and a Thoreau-like hut on the edge of civilization. Is it history? If so, its literary form comes eerily close to what are known today as tales of the fantastic. Is it about Jews? Well, it is indeed preserved in Hebrew and is included among the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. Yet, with the sole exception of the hero, no Jews appear, and Gentiles are the focus of at least half of the book. But if Jonah is a prophet, what is his prophetic message? A paltry five words, as against the pages of prophecy in other prophetic books, and these spoken reluctantly, between angry teeth. Of course, other prophets were also disinclined and argued against the Lord, but in the end they all gave in. Jonah's rebellion is more original: instead of the usual

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<sup>1</sup>Molière, *Le misanthrope* (London: Bristol Classics Press, 1996). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. Since my purpose is to explore various possible readings of the book of Jonah, translations of the same words and passages may vary, depending on the meanings and contexts under consideration, and one is warned not to expect rigid consistency.

arguing and trying to stay his ground, he simply shuts up, makes an about-face, and flees. The main question of the entire book is why, and the writing delights in delaying and even in confusing expectations.

Jonah himself does not say why, at least not right away, and the narrator does not tell either. Only towards the book's end does the prophet seem to offer a deferred excuse, one that shocks our sense of religion and, for some readers at least, reduces Jonah to the level of a comic character. His complaint seems to be that God will let the repentant Ninevites off the hook because He<sup>2</sup> is too *merciful*! The truth is that this is anything but an explanation, for, as Ben Zvi explains, Jonah 4:2 does not really resolve the question. "The reason for his flight is not textually inscribed in the book."<sup>3</sup> But already at the start, Jonah's attitude raises serious questions, for can one hope to escape from God:

Whither shall I flee from Your Presence? (Ps 139:7)<sup>4</sup>

And if God's prophets can be expected to know this better than anyone, then what on earth—or on the seas—can Jonah possibly have in mind? The proverbial "strangeness" of the book of Jonah thus challenges simple solutions.<sup>5</sup> Its close reading may bring us to understand and even approve Jonah's deep religious and existential rebellion. And from the book there is some evidence that God, too, comes around to His prophet's point of view. That does not mean, of course, that Jonah is off the hook. It does, however, intimate that standing up to God is necessary both for humans and perhaps for God too.

We might begin by offering that the book of Jonah is existential in a most elementary way, since all the protagonists—God

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<sup>2</sup>In this book I regularly use uppercase—He and not he—to refer to God. My purpose is purely to maintain the distinction between the divinity and humans and certainly not for purposes of one-upmanship with atheists. Similarly, I use the masculine gender for pure convenience.

<sup>3</sup>Ehud Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTSup 367; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2003), 59. This remarkable study, written by an historian of ancient Israel, is a promising sign of a new wave of fresh readings and broadened perspectives on the book of Jonah. It requires close study.

<sup>4</sup>In addition to Ps 139, the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael* (Tractate Pisha, 3) cites Zech 4:10; Prov 15:3; Amos 9:2–4; and Job 34:22.

<sup>5</sup>The epithet took hold due to Elias Bickerman's catchy title, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Qohelet, Esther* (New York: Schocken), 1967.

included—have to survive a major threat to their very existence: the Ninevites because of their evil deeds, the sailors because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, Jonah because death is what he wants, and God because He disregards Jonah's threat. In the words of the poet Rilke:

“What will You do, God, when I die?”<sup>6</sup>

Jonah might thus be considered a salvation narrative. Just as Job is rescued from pain and accusation, Jonah is saved from suicide, the sailors from drowning, the Ninevites from annihilation, and God from the loss of His beloved prophet and possibly His reputation. But what survives for the generations is what was fully sought and only partially obtained by Job, and only partially sought and fully obtained by Jonah: a frank dialogue on the way the universe works and in particular on where humans who try to be “good” fit into the world order.

My excuse for adding yet another to the several good books about Jonah is to remain faithful to the obligation to recover for our own generation more of the seventy faces of scriptural interpretation. These seem to me at present stalled at two levels: on the one hand, a widespread refusal to “loosen the fixities, the ossifications of preconceived readings,”<sup>7</sup> and, on the other, a failure of imagination to explore other literary and theological agendas. For example, it is painfully obvious that important ideas in the book of Jonah do not often come up for discussion and yet are of great interest to our contemporaries. I refer to such questions as suicide (and assisted suicide, its Jonah variant), near-death experiences, mere survival and existence conceived as a theological imperative, the moral capacity of animals, erotic theory, the possibility that God can not only change His mind but even be educated, universalism or outreach to Gentiles, and of course more standard issues such as the nature of repentance and prayer.

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<sup>6</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 30.

<sup>7</sup>Aviva Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), xii. The perspectivism implied in the many faces of interpretation will be in evidence throughout this study. Thus unresolved contradictions (e.g., did Jonah repent?) must be fully discussed but not forced into resolution.

A second excuse is to question some trivializations of the book of Jonah that have become fashionable. The following seem to me the most problematic:

- a) mainly because of the giant fish, a generic fairy-tale ambience is read into the book, leading to a hovering suspicion that the whole thing is not all that serious. But if Jonah is as serious as fairy tales, then it is very serious indeed.
- b) demeaning personal ascriptions, such as the claim that Jonah's grief over the death of the *kikayon* plant that provides him shade is based on a concern "for his own comfort level."<sup>8</sup>
- c) psychological theories about Jonah's clinical depression or insanity or just plain foolishness. For example, it is complacently asked how anyone could try to run away from God, least of all a prophet, forgetting that, as the Vilna Gaon remarks, "Everyone flees from the presence of God; no one wants to stand in His presence."<sup>9</sup>
- d) comic theories that trivialize the prophetic calling, for, as Kenneth Craig puts it, "the story is too earnest for laughter."<sup>10</sup> Even Jonah's putative plea for justice has been ridiculed, forgetting it to be but a variant of Abraham's own exclamation before God: "Shall the righteous and the wicked be treated equally?" (Gen 18:25).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 97. A low point is reached in such statements as Jonathan Magonet's: "Yet for all his selfishness and absurdity, even Jonah has an inner life" (Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* [Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983], 53). Or, yet more breathtaking is dubbing Jonah a "mantic bumpkin," so B. Halpern and R. E. Friedman, "Composition and Paronomasia in the Book of Jonah," *HAR* 4 (1980): 89.

<sup>9</sup>This appropriate antidote to such naiveté is quoted in Zornberg, *Beginning*, 24.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Craig, *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 143.

<sup>11</sup>I leave aside the more grievous anti-semitic issues, which have been adequately dealt with by Yvonne Sherwood, "Cross-Currents in the Book of Jonah," *BibInt* 6 (1998): 49–79; *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). I am especially indebted to these brilliant and spirited studies, which saved me loads of time, cleared the way for more balanced and accurate assessments of the book

- e) stylistic assumptions that God's treatment of Jonah is basically ironic, as if parody and satire were the appropriate tone and means to conduct a serious discussion about crucial theological issues.<sup>12</sup>

It is a fortunate and astounding fact of literary history that Jonah has not only survived such assaults but continues to thrive, for, as Meschonnic triumphantly puts it, "Jonah has swallowed up his critics like the fish swallowed up Jonah."<sup>13</sup> As against these and similar reductive tendencies, we recall the Christian identification of Jonah with Christ's descent into hell only to rise again (Matt 12:39–41), or the Rabbinic conviction that Jonah ascended to Heaven without suffering death.<sup>14</sup> For if Jonah "ups and runs away from God's Presence" merely because he is depressed or foolish or crazy, one might wonder why God would invest such quality time in a basket case. One thinks of God's extensive dialogue, its tender humor, the impressive battery of tricks used to bring Jonah around: the large fish, the storm, the *kikayon*, the worm, the east wind. It would seem that, for whatever reason, Jonah is, at the very least, worthy of God's attention. For, as Sherwood has argued, "marginalising Jonah's perspective" is tantamount to "banishing his potentially explosive challenge to the deity from the text."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps a more interesting question, though—all the way from Jonah's startling refusal to his climactic silence at the end—is why God is worth Jonah's. For if Jonah's only lesson from God is "might is right," then Scripture has canceled its own moral authority in favor of common lawlessness.

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of Jonah, and helped to restore for biblical studies that "fundamentally experimental character of interpretation," *A Biblical Text*, 6.

