

AMONG THE PROPHETS

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the Prophetic Writings**

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IN PRAISE OF DIVINE CAPRICE:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH*

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ABSTRACT

'Deliverance', as the author of Jonah depicts it, is neither a reward for merit nor a tempering of justice with mercy. It is, instead, a free and gracious act of divine love. The wellspring of this concept of deliverance is not covenant faith, but personal religion. This understanding of the message of Jonah is defended by a close reading of the critical passages in Jon. 3-4, and by an examination of intertextual relationships between Jonah and some of the other Minor Prophets.

I

The Book of Jonah gives common sense a battering. At almost every turn, it seems to refute some unspoken assumption, something taken for granted about the way things work in the world. A prophet commissioned to go to the east would not flee to the west; people drown when they are tossed into a tempestuous sea; if God announces that he is going to destroy a city, it is as good as destroyed; the Assyrians would not change their entire way of life because of a five-word admonition from a Hebrew prophet—except (in all four cases) in the Book of Jonah. Practically everything in the book confutes normal expectation—its characters, its plot, and even its language. Its fictive world is far removed from the everyday world described by experience and common sense.¹

* I would like to thank my former students, Rabbi R.M. Rosenberg and Rabbi E.W. Torop, for their responses to the ideas contained in this paper. I also benefitted from keen critical readings of earlier drafts by my friends, Drs M.V. Fox, B.R. Goldstein and B. Halpern.

1. See S. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 3-46. In her words, 'nonsense most often results from what may be seen to be a radical shift... away

One of the classic confutations of the 'real world' in all literature, of course, is Jonah's sea voyage in the belly of a great fish. This incredible adventure is spun out of the literalization or inversion of a metaphor,¹ specifically the metaphor of Jon. 2.3-4 ('From the belly of Sheol I cried out'). The effect of such inversion is to 'present a critique and a denial of univocal meaning and the ideology of univocal meaning found in common sense'²—not a bad precis for the entire Book of Jonah, in my view. Yet it is out of the book's befuddlement of its readers that its profound theological message emerges, as I intend to show in this paper.

It can hardly be fortuitous that two astonishing instances of unpredictable plot-reversal (*peripeteia*) in the Bible happen to involve the prophet Jonah. In 2 Kgs 14.25-27, God permits the expansion of Israel's borders, 'according to the word that his servant Jonah uttered', despite the nation's persistent sinfulness (14.24). And in Jon. 3.10, God reverses the evil decree that Jonah had pronounced against Nineveh in 3.4. The thematic link between these two events was already noted in the Babylonian Talmud, where R. Nahman b. Yisḥaq is quoted as saying, 'Just as evil was transformed³ into good for Nineveh, so was evil transformed into good for Israel during the days of Jeroboam b. Joash' (*b. Yeb.* 98a).

In each instance, the change of fortune entails the falsification of a prophetic threat of destruction. The reversal of Jon. 3.4 is self-evident.⁴

from a contiguous relationship to the context of everyday life... (p. 33).

1. Examples of this phenomenon are legion in everyday discourse, and are often a source of humor. When cartoon characters become furious, they turn red and breathe fire, their ears emit steam, and the tops of their heads blow off—all literalizations of commonly used metaphors. On these and other metaphors of anger, see G. Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 380-97.

2. Quoting Stewart, *Nonsense*, p. 77.

3. R. Nahman uses the niph'al of *hpk*, as does Jon. 3.4.

4. I am assuming for the moment that Jon. 3.4. is unequivocally negative. Yet according to Rashi and Isaac Abravanel, for example, *nehpāket* might have two senses: either Nineveh will be 'overthrown', or it will be 'transformed' for the better. Nineveh's response to the oracle will determine which of the two senses is effectuated. This view has been adopted recently by E.M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 48-49; B. Halpern and R.E. Friedman, 'Composition and Paronomasia in the Book of Jonah', *HAR* 4 (1980), pp. 79-92, esp. pp. 87, 89. For an arbitrary rejection of it, see H.W. Wolff, *Ozadiah and*

It is less frequently noted that the prophecies of Amos against Jeroboam, recounted in Amos 7.9 and 11 (the latter being Amaziah's report of Amos's speech), are contradicted by the favorable notice in 2 Kings 14 and, by inference, must have been at variance with Jonah's predictions. As M. Cogan and H. Tadmor remark, 2 Kgs 14.27 'evidences awareness of a prophetic word contradicting that of Jonah'.¹ A midrash suggests that Jeroboam was rewarded because he repudiated Amaziah's charge against Amos: 'Was not Jeroboam an idolater? Yes, yet God chose him to save Israel because he refused to accept slander of the prophet Amos.'² The sixteenth-century homilist Moses Alshekh explains that by sparing Amos's life, Jeroboam brought about the annulment of Amos's prophecies, and the fulfillment of Jonah's.³

In each case, the Bible seems to supply God's motive for sparing the condemned people. I say 'seems to' because, upon closer examination, the purported motives evanesce, or at least raise more problems than they solve. I intend to argue that these problems are the crux of the Book of Jonah—and not the contrast between Israel and the gentile nations, the clash between universalism and particularism, the tension between divine justice and mercy, or the dilemma of false prophecy, to name the four themes that have dominated discussion of the book for two millennia.⁴

Jonah (trans. M. Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 149.