<sup>12</sup>Satire has in fact become the locus of both moral evidence and uncontrollable eloquence, as I. J. Spangenberg: "Evidently the author of Jonah wanted to expose and elicit public contempt for the behaviour of a self-centered, lazy and hypocritical religious person" ("Jonah and Qohelet: Satire versus Irony," *OTE* 9 [1996]: 509).

<sup>13</sup>Henri Meschonnic, *Jona et le signifiant errant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 77.

<sup>14</sup>"Jonah never died but entered the Garden of Eden alive" (Midrash Shoher Tov, section 26; quoted in Ze'ev Haim Lifshitz, *The Paradox of Human Existence: A Commentary on the Book of Jonah* [Northvale, NJ]: Jason Aronson, 1994), xxi).

<sup>15</sup>Sherwood, "Cross-Currents," 56.

This book is conceived as a prolegomenon to the reading of the book of Jonah. Its focus on the requirements of reading arises from the impression that we have become too fixed in our ways, too convinced that we already know what the book says. We tend to forget that a fresh reading—and every reading should be that—requires bracketing out inherited truths and preconceptions. At this simplest level, this requires going back again and again to our, yes, our dictionaries. This basic necessity for any sophisticated literary text is especially crucial when these texts are foreign and ancient. As the classicist and poet Anne Carson put it:

Sometimes when I am reading a Greek text I force myself to look up all the words in the dictionary, even the ones I think I know. It is surprising what you learn that way. Some of the words turn out to sound quite different than you thought.<sup>16</sup>

At another level of our attempt to untangle and recover some of Jonah's meanings, the popular generic puzzle—is the book a fable or a history or a parable or a satire or a prophetic account or something else—must be dislodged or expanded. One way to do this is by following hints from the book of Jonah itself, to broaden the text's imaginative context, to approach Jonah from a fresh reading of such texts as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the pastoral, the Song of Songs, and the literature of the fantastic. Another way to raise this question, if we remain (quite sensibly) attached to the prophetic genre as our model,<sup>18</sup> is to be willing to retrieve earlier understandings of prophecy, to follow such thinkers as Maimonides in regarding the essence of prophecy as, beyond the usual religious and political interests, an intense and passionate clinging of the soul to the divine Presence, of Lover to Beloved. I shall suggest that erotic theory may open doors to Jonah's mysticism and contemplation that have been

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> "In terms of its ancient literary critical classification, there can be little doubt that it [the book of Jonah] was understood as a story about a prophet" (John Day, "Problems in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," in *In Quest of the Past: Studies on Israelite Religion, Literature, and Prophetism* [ed. A. S. van der Woude; OTS; Leiden: Brill, 1990], 39).

avoided by modern inquiries but that were perhaps at the heart of Rabbinic speculation about Jonah's "dying without dying."<sup>19</sup>

As an epigraph suggesting the erotic aspect of my argument, I refer to the central love-relationship of Molière's *Misanthrope*, whose subtitle *l'atrabiliaire amoureux* designates the male lead as a black-biled or melancholic lover. In my free adaptation the coquettish female lead Célimène is speaking to her hopelessly enamored and very jealous Alceste. For whatever reason—his sincerity, passion, devoted attachment, hatred of hypocrisy, to name a few—Célimène still loves the grouchy misfit. But she is quite unprepared, for all that, to renounce an imperfect world and the enjoyment of the flattery it affords. In this analogy, the Lady is, as was the case in the old courtly tradition, God Himself (or Herself), and the misanthrope is, yes, Jonah.

My final and really primary excuse for writing this book is so that somewhere a thirteen-year-old will write that I have helped her or him to read Jonah a bit better. For, speaking from personal experience with my own kids, at that age the mind is vigorous and the heart is pure; the imagination can still range the seas and the dry land, and the intentions are uncluttered, existential. I mean that at that age it is still possible to have a personal reading, or at least one not totally subserviant to the usual. My suspicion is that our hero will no longer be regarded only as Jonah-the-Jew but also as Jonah-Everyman.<sup>20</sup>

Put differently, turning from trivialization may help us recover what Wallace Stevens has called "the freedom to yield ourselves" to the ancient Ur-images that still haunt us, help us to penetrate the utter simplicity and modesty of the narration. Again, Stevens:

A force capable of bringing about fluctuations in reality in words free from mysticism is a force independent of one's desire to elevate it. It needs no elevation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>John of the Cross's "muero porque no muero"; see Concluding Midrash I below and the Yehudah Halevi verse quoted there.

<sup>20</sup>See Sherwood, *A Biblical Text*, 280. For "adults," however, Sherwood's sobering sarcasm proffers its challenge: "How is one to read, and teach this text, at the turn of the millennium," in *Higher Education*, 87.

<sup>21</sup>Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), viii.

The challenge to the modern reader is, behind the strange and atypical folk-images of fish and *kikayon*, to perceive the intimations of epiphany, to recover, behind the imagined appearances of an egoist, the Hebrew Bible's sketch of God's intimate friend.<sup>22</sup>

New Haven and Beer-Sheva

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<sup>22</sup>As this book was already on its way to press, Ehud Ben Zvi's *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* appeared on Jonah, and I was so impressed that I was tempted to rename this work "Rereading Jonah." Ben Zvi has identified the book of Jonah as metaprophetic (i.e., not only concerned about single prophetic events but also about how prophecy itself works). In so doing and true to his source of inspiration, he has written the manual not only for rereading Jonah but also for what rereading Hebrew Scripture itself can mean. Most important for my own work, Ben Zvi gives a theoretical basis for authenticating both interpretations long in service and really new understandings of familiar passages.

## ABBREVIATIONS



AB	Anchor Bible
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud
CAT	Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament
CC	Continental Commentaries
ConBNT	Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Ed. E. Kautzsch, rev. A. E. Cowley. 2nd English ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910.
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated under the supervision of M. E. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden, 1994–2000
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplemental Series
ms(s)	Manuscript(s)
MT	Massoretic Text (the standard Hebrew version)
NCB	New Century Bible

NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NT	New Testament
n./nn.	note/notes in the Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
OTE	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
OTS	Old Testament Studies
RelArts	Religion and the Arts
RHR	<i>Revue d'histoire des religions</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
SCR	<i>Studies in Comparative Religion</i>
v./vv.	verse/verses
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>

Biblical books are abbreviated according to guidelines published in *The SBL Handbook of Style*. All references to the Bible and to classical texts give chapter followed by verse or appropriate subdivision. I cite Hebrew Scripture according to the chapter and verse of the MT and give the English when different. All biblical and other translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

For the transliteration of Hebrew, since in all cases the goal is less to reproduce the exact spelling of the MT than to recall the shape of the Hebrew words, vowels are transliterated as they would sound in an English reading. Consonants are transliterated according to the “General Purpose Style” in *The SBL Handbook of Style*.

# INTRODUCTION



## A Dialogue of Silence

If in our reading and study of the book of Jonah we are looking for “the central theme that unites all the elements of the story into a literary and conceptual whole,”<sup>1</sup> then we might say, at least stylistically speaking, that the constant element throughout the book is the dialogue—really a series of arguments—between God and His prophet Jonah. This feature in itself is of course not distinctive to our story, since dialogue characterizes the entire Hebrew Bible and is especially definitive of the prophetic relationship with God. The Jonah dialogue is so deviant from this model, however, as to seem to constitute its own genre.

As is typical in prophetic stories, it is God who initiates:

Now the word of Lord [came] unto Jonah, etc.

When we reach the very end, the dialogue rages on, God and His prophet still locked in argument. Between start and finish, it is true, the dialogue takes some remarkable turns, but in so doing it merely remains true to the double surprise that encapsulates the entire book. At the start, God’s word to Jonah evokes the response not only of flight but of silence—thus a dialogue aborted at the very onset.<sup>2</sup> Not differently at the end, God asks a question that,

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<sup>1</sup>Uriel Simon, *Jonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), vii.