1. *II Kings* (AB, 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 161 (see also p. 164).

2. *T. d. Eliyy.* 17 and parallels. See W.G. Braude and I.J. Kapstein, *Tanna Debe Eliyyahu* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), pp. 233-34.

3. M. Alshekh, *Sefer Mar'ot ha-Šove'ot* (repr. New York: Joseph Weiss, 1979), ad 2 Kgs 14.26. Alshekh's position is consistent with a common attitude towards prophecy, namely that prophecies of destruction are contingent upon the human response to them. Such prophecies may therefore be annulled without prejudice to the prophet who pronounced them. Promises of good fortune, on the other hand, are invariably fulfilled. On the latter point, see *b. Ber.* 7a (bot.); *b. Šab.* 51a. On the general principle, see Maimonides, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 10.4 (trans. H.M. Russell and J. Weinberg [New York: Ktav, 1983], pp. 26-27); Levi ben Gershom, *Milhamot ha-Shem* 2.6 (trans. S. Feldman [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986], II, pp. 59-60).

4. For basic orientation, see E. Bickerman, 'Les deux erreurs du prophète Jonas', *RHPR* 45 (1965), pp. 232-64; *idem*, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), pp. 3-49; L. Schmidt, 'De Deo': *Studien zur Literarkritik und Theologie des Buches Jona...* (BZAW, 143; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), pp. 4-130; J. Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in*

According to 2 Kgs 14.26-27 (contrary to the aforementioned midrash), God perceived the abject helplessness of Israel, and 'resolved not to blot out the name of Israel from under heaven' (NJPSV).¹ A similar pretext is apparently adduced for the rescue of Nineveh: its inhabitants 'do not yet know their right hand from their left' (Jon. 4.11). The thrust in both cases seems to be that the helpless, the ignorant, or those who are not responsible for their actions (like those renowned 'beasts' of Jon. 4.11) benefit from God's mercy.²

The problem with that motive for divine mercy is twofold. In the first place, it is contradicted by other descriptions of the human characters. Amos depicts an Israel that exults in its military successes (Amos 6.13), and is anything but forlorn: 'They lie on ivory beds, lolling on their couches, feasting on lambs from the flock and on calves from the stalls' (6.4). One might suggest that God's perception of Israel is at odds with Israel's self-perception, but that would be special pleading in favor of harmonizing Amos with 2 Kings 14. And that suggestion would not explain why God should choose to construe *this* particular instance of Israelite sinfulness as helplessness.

The contrast between the professed divine motivation and human action is even more blatant in Jonah. In response to Jonah's word, the Ninevites embark on a course of action that is so commendable that it has been taken for satire:³ they repent (Jon. 3.5-8). In effect, they act

the Book of Jonah (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), pp. 85-112; A. Preminger and E.L. Greenstein, *The Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism* (New York: Ungar, 1986), pp. 467-78. On the history of interpretation in general, see the works listed in Wolff's bibliography (*Obadiah and Jonah*, pp. 91-92, §10).

1. The passage bristles with difficulties. For a recent discussion, see Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, pp. 107, 160-64.

2. Cf. J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), pp. 121-22. Licht suggests that God 'spares His creatures for the simple reason that He likes them to exist'. That suggestion raises an obvious question: why, then, does he destroy them?

3. See J.A. Miles, Jr, 'Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody', *JQR* 65 (1974-75), pp. 168-81; J.S. Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah', in B. Halpern and J.D. Levenson (eds.), *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), pp. 213-46; *idem*, 'Jonah', in R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 234-43, esp. 238-39. Note also T. Eagleton's recent characterization of Jonah as a 'surrealist farce' ('J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah', in R. Schwartz (ed.), *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], pp. 231-36).

out Amos's admonition to 'seek the Lord and live' (Amos 5.6). This hardly represents the behavior of helpless, ignorant or irresponsible people. And their motivation for repentance is sophisticated: 'Who knows but that God may turn and relent?' (Jon. 3.9). In 3.10 God 'perceives' (*r'h*, as in 2 Kgs 14.26) what the Ninevites have done, and reverses his evil decree. For a moment, it even seems as if God has renounced his threat *because* of the Ninevites' repentance, but that causal nexus is immediately severed by both Jonah (4.2) and God (4.11). According to Jonah, mercy arises out of God's character, which the prophet defines by a purposeful revision of Exod. 34.6.¹ When God accounts for his behavior, however, he refers neither to the Ninevites' repentance, nor to Jonah's characterization of him (4.11).

The dissonance between God's actions and his putative motive(s) is exacerbated by a second consideration: the redemption of both the Northern Kingdom and Nineveh was abortive. The 'transformation of evil into good' was reversed in both cases. Israel persisted in its evil ways and was wiped out (2 Kgs 17). The Ninevites repented, and lasted long enough to serve as the agents of Israel's destruction before meeting their doom (Nahum). The destinies of the two beneficiaries of divine 'mercy' were thus intertwined until the demise of both.