<sup>2</sup>According to George M. Landes (“The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm,” *Int* 21 [1967]: 14), however,

within the pages of the text, is left unanswered—thus, again, a frustrated exchange.<sup>3</sup> Analogous to what the French would call a dialogue of the deaf, the book of Jonah takes on the quality of a dialogue of silence. It is this dialogic silence—which is anything but a silencing of dialogue—that we would like to explore.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of dialogue most valuable here goes far beyond mere exchanges of words, if only because, as pointed out, many of the responses from both sides avoid the verbal.<sup>5</sup> Yvonne Sherwood has proposed a Bakhtian model, a shift from a satirical mode of reading, in which Jonah is seen as particularistic and selfish, to an open form of carnivalesque parody where both parties—Jonah but also God—get their come-uppance and neither gets the last word.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, our text takes pains to stress the impossibility of knowing for sure, by pointing out both our ignorance of God's mind ("who knows?" 3:9) and also the possi-

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Jonah did react verbally to God's initial charge, but the response was delayed for greater dramatic effect. Thus 4:2 ("was this not *my word* while still in my land?") would not mean "what I thought" but rather "what I said."

<sup>3</sup>But an exchange or dialogue nevertheless. See below, Conclusion. For the possibility that the book does *not* end on a question, see below, "The Double Ending, . . ." in chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup>The rabbis, sensing a similar argumentative scenario in Hosea's silent compliance with God's outrageous command to "take to himself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry" (Hos 1:2), fleshed out the controversy in *b. Pesahim* 87a-b.

<sup>5</sup>This needs to be asserted against those who seek to limit divine communication to the verbal, as for example Landes ("Kerygma," 20-21): "Jonah experiences no word from Yahweh all the time he is on the ship, in the sea, or within the great fish." On the contrary, all of God's "appointees" (the fish, *kikayon*, worm, east wind) embody divine messages. As for Jonah, his actions speak as loud as his words—for instance, his trance while in the belly of the ship reaches out to God (see below, "Jonah's Trances," in chapter 5). It is important to see Jonah's words and actions as *integrated or coordinated* parts of an ongoing and developing dialogue with God, as against those critics who see a disparity. Steven Weitzman (*Song and Story in Biblical Narrative: The History of a Literary Convention in Ancient Israel* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997], 110), for example, thinks that Jonah's deeds "reveal that Jonah does not fully understand the implications of what he said." Or, more stringently and parochially, Samuel E. Balentine (*Prayer in the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress 1993], 71-80).

<sup>6</sup>Yvonne Sherwood, "Cross-Currents in the Book of Jonah," *BibInt* 6 (1998): 49-79. Bakhtin's work on Rabelais had an important influence on literary studies in the early '60s and, as Sherwood brilliantly shows, still has enormous potential for liberating biblical texts from petrified readings.

bility that God can change His mind and even repent. This approach, especially welcome in the present climate, rids us of what is often poor psychology or—worse—grim theologizing about Jews behind a comic mask. What needs to be incorporated into this method is an awareness that Jonah's issues are as real and important and worthy of discussion as God's own. And if the notion of parody is to be retained, this should be with full awareness of heroically held and principled positions. To return briefly to the paradigm of *The Misanthrope*, it may be that Molière was indeed making fun of Alceste, at least of his lack of sociability. But Alceste's grandeur is also recorded, his fervid attachment to principles, his heroic love attachment reminiscent of outmoded but grand courtly ideals. Few mockers of Alceste are able to withstand Rousseau's withering scorn, and one wonders whether Jonah's detractors might not merit similar treatment.<sup>7</sup>

## Symbolizing Something

There was grace and mystery in her attitude, as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, is a symbol of.<sup>8</sup>

Consider the following three scenarios, all variants of a single pedagogical method:

- a) A sage and member of the community goes out and marries a whore, and everyone asks why. And, indeed, the prophet Hosea wants to help folks imagine that they are themselves behaving like whores with other gods.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Rousseau's essay on *The Misanthrope* can be found in his "Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles."

<sup>8</sup>James Joyce, *The Portable James Joyce* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 227.

<sup>9</sup>For the dramatic aspect of such symbolic actions, I like Marvin A. Sweeney's discussion of Hosea in *The Twelve Prophets* (2 vols.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000). See also my remarks below ("Pastoral Pedagogy," in chapter 9) on the prophetic project of being a "visible saint."

- b) A distinguished intellectual ups and leaves town, withdraws to the edge of civilization in order to build and live in a hut, and folks are curious. And, again, people come to understand that Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, perched at the meeting point between the civilization of Concord and wild nature, is a visible figure of that pastoral inner landscape where humans should establish their primary residence.<sup>10</sup>
- c) A leading member of the religious establishment, during an intensive campaign to reach out to outsiders, suddenly gets up and runs away. Local curiosity is piqued not only by the contradictory behavior but also by the ostentatious style: the departure is unannounced, sudden, even mysteriously precipitous (according to some, Jonah buys up the entire escape ship). What on earth are people to make of such provocative behavior? For there are no words to help unravel the puzzle, only silence and gestures that seem to signify. Later, in a symbolic move that recalls the first in its style, Jonah withdraws from the target city "in order to see." Yes, to see and perhaps, as God Himself is fond of doing, to be seen as well.<sup>11</sup> Again, the demonstrative behavior seems intended to teach something. But what?

In this last scenario, Jonah's two silences that bracket the book at both its extremities do not frustrate the dialogue but give it extraordinary resilience, thus remaining true to its prophetic underpinnings. For the strong debate that occupies the entire book is conducted not only by words but also, when these do not perform their service, by a whole battery of means and tricks. Jonah, in addition to silence and flight, uses behaviors that, if only because of their strangeness, seem symbolically intended: a precipitous descent from God's Presence to the mountains' very roots; rushing through the city—a three-day journey—in a single day; building himself a pastoral hut on the edge of the

<sup>10</sup>See below, "A Pastoral Perspective," in chapter 9.

<sup>11</sup>Deuteronomy 16:16 and Jeffrey H. Tigay's comment (*Deuteronomy* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 159). The active/passive crux of seeing/being seen seems to be based ultimately on Gen 22:14.

city to monitor its . . . annihilation? compliance? It is as if Jonah were trying to teach—us? God?—something, rather than the other way around. God, for His part, also has means beyond the verbal: the windy storm, the great fish, the worm, the *kikayon* bush. Beyond their specific mission, these messengers or “appointees” are usually thought to be sent to teach Jonah a lesson, but we shall see that their impact on Jonah is intended to be argumentative as well as pedagogical. As Montaigne said about educating children, Jonah’s God—contrary to the usual view—would rather be loved than feared, rather teach and persuade than constrain, with all the risks of refusal that this may entail.<sup>12</sup>

Thus each one of God’s and Jonah’s actions seems intended to persuade the other, to win an argument. About what? That is the single issue of the book of Jonah, the central factor motivating Jonah’s flight. It soon becomes patent that the narrative voice does take God’s side against Jonah, thus further motivating readers to do likewise. But the narrator also carefully records Jonah’s point of view. And it is especially this latter voice that, in a more sympathetic mode, we must try to recover.

## Why Did Jonah Flee from God’s Presence? Four Hypotheses

Jonah’s strange behavior as a prophet has inspired a wide range of explanations. Focusing on what he sees to be the basic puzzle of the book—Jonah’s refusal to preach repentance to the Ninevites—Uriel Simon has summarized the following four possible motivations:<sup>13</sup>

### *Repentance or Punishment*

For Yehezkel Kaufmann, as well as for Jews generally, Jonah is the book of Repentance, designated to be read liturgically on

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<sup>12</sup>“Even if I could make myself feared, I would much rather make myself loved” (Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* [trans. Donald Frame; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976], 285).

<sup>13</sup>Simon, *Jonah*, vii–xiii.

Yom Kippur.<sup>14</sup> Kaufmann's particular view of the book's argument is that Jonah's antiquated concept of necessary punishment for sin is replaced by the possibility of repentance and thus represents a theological advance. According to this view, repentance is to be learned from the Ninevites, and Jonah is not an example to follow.

This argument strikes me as most powerful according to Simon's own criteria in that, as I shall argue, it unifies all parts of the book under a single theme. Simon thinks otherwise, since he finds the repentance theme restricted to the Ninevites and thus the focus of only the third chapter. As we shall see, however, repentance is not so confined but is rather a strong focus of attention from the very first to the last verses of the book. For the sailors in chapter one are also involved in repentance, and Jonah himself, in the entire second chapter, undergoes profound regret—otherwise, how does he come to accept, at the start of chapter three, the mission that he rejected from the start? And, finally, the Jonah of chapter four is once more challenged to rethink his ways, mainly by choosing life over death both for himself and the Gentiles.

### ***Israel and the Gentiles***

A stronger objection to Kaufmann would be that the theme of repentance does not concern Israel, at least not explicitly. And even taking Jonah as a figure for Israel, one wonders whether Israelites could learn of God's mercy from such an example—maybe for them God has higher standards! According to this argument of chosenness, Jonah doesn't want to preach to Gentiles because he knows that they will repent and this will make Jews (who presumably, as in Ezekiel 1–15, don't repent) look bad.

The first problem with this argument is that, although the lesson of Gentile repentance is a good one, the modern wish to use it to make Jews look narrow-minded<sup>15</sup> is contradicted by its

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<sup>14</sup>Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (trans. Moshe Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 283, 285; see also Jeffrey H. Tigay, "The Book of Jonah and the Days of Awe," *Conservative Judaism* 38 (1985/86): 67–76.

<sup>15</sup>On this whole question see Sherwood, "Cross-Currents," and Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*.

inclusion in the Jewish biblical canon. The second problem is that Jews are nowhere mentioned in the book, with the single exception of Jonah's self-identification as a Hebrew to the sailors (1:9). The third reason is that neither the sailors nor the Ninevites are depicted in such positive terms: the sailors, as we shall see, are guilty of assisted suicide, and the Ninevites are likened—albeit in a somewhat positive sense—to animals (4:11).

### *The Validity of Prophecy*

According to this argument, Jonah is angry that, if the Ninevites do repent, then he will be proved wrong and thus a false prophet: he predicted a destruction that didn't happen (see Deut 18:21–22). But, surely, the purpose of preaching repentance is to bring about . . . repentance! And in such cases, both alternatives—the Ninevites repenting, or not—are clearly fulfillments of prophecy.

To save this argument, Sasson<sup>16</sup> finds Jonah a victim of oracular ambiguity: In announcing that Nineveh would be overthrown, Jonah saw only destruction, whereas the opposite possibility—"overthrow" by repentance—was also intimated. When Nineveh is indeed not destroyed and Jonah finally sees the paronomasia, he is upset not because of his faulty understanding or God's trickery, but rather because God didn't observe proper etiquette in now allowing him to prophesy Nineveh's weal.<sup>17</sup>

The problems with this position are multiple. First of all, announcing weal is a prophetic possibility but certainly not a necessity and not even widespread (Sasson cites only Isaiah). And if Isaiah can indulge a basically decent king, requiring an Israelite prophet to congratulate Nineveh would be quite another matter. On the matter of paronomasia, the failure to perceive ambiguity is never a simple case of linguistic incompetence. Jonah does not see the (linguistic) possibility of Nineveh's salvation because he is presumably not interested in its salvation, not believing it to

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<sup>16</sup>Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB 42B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 294–98, 346.

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion, see my forthcoming study (T. A. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Genesis 4:1–7 and Oracular Double-Talking," *Prooftexts* 25 [2006], 259–76).

be possible. This could mean that, as the rabbis projected, Jonah doubted that their repentance was sincere. Or, alternatively and as we shall argue, it means that Jonah does of course see the ambiguity but holds that the Ninevites are not yet deserving of God's *full* love.<sup>18</sup>

### *Justice or Mercy?*

Simon's own explanation of Jonah's anger is that Jonah is a law-and-order man, that in the perpetual tension between God's compassion and justice Jonah is overprotective of the latter, feeling that mercy can mean overindulgence with the wicked and absence of justice. But one must notice that Abraham, the grand patron of mercy over justice (see Gen 18), concedes the destruction of the wicked and does not preach repentance. Terry Eagleton said it best: "If disobedience on the scale of a Nineveh goes cavalierly unpunished, then the idea of obedience also ceases to have meaning. God's mercy simply makes a mockery of human effort, which is why Jonah ends up in the grips of *Thanatos* or the death drive."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, if Simon is correct, then we must reconsider one of the rabbis' most famous judgments of our prophet, according to which Jonah cared for the honor of the child (Israel) but not of

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<sup>18</sup>There are, of course, instances in the Hebrew Bible that smack of classical oracular ambiguity (see the previous note). Here too, God, unable to speak an untruth, proffers words that have opposite meanings. Thus *hpkh* can mean either be literally overthrown and destroyed, or spiritually transformed through repentance. One must occur—actually, over the course of time, both can occur—but humans can influence which. Similarly, Jonah is invited to speak initially *against* the Ninevites and then *to* them. In the first instance, he infers from the preposition "against" that the meaning has to be physical destruction and he refuses. When this is revised as "to" them, he can at that point see the second meaning and on that basis accept the mission to preach their repentance. There is thus no ambiguity in the classical sense and this is not merely another instance of poor Jonah's stupidity. Rather, he does make the two options clear to the Ninevites: they are going to be "overthrown" one way or another, the choice is theirs; either they do it or God will do it for them. If the choice seems easy, change is not. Recall Lot's wife, who just couldn't avoid her clinging gaze backward. Or even Lot, on the edge of annihilation and still bargaining for yet "a little" of the old stuff.

<sup>19</sup>Terry Eagleton, "J. L. Austin and the Book of Jonah," in *The Book and the Text* (ed. Regina Schwartz; Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 231–36.

the Father (God). It would seem, rather, that Jonah's entire purpose was quite the opposite: disregarding the honor of all human beings (including the Israelites, who do not appear in the book anyhow), Jonah's total preoccupation was with the honor of God, for the total integrity of the divine Being, which includes justice as well as mercy (see below, "Conclusion").

The matter of the Ninevites' repentance as the book's central focus is problematic, however, since the book is not at all about Gentiles—in fact, they don't even appear in chapters 2 and 4. Thus, for example, the argument that "it was the belief that the Ninevites would repent that prevented him [Jonah] from going to Nineveh in the first place"<sup>20</sup> is to be rejected, not because Jonah hates Gentiles but because God's edict of annihilation is incomprehensible, both in terms of what Jonah knows about the divine attributes and because of his prophetic understanding of the goals of human life, as we shall discuss in chapter 8 below.

## A Fifth Hypothesis: The Love-Plot

Now the word of the Lord [came] unto Beloved.<sup>21</sup>

The book's simple words of prophetic opening are actually among the most mysterious in the Bible, and yet we behave as if they were perfectly clear and obvious. One typical reaction: "How could Jonah have even thought of refusing? God told him to do it!" But the period of prophecy is past; God no longer speaks directly to humans, not even to His prophets. By this we do not engage the nature of prophecy but rather observe that we simply may have neither experiential nor conceptual bases for grasping what is being said. All we surmise is that Jonah himself—whether through dreams or inner inspiration or whatever—was convinced that the order was from God. And that is enough to follow his psychology and even try to penetrate his lofty perceptions. But

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<sup>20</sup>John Day, "Problems in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," in *Quest of the Past: Studies on Israelite Religion, Literature, and Prophetism* (ed. A. S. van der Woude; OTS; Leiden: Brill, 1990), 45.

<sup>21</sup>I.e., Jonah or dove or, as per Cant 5:2, "Beloved"; see below, "The Opening Scene," in chapter 5.

it does not authorize assertions about God's nature, nor does it set immutable parameters for the ensuing dialogue.<sup>22</sup> By this I mean something quite simple but essential for today's human being, whether religious or totally secular in outlook. Jonah was convinced that he had a personal experience and dialogue with God and this experience is somehow reported by what we have of Scripture. Through this writing we can now try to reconstruct his concept so that we can decide whether the experience is worth the pursuit.

In the matter of Jonah's motivations we thus wish to put forth a fifth hypothesis, one that combines elements of the other four but looks single-mindedly neither to the theological issue, nor to the secondary characters, nor to Jonah's professional responsibilities as a prophet, nor to the psychology of the other major player—God. To be sure, what all of these have in common (except the last one) is a focus on the *message* of prophecy, in this case the call to Nineveh to repent. However, I see the problem as one of a threatened *relationship* (between God and His messenger) that involves all of the above but that is distinct, enmeshed in the very fabric of the prophetic dialogue.<sup>23</sup> To see the matter clearly we must stay as close to the words of the text as possible and be attentive to every possible nuance of meaning. For example, the book's main problem has been presented as Jonah's refusal to preach to the Ninevites.<sup>24</sup> This may indeed be a correct inference

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<sup>22</sup>Current understandings of the book of Jonah are typically reductive, reading the exchange between God and Jonah as entirely uni-directional and monologic (God has to convey a lesson, convince Jonah of some important truth, and the like). However, "the primacy of the signifier [the entire Jonah story] goes beyond theology as such. The Book's language, which is history and the relation to history, is sufficient. Even God is part of the signifier, since that is where dialogue occurs" (Henri Meschonnic, *Jona et le signifiant errant* [Paris: Gallimard, 1981], 86). Thus God does not have anything like a privileged position but is rather conceived as merely part of the total signifier.

<sup>23</sup>Alexander Rofé (*The Prophetic Stories* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988], 175) cogently argues this point in the case of the Man of God at Bethel (1 Kgs 13): "the prohibitions [against eating and drinking] are related to the Man of God's role as messenger, rather than to the message." Rofé also makes a good case for viewing Jonah and the Man of God story as belonging to the same literary genre, that of a parable whose dynamics focus on the relationship between the prophet and his God (173).

<sup>24</sup>Simon, *Jonah*, vii.

from his flight, but it does not tell the whole story. The text says, rather, that Jonah attempts to “flee from God’s presence,” which is a rather more complex matter.

We may begin by asking: What, then, is God to Jonah? The answer, according to the prophet himself (4:2), is that He is a patient and merciful God such as is mentioned throughout the Hebrew Bible. Now this God, whose mercy is said to be “upon all His creatures” (Ps 145:9), tells His servant—if he wants to be His servant—to bring the immoral Gentiles back to proper behavior and He will let them live. That is to say, Jonah’s belief in God requires him to leave the security and joy of the divine Presence (the Holy Temple) in Jerusalem and journey to an unclean land and a wicked people. But why should he? Because God commands! But why on earth, on the basis of his experience and expectations, should God so command?! For Jonah regards God as primarily the One who has a special relationship of *love* towards His *servants*, who “watches over those who love Him and that He loves, and destroys the wicked” (Ps 145:20). We often conclude from that—somewhat hastily—that Jonah is to be thought of as a law-and-order man, one who is jealous of God’s Justice, which in this case would mean deserved retribution against the cruel and the wicked. But a different focus is possible since, surely, the wicked, if not through divine agency, will *self-destruct* if given a decent chance.<sup>25</sup> No, Jonah is concerned about the implications of God’s mercy less towards the wicked than towards God’s own beloved, such as he feels himself to be. Let’s be clear about this: Jonah does not complain that God loves, only that He loves “too much,” without discrimination or faithfulness, showing *rab khesed*, “too much”<sup>26</sup> love for the wrong people (sinners), undoubtedly, but by that very fact *not enough love for his Beloved*.

In our search for the book’s unity there are also matters beyond thematics to consider: literary questions of tone, levels of dialogue. My hunch, to repeat, is that Jonah’s upset is less that of

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<sup>25</sup>As per Ps 9:16: “The nations drown in the pit which they made; in the net that they hid their own foot is caught.”

<sup>26</sup>For this meaning of *rab* see Num 16:3; Ezek 45:9; and Qoh 1:18, as I argue in T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993), 72.

a false and/or unsuccessful prophet or law-and-order man than of a jilted lover. There are many reasons why this thesis is preferable as an explanation of the work's unity. First of all, it views the main problem dialogically, providing a more realistic explanation of the relationship between God and His beloved prophet, while saving the story from the temptation to view it as merely or basically parody, or irony, or even comedy. Secondly, it unites not only all the major themes but also those otherwise unexplained and unexplainable elements such as both Jonah's strange behaviors and God's playful irony. It enables us to understand these as amorously motivated and thus vulnerable and tender rather than simply ridiculous. It also encourages us to notice that Jonah and God have some serious issues to work out before their relationship can get back on track; and, as in such circumstances, the matters must be worked out not by put-downs but rather by patient dialogue. Let us now proceed to some of these issues, in more or less the order in which they are presented in the text, indeed in the very manner of their presentation.

### **Structure and Plot: Two Equal Parts, Delayed Plot**

A rather unique feature of our book is that, of all biblical prophets, Jonah is the only one who “needs to have his assignment from the Lord given to him a second time,” suggesting to this critic that Jonah's mission to Nineveh was “very important indeed”:<sup>27</sup>

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim . . .” (1:1–2; emphasis added)*

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim . . .” (3:1–2; emphasis added)*

Before jumping ahead to interpretations—or getting bogged down on the mission itself—however, certain stylistic implications must

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<sup>27</sup>James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 22.

be noticed, and these will in fact be important for interpretation. This repetition, quite astonishing for both its length and verbatim precision, focuses attention on structural features even more astonishing. Notice both the distance of the repetition from its pattern and also its location: it occurs precisely at the midpoint of the book, thus yielding, even on first reading, the correct impression of a perfectly balanced two-part composition, its four chapters being divided into two equal parts:<sup>28</sup>

Part One = chapters 1–2;

Part Two = chapters 3–4.

The Lord's repeated command thus marks both an ending, bringing closure to Part One, and a beginning to a new part.

Such a repetition of words—variously called *inclusio*, or *Wiederaufnahme*, or repetitive resumption in literary parlance, occurring often but not necessarily at the start of a verse or section—is a frequent feature of biblical style, its function being similar to that of a bracket or parenthesis. For example, Gen 22:6 closes with the observation “So the two of them went together.” There ensues a brief dialogue between father and son, followed by the verbatim repetition “(s)o the two of them went together” (v. 8), indicating that the parenthetical dialogue is now closed. The text then resumes where it left off before the interrupting dialogue, which, from the point of view of plot, could easily have been omitted, the reader skipping ahead to where the action resumes.

If this simple stylistic rule is now applied to Jonah, then we must consider that the entire first half of the book is somehow bracketed. For the repetition of the opening verse at 3:1 stylistically sponsors the argument that the long parenthesis opened at the outset is finally closed. At the start of Part Two Jonah is simply brought back to square one, so to speak, where the aborted plot can resume or, rather, so that it can finally

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<sup>28</sup>Other divisions have been suggested. Jacob Licht (*Storytelling in the Bible* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978], 122), for example, sees three “episodes” (corresponding to chapters 1, 3, 4) rather than two parts, but his analysis has two disadvantages: loss of the parallelistic implications of two equal parts (see below), and dismissal of Jonah's psalm (chapter 2) as a mere “poetic intermezzo.”

commence.<sup>29</sup> Thus, quite astonishingly, Part One represents such a notable lack of progress as to be merely parenthetical, and half-way through the book the story has not advanced; indeed, since nothing has yet happened, the story has not even begun, and some readers might wish to have been warned to skip ahead to the real action!

Such a compression or postponement of the plot is further exaggerated, this time at the end. It has been accurately observed that, as a prophetic work of Hebrew Scripture, the book of Jonah's four chapters could have been condensed into one, the third.<sup>30</sup> The remainder of the book is quite subsidiary to the prophet's call and mission, both fully described in chapter 3. Thus, the entire rest of the book, chapter 4 as well as the first two, focuses merely on Jonah's psychological reactions to his prophetic call: his refusal of the mission before the fact (chapters 1–2), and his regret or reaction over having succeeded (chapter 4). Three-fourths of the book, in other words, presents (merely!) the emotional problems, as it were, that God and prophet are having with one another.<sup>31</sup>

However, if the parallelism of Jonah 1:1 and 3:1 demonstrates the sheer excess of the first half of the book—that the entire bulk was simply a false start and that the plot is brought back to degree

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<sup>29</sup>It is thus imprecise to say, with Phyllis Tribble, that “the plot *continues* by beginning a second time,” since the plot has not even yet begun. See her *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 109; emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup>André LaCocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 137.

<sup>31</sup>If the comparison between simple or local *inclusio* and the extended one in Jonah seems strained, Job's Prologue in Heaven can be seen as a bridge between the two:

One day, the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came along with them. (Job 1:6)

One day, the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came along with them to present themselves before the Lord. (2:1)

In terms of the plot, nothing has happened between the parentheses, except a nice chat and an aborted attempt on Job's honor: the satan's plan has failed and things are back to square one. If indeed the satan's first experiment was even necessary is a question that seems a strong provocation to clever exegesis, since, upon appearance, it could have been skipped, with little lost in the bargain. See Meir Weiss, *The Story of Job's Beginnings: Job 1–2, a Literary Analysis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), 62.

zero—we are similarly provoked to ask why the chapters that make up Part One have been included. What else does the book of Jonah attempt to represent, beyond the prophetic goal of saving Nineveh? At the start of Part Two Jonah now knows that the previous option has been exhausted, that in reality something new is about to unfold. Before examining the progress of this awareness, it is worth sketching out ways in which such a binary and symmetrical organization—especially as reinforced by the *inclusio*—can help us conceptualize how meaning is structured in Jonah.

## The Two/Four Settings

Critics have interpreted these two equal parts to the book of Jonah in a variety of ways: as complementary, as parallel or mirror-like, and as contrastive.<sup>32</sup> For the moment, let us take note of several ways in which such a partition distributes meaning and suggests interpretations:

- a) Each part sponsors its own mode of what we might call dialogic behavior, distinct but parallel, as it were:

Part One: Jonah goes down into a boat, God takes him into a fish;

Part Two: Jonah goes into a *succah*,<sup>33</sup> God lures him under the *kikayon*.

- b) Each part presents its own Group of Gentiles. The focus, in traditional discussions, is on the Ninevites (chapter 3), with the sailors (chapter 1) playing at best second fiddle, providing a kind of weak parallel or anticipation. The balancing of parts, however, suggests that the sailors play a

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<sup>32</sup>There is a considerable body of critical writing on this mirror effect, most of it belaboring the symmetries between the parts. Whereas Sasson (*Jonah*, 16) considers the listing of such parallels as superficial, the opposite extreme (e.g., Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 109–17), through excessive multiplication, actually has the effect of reducing both parts to a single one. We shall later have more to say about how the two parts of Jonah mirror one another.

<sup>33</sup>Heb. *sukkah*, hereafter using the Eng. *succah*.

more central function, as we shall see in our examination of chapter 1.

- c) Each part focuses on alternate psychological motivations and presents distinct episodes in Jonah's relationship with God. In Part One the focus is on Jonah's reasons (or lack thereof); in Part Two the focus is on God's motivations. Stated differently, in Part One God saves Jonah for his sake, in response to his prayer; in Part Two, God saves Jonah for His own sake as a Creator or, alternatively, as a Lover.
- d) There is a studied, parallel alternation between the social and the highly personal. Thus each part opens (chapters 1, 3) with a stress on Jonah's service to and/or relations with other people. These are then followed (chapters 2, 4) by scenes in which only God and Jonah are the interlocutors. Here each chapter opens with a personal prayer and expands from highly personal communication with God (through the fish and the *kikayon*) to highly abstract theological matters relating to creation and divine mercy.
- e) Finally, each part—quite independent of the prophetic plot but crucial to the meaning—has its own distinctive setting. The alternate geographical settings of Parts One and Two have been characterized as the sea and Nineveh.<sup>34</sup> More accurate would be Jonah's own focus, for when the prophet first opens his mouth, it is to acknowledge his allegiance to the Lord “who made *the sea* and *the dry land*” (1:9; emphasis added). This declaration also has structural import, since it forecasts in a very precise way what will prove to be both the geographical and symbolic environment of the entire book:

Part One: the sea;

Part Two: the dry land.

A second and finer distinction can also be made. Just as the dry land has two aspects, each occupying its own chapter, the sea

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<sup>34</sup>E.g., Sasson, *Jonah*, 16.

setting also moves from the boat to the deep. We thus have, to use a Rabbinic expression, a situation of “two that are four”:

Two symbolic settings: The sea and the dry land;

Two variants of each:

the sea: the boat (chapter 1) and the deep  
(chapter 2);

the dry land: Nineveh (chapter 3) and the desert  
(chapter 4).

This carefully elaborated structure has major implications for the understanding of the concluding chapter 4, as we shall see.<sup>35</sup>

This study, following the structure of *Jonah*, is divided into two sections that mirror one another to some extent. The first (chapters 1 to 4: *The Ocean Experience* and *The Dry-Land Experiments*) follows the order of the four chapters of *Jonah*, attempting to identify and elucidate the main issues of each. The second section (chapters 5 to 8) returns to these materials in roughly the same order, attempting to extend the literary discussion in more theological directions. The final chapters project the generic and pedagogical possibilities of viewing *Jonah* as a pastoral or, alternatively, a tale of the fantastic.

Let us, in concluding these observations on the structural parallelism of parts and settings, mention a final nuance that will come up later for discussion. Like *Job* and *Faust*, the book of *Jonah* also has a Prologue in Heaven, albeit only a trace. If *Jonah*'s two settings are to be seen as contrastive,<sup>36</sup> these may be less so to one another than to *Jonah*'s point of departure and ultimate destination: the place of the Lord's Presence, since for the prophet both Tarshish and Nineveh are places of exile. Before proceeding to these important nuances, however, we must focus on how the particular setting of each literary part—the sea in the first case, the dry land in the second—creates its own distinct symbolic environment. Let us then proceed to the first of these.

<sup>35</sup>See below, “The Structure of *Jonah* 4,” in chapter 8.

<sup>36</sup>Sasson, *Jonah*, 16. See also Harold Fisch, *A Remembered Future: A Study in Literary Mythology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 133.

PART ONE

THE OCEAN EXPERIENCE

Jonah 1–2

... Who made the sea ...

(Jonah 1:9)

If I am not for myself, who is for me?

(Mishnah Abot 1:14)

*The creature that swallows and then vomits Jonah has excited the imagination of countless generations and is most certainly one key to the book's universal appeal. The very generality or generic nature of its presentation—simply a “great fish”—has empowered readers to imagine a whale or even the leviathan, and those who prefer an allegorical reading have also had ample room. Common to all readings is an awareness of the fish's awesome power, as precisely that creature who can range across all vertical dimensions of that great flux/void of our consciousness, rising to the surface and plumbing the depths beyond which lies unconsciousness and a death that may also be a rebirth. For the great fish has the power both to kill and give life, thus a worthy messenger of the Supreme Being who has similar powers (1 Sam 2:6).*

*It is worthy of note that the “great fish” is mentioned four times by the narrator but not at all by Jonah. What does have a powerful hold on Jonah's attention throughout Part One is rather the fish's medium, the mighty sea and its waters:<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>The Targum unfailingly renders Tarshish, Jonah's supposed destination, simply as “the sea,” thus suggesting that its particular identity is of less import

*The Lord God of the heavens I fear, who made the sea and the dry land. (1:9)*

*Pick me up and throw me into the sea so that the sea will be quieted for you. (1:12)*

*And You cast me out into the depths,  
into the very heart of the sea:  
The current enfolded me;  
All Your breakers and Your waves  
passed me over. (2:4)*

*The waters choked me to my very life,  
Tehom enfolded me.  
Seaweeds closed upon my head.  
To the base of the mountains I descended,  
the underworld. . . . (vv. 6–7)*

*If it is true that we are dust and there shall return, this regards only the physical body, for in terms of our biological life and perhaps our consciousness as well, our myths would have us arise from water. In the Genesis account (1:2), the earth itself is originally in flux, enclosed or engulfed, as it were, by both Tehom (the cosmic deep) and the waters. Beyond his personal demise, Jonah's engulfment seems to undo the very act of creation. For Daniel Lys' beautiful reading of Cant 8:7<sup>2</sup> can also be applied to Jonah's plunge: "C'est plus qu'une simple mort, c'est l'engloutissement dans le Chaos originel."<sup>3</sup> Let us, with Jonah, traverse this watery space and try to describe its project.*

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than its symbolic value. Put differently, is Tarshish Jonah's real destination or rather, as we think, a negative one, any place away from the "Temple of Your Holiness" (2:8)? On the Targum of Jonah, see Eytan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Jonah* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1978), 57.

<sup>2</sup>8:7: Many waters cannot quench love / Nor can rivers sweep it away (Daniel Lys, *Le Plus beau chant de la création: Commentaire du Cantique des Cantiques* [Paris: Cerf, 1968], 291).

<sup>3</sup>"It is more than a simple death, it is the engulfing in the original Chaos."

CHAPTER ONE

# GOING DOWN UNDER: JONAH 1



Rabbi Nathan says: “Jonah went to the sea only in order to commit suicide.”

Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael<sup>1</sup>

There is only one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.

Albert Camus<sup>2</sup>

He is a priest who has left the world to itself, truly.

John L’Heureux, “Departures”<sup>3</sup>

## Jonah’s Suicide

Camus’ dictum on suicide and the proper pursuit of philosophy is best conceived not as an all-or-nothing affair, a kind of personal final solution, as it were, but rather as a question that gnaws at us daily and requires constant attention. Do I like my life; do I accept it as given? Why on earth am I here; by what cause and to what purpose? With what level of wakeful attention am I required to rivet myself to my existence as such?

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<sup>1</sup>Tractate *Pisha*, 4. Similarly, Ibn Ezra on Jonah 1:12: “He desired and sought to die.”

<sup>2</sup>Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 15.

<sup>3</sup>John L’Heureux, “Departures,” in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories* (ed. Tobias Wolff; New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 308–19.

Or to use Jonah's own words in the form of a question: Isn't my death better than my life (Jonah 4:3, 8)? Job, in an attempt to ground the question theologically and protect God, in fact may have had just the opposite effect, since his formulation sends the whole question upstairs, so to speak, by referring the problem to the Creator: why did God create us in the first place; and, by extension, why does God sustain us in being? Hardly embarrassed by such speculations, some midrashists even imagined previous creations that apparently weren't up to snuff and were consequently snuffed out (measure for measure?) by the Creator Himself.<sup>4</sup> Does ours merit the same fate? And, if so, maybe it is our privilege—even responsibility—to decline what is euphemistically called the gift of life, to withdraw and, at whatever level one deems appropriate, to “brown out” or “go dead” or even, literally, to die.

The question that plagued both Camus and the rabbis was also raised by key figures throughout Hebrew Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

Rebecca:

If such [is to be my suffering], why then do I exist? (Gen 25:22)

Moses:

But if not [i.e., if You will not forgive their sin], erase me from the book [of life] which You have written. (Exod 32:32)

Job:

Why is light given to him that is in misery,  
and life to the bitter of soul? (Job 3:20; also Jer 20:14–18)

Elijah:

[Elijah] came to a broom bush and sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. “Enough,” he cried. “Now, O LORD, take my life. . . .” (1 Kgs 19:4)

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<sup>4</sup>George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim* (3 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966; repr. in 2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1.382.

<sup>5</sup>See especially David Daube, “Death as Release in the Bible,” *NovT* 5 (1962): 82–104.

Such reactions to life's problems provide a compelling perspective for rereading Jonah, since the hero of this book, whatever his particular difficulties may be, wants out; he has had it with life; it is all just too much. Let us listen again to Jonah's theme song:

Please, Lord, take my life from me, for my death is better than my life. (4:3)

He requested from his soul to die, saying: "My death is better than my life." (v. 8)

"I am distressed unto death." (v. 9)

One might speak only of a "swan song," positing that, since these explicit examples occur only in the final chapter, they may reflect less a permanent disposition than a change of attitude on Jonah's part. It is rather the case, however, that Jonah's suicidal wishes are fully operative from the very start.

Let us begin at the beginning, with Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh at God's behest. Interpreted as a reluctance to prophesy, Jonah's refusal is not unique in the Hebrew Bible. What *is* unique is the peremptory nature of the rebuff, first in the absence of any argument or even reply whatever—a mutism stressed even further by the narrative's conniving delay of explanation until much later—and secondly in the seeming compliance followed by an abrupt about-face:

God: "*Get up and go to Nineveh!*"  
*And Jonah got up . . . and fled!*

Although the reasons for his "wanting out" are unclear, the abruptness of his response points not only to a flight but also to what Uriel Simon has called a "rebellion."<sup>6</sup>

Jonah's flight is conveyed by the verb *yarad*, to "descend" or "go down," which, through insistent repetition, moves from being a mere geographical notation to a metaphoric suggestion of intent:

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<sup>6</sup>Uriel Simon, *Jonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 3.

He *went down* to Joppa. (1:3)

He *went down* into it [the ship]. (v. 3)

When the sea storm, God's agent, starts to act up, Jonah descends even further into withdrawal:

Jonah *had gone down* into the hold<sup>7</sup> of the vessel. (v. 5)

As a further and fitting conclusion to Jonah's descent:

. . . he *lay down* and fell asleep. (v. 5)

The Hebrew for "fell asleep," *yeradam* (also v. 6), is a superb word-play or sound repetition of Jonah's successive descents (*yarad*), stressing "Jonah's flight from YHWH's presence as a descent into unconsciousness."<sup>8</sup> As Ackerman further observes, "our prophet is taking a path that leads to death as he seeks to avoid the road to Nineveh."

Jonah's "descent" has been frequently noticed by critics, but its full range and deep implications need to be grasped. In its intensity and pervasiveness, in its repetitive insistence that is literal as well as metaphorical, it means that Jonah *wants to die*, to be relieved of living, since he can no longer accept life on its present terms. No better proof of this than his own request to be thrown into the deep and thus disposed of:

[To the sailors:] "Pick me up and throw me overboard!" (1:12)

It should also be carefully noted that, had Jonah not wanted to die, he would instinctively have prayed, during the storm, to be saved. Even though requested to do so by the ship's captain, however (v. 6), his first uttered prayer occurs only from the belly of the fish (2:2).

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<sup>7</sup>*yarktei-*, usually rendered "hold" (NJPS, NRSV), "the farthest end" (Simon, *Jonah*), "inner part" (RSV) or, even better, "innards," as Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 166. It is equated with "*She'ol*, the depths of the pit" in Isa 14:15 (see also Ezek 32:23). In Amos 6:10 the image seems to be that of solitary confinement in the house of the dead.

<sup>8</sup>James A. Ackerman, "Jonah," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 235.

Thus the death wish does not need to be “read back” into Part One, since it is pervasively there from the very start. But we are further invited to consider Jonah’s extended prayer in chapter 2 as part and parcel of that wish, as required by the culmination of the ongoing wordplay that occurs in that very prayer:

To the base of the mountains I descended [*yaradeti*],  
 the underworld,  
 its bars around me, forever. (2:7)

It is difficult to read this without recalling Jonah’s death wish, which now comes almost as a fulfillment. He asks to be relieved of living and the sailors, albeit reluctantly, oblige (see below). God does not acquiesce quietly in His servant’s demise, however, but rather calls his bluff, as if to say: “You want to ‘go down’; well, I’ll really take you down”:

Now the Lord appointed a large fish to swallow up Jonah. (2:1)

The complementary process is thus symbolized in our text by the successive agents of descent: it is Jonah who initiates the process, by going down to his sea-death, where he is assisted by the sailors. Now God goes one better by appointing the fish, which takes His prophet to the point at which death becomes palpable (v. 7). The surprise is that the great fish, besides being the agent of death, is also the means of rescue,<sup>9</sup> and *both* functions come from the Lord. The dual valence of this great fish points to the dual argumentative burden of Jonah’s prayers, to which we shall turn in chapter 2 after considering a most interesting variant of the suicide question.

### **Assisted Suicide: Jonah and the Sailors**

The details of Jonah’s flight—what we have termed a suicide, if only symbolic—can be rehearsed in a few sentences. Jonah goes

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<sup>9</sup>So George M. Landes, “The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm,” *Int* 21 (1967): 13: “the fish has essentially a salvatory function.”

down to the seaport of Jaffa and takes a place on a ship; in fact, according to a close reading of “he paid *its* price” rather than *his* price, some even conclude that he bought up all remaining places so that he could leave right away.<sup>10</sup> A violent storm comes up and the lots point the guilty finger at Jonah, who declares that he is fleeing from God and suggests that the storm will subside if the sailors throw him overboard.<sup>11</sup> The sailors are reluctant and make valiant efforts to row to safety, all to no avail. Believing there to be no alternative, they throw him overboard. To make the standard moral reading even more obvious, the rabbis came up with the following scenario:

*So they took up Jonah and cast him into the sea. (1:15)*

First they threw him in up to his knees and the storm let up, but when they took him back on board the storm started up again. So they lowered him into the sea up to his navel and the storm again let up, but when they again took him on board the storm resumed. They then lowered him into the water up to his neck, and again the storm abated. As soon as Jonah was brought back on board, however, the storm resumed in all its fury. They then threw him completely into the deep. (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*)<sup>12</sup>

The storm does abate—whether instantaneously, as such readings would favor, or at some later time. The sailors in great fright of the Lord offer sacrifices and make vows, and Jonah is swallowed up by a large fish.

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<sup>10</sup>All citations in Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB 42B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 83. Alternatively, Jonah’s motive, seldom imagined, could also be to reduce the number of lives about to be put at risk.

<sup>11</sup>According to the interpretation that Jonah bought up all the places on board, the sailors’ plan to cast lots seems disingenuous at best, for on whom other than Jonah were the lots to fall? Surely not on the sailors themselves, who just returned *from* Tarshish (see below, “The Mediating Narrator” in chapter 10) unscathed.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in M. Zlotowitz, *Jonah: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1980), 103.

Of the number of interesting and tough questions to be put to this text, let us focus on the sailors' participation. Here, at least, there is universal agreement with the rabbis' attempt to exonerate. Let Jerome's assessment stand for all the rest:

The sailors refused to spill blood, choosing rather to die. . . . The sea is in turmoil, the storm is overwhelming, and here they are forgetting their own danger and only think of saving another.

Citing this text, Sasson also finds proof on the sailors' part of a "demonstration of their humanity beyond normal expectations."<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, the narrative voice supports such an evaluation of the sailors, who are made to sound not only decent but like downright righteous chaps. At one point, in fact, their idiom sounds like God's very own: "Get up and call" (1:6), harking back to the divine call in 1:2. And, to be sure, the sailors throw Jonah overboard only with great hesitation and after trying alternative measures. But—and this is the important point—they do throw him overboard! And to argue that committing murder under duress is not really murder is a bit like the claim, cited by William James, that adultery is not only mitigated but removed when the baby is only a small one! At least under Jewish law, if someone tells me that I must kill him or he will kill me, I am allowed to kill that person. But if someone tells me to kill another or I might die, I am under no obligation. On the contrary, if I do kill that person under the guise of saving my own life, then I am guilty of murder.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Sasson, *Jonah*, 141. The sailors were not always so positively viewed however. As Yvonne Sherwood summarizes, "The sailors become variously the Apostles, steering the ship of the church (*and sleeping in Christ's hour of need*), or the Roman authorities who condemned Christ to death, or the Jews who opposed Christ, or Pontius Pilate, washing his hands of Jesus-Jonah's death." See her *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15; emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup>Scholars are wont to wax eloquent on this subject. James Limburg (*Jonah: A Commentary* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993], 56) notes, quite gratuitously, that "the Israelites have had a history of taking innocent blood" and concludes that these non-Israelites are most concerned not to do such a thing. The critic has considered all pieces of evidence except the crucial one, since taking innocent life is precisely what the sailors do!

But why not state the matter in the sailors' own words of prayer:

Please, Lord, may we not perish because of this man's life.<sup>15</sup>  
Do not put innocent blood upon our heads. (1:14)

Indeed, this is why the sailors are filled with such fear, because they know that it is not legitimate to take another's life to save one's own, and because they are indeed guilty of taking innocent blood.<sup>16</sup>

The very structure of the text brings subtle but firm confirmation of this point in the conclusion. Notice, first of all, that in their prayer the sailors express not one but two concerns:

Please, Lord,  
may we not perish because of *this* man,  
and  
may we not be guilty of shedding innocent blood (1:14).

Despite the tease of semantic parallelism here, which would collapse the two segments into a single meaning, the matters are quite distinct: may we not perish either because of his guilt or because of ours. In perfect consonance with this dual concern, the sailors, upon being saved, make two distinct acknowledgements to the Lord:

They offered sacrifice to the Lord  
and  
they made vows. (v. 16)

Commentators typically conclude that both of these are but variant forms of thanksgiving, the one on the spot to be followed up, as per their vows, by others on land. And, to be sure, the form of sacrifice (*zebakh*) frequently refers either to peace offerings or offerings of thanksgiving. But another linguistic tradition points in a different direction. Here God is speaking to the budding prophet Samuel:

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<sup>15</sup>Rashi makes clear the sailors' perception of their own guilt: "because of the sin of having laid a hand upon his soul," *nfsh*, meaning life, as in 2:6: "The waters choked me to my very *nfsh*" = life.

<sup>16</sup>The objection that Jonah himself confessed his guilt is no objection, since self-accusation is without value in criminal cases (see *b. Sanhedrin* 9b): perhaps the defendant is crazy or depressed.

I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house will not be *expiated with sacrifice* [*zebakh*] or offerings forever. (1 Sam 3:14)

The sacrifice thus has a role distinct from the vows, since, beyond their thanks for being saved, the sailors still had to atone for taking innocent blood.<sup>17</sup>

Another question that has received scant attention is the form of Jonah's suicidal flight, his decision to take a sea voyage, for, surely, suicide does not need such contrivance. One must at least ask the simple question: if, beyond the hypothesis of his suicide, Jonah was so persuaded of his own guilt,<sup>18</sup> then why didn't he throw himself overboard, if not to take his own life, at least to save the crew? Why involve presumably innocent sailors? And, indeed, the success of such a procedure is not guaranteed. For, surely, the sailors are under no obligation to assist Jonah. To his command: "throw me overboard" they might—indeed should—have responded (especially if, as Jerome would have us believe, the sailors did in fact refuse to spill innocent blood): "throw *yourself* overboard!" Why does Jonah put the sailors into a situation of human sacrifice?<sup>19</sup> Or, for that matter, why does God?

The question of Jonah's mysterious motivations for flight/suicide—this time in involving the sailors—must again be postponed until a fuller picture is painted, but we may here outline the matter from the perspective of the book's discussion concerning the moral status of Gentiles. The matter is complicated by the fact that God Himself changes course at the end. At the start, God plans to destroy Nineveh because of their Sodom-and-Gomorrah-like

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<sup>17</sup>When, later, Jonah also offers a similar sacrifice (*zebakh*, 2:10), it thus seems also possible to extend the sense beyond that of simple thanks and to include also the notion of atonement, in this case for having attempted suicide.

<sup>18</sup>As Jonah's prayers in chapter 2 make perfectly clear, Jonah does not have any sense of having sinned by running away; see below, "Jonah?" in chapter 7; "A Modern Fantastical Reading," in chapter 10.

<sup>19</sup>One interesting theory (see discussion in Kenneth Craig, *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993], 132–33) is that, knowing that the ship's troubles are due only to his rebellion, Jonah commands the sailors to throw him overboard out of compassion for their lives. However, to upgrade the sailors' status from innocent victims to murderers hardly qualifies as an act of compassion.

wickedness. After their repentance, however, He is willing to let them off the hook because they are not really wicked but like innocent children or animals. What matters to God, in the long run, is whether their evil deeds are corrected or not. But this remarkable aspect of the book—that God Himself can change His mind—will be convincing only to those who have read ahead to the end and who, moreover, think that God necessarily has the last and convincing word, which is far from the case in the book of Jonah, as we shall see. Earlier in the book, Jonah knows this tendency of God (4:1–2)—is it mercy or mere divine credulity?—and therefore tries to convince Him that the book's Gentiles are much worse<sup>20</sup> than He might come to think. The scenario could be sketched as follows:

[God to Jonah:] “Go preach to Nineveh!”

[Jonah to God:] “But the Gentiles are wicked, as You Yourself admit, and I can prove it. They would, for example, have no hesitation to take an innocent life to save their own.”

And Jonah went down to Jaffa and found a boat. . . .

In brief, in pursuing his (still unexplained) suicide, Jonah chooses to involve Gentile sailors in order to conduct an experiment for God's sake—a test, really.<sup>21</sup> And, as we have seen, God in fact loses the argument, since the sailors do commit murder or at least assist a suicide! God's only way out, at this point, is to resort to the fish trickery, as if to claim:

See, they didn't actually commit murder since you are still alive!

God thus appears to save Jonah principally in order to protect His own reputation. But God also saves Jonah for more responsive and altruistic reasons as well, as the so-called Psalm of Jonah now brings to our attention.

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<sup>20</sup>Or much better; see below, chapter 8.

<sup>21</sup>Alternatively, in asking to be thrown overboard, “Jonah offers his life to save the sailors.” So Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (2 vols.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 323. This of course does not explain why Jonah had to involve the sailors in his suicide in the first place.