It should be clear from the forgoing remarks that I reject the notion that 'Jonah has no connection with the grand sequence of sacred history'.² Such a claim may serve the interests of critics who would divorce Jonah from its canonical context, and read it as an isolated, self-contained entity. My view, however (to be elaborated below), is that *only* an intertextual reading can do justice to the book. It seems obvious to me that, as B.S. Childs observes, the reader of Jonah 'has in his canon the book of Nahum!'³ (and, I would add, Amos and 2 Kings as well). I would apply that observation to ancient and modern readers alike, and suspect that it was already in the mind of the editor of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets.

1. I shall return to this topic below. See the important discussions by M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 335-50; T.B. Dozeman, 'Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Yahweh's Gracious and Compassionate Character', *JBL* 108 (1989), pp. 207-23.

2. Licht, *Storytelling*, p. 124.

3. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 425-26.

It is easy, then, to sympathize with I. Abravanel's explanation of Jonah's anger, apropos of Jon. 4.1:¹

He never thought that the decree against [the Ninevites] would be reversed, for even though they had turned away from their wicked deeds, they persisted in their idolatry... Why, then, did God renounce the punishment that he had planned to bring upon them?... So that they might become the 'rod of his anger' [Isa. 10.5] and the 'weapons of his wrath' [Isa. 13.5], in order that he might take vengeance against Israel by means of them.² The prophet protested against God in his heart: Why should it be his intention to destroy Israel for idolatry, while pardoning Nineveh for the same offense?

The question that Abravanel puts in Jonah's heart is precisely the question of the Book of Jonah, but it needs to be rephrased in a more general way: why does God allow a wicked nation to prosper, only to destroy it later on for the selfsame wickedness?

The point is not to contrast God's treatment of Jews with his treatment of gentiles, but simply to ask why God seems to be so inconsistent and unpredictable. Is his behavior motivated in some comprehensible way? The Book of Jonah and 2 Kings 14 provide three possible answers to that question: (1) God spares the helpless; (2) God is 'compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment'; (3) God eschews the punishment of those who repent. All three of those answers are rendered problematic,³ particularly granting the validity of intertextual reading. Even within the stories themselves, Israel and Nineveh are not portrayed as particularly helpless. In the larger canonical context, it becomes clear that God did not utterly renounce their punishment; he *only* put it off for a while.⁴ Finally, while the repentance of the Ninevites did not save

1. All citations of Abravanel are from the Warsaw (1862) edition, where the commentary on Jonah can be found on pp. 119-30. The commentary on the Latter Prophets was first published in Pesaro in 1520.

2. For a modern commentator who derives Jonah's pathos from his prophetic knowledge of Israel's future destruction by Assyria, see H. Gese, 'Jona ben Amittai und das Jonabuch', *Theologische Beiträge* 16 (1985), pp. 256-72.

3. For a diametrically opposed opinion on this point, see T.E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), p. 129. Fretheim asserts the *validity* of all three answers.

4. Abravanel discerns God's true intention by interpreting Jonah's prophecy esoterically. 'Forty days more' (3.4) turns out to mean 'in 120 years' for 'days' = 'years', and the numerical value of the Hebrew word for 'more' ('*öd*, i.e. 70 + 6 + 4

them in the end, a remnant of Israel, which never repented, survived.

Why should the Book of Jonah raise three explanations of divine behavior that are subject to contradiction or falsification? Because, in my view, that is the point of the book! God's actions are uncanny and inexplicable; he is absolutely free to do as he chooses. More importantly, for the postexilic author of the Book of Jonah,¹ divine freedom manifests the only tolerable alternative to the failed conditional covenant—the covenant that had literally compelled God to destroy Israel.²

Divine freedom is often propounded as a theme of the Book of Jonah,³ but I do not think that it has been understood in all its ramifications. In a popular introduction to Jonah, K. Pfisterer Darr writes,

Central to the Book of Jonah are the concepts of divine freedom and mercy in the face of repentance. The story is, in fact, illustrative of the perspective found in a text like Jeremiah 18.7-8,⁴ wherein Yahweh says: 'If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I

= 80) must be added to the explicitly mentioned forty!

1. Perhaps also for the authors of Lamentations and Job. See my articles, 'The Message of Lamentations', in J. Lassner and P. Machinist (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible: Sacred Text and Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press [in press]); 'Reading and Misreading the Prologue to Job', *JSOT* 46 (1990), pp. 67-79.

2. I accept the scholarly consensus that places the composition of Jonah in the late fifth or early fourth century. On the reassessment of covenant in exilic and post-exilic Israelite thought, see D.J. McCarthy, 'Covenant in Narratives from Late OT Times', in H.B. Huffmon *et al.* (eds.), *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of G.E. Mendenhall* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), pp. 77-94; P.D. Hanson, 'Israelite Religion in the Early Postexilic Period', in P.D. Miller, Jr. *et al.* (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 485-508; S.D. Sperling, 'Rethinking Covenant in Late Biblical Books', *Bib* 70 (1989), pp. 50-73.

3. See, e.g., Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, p. 177, on God's 'completely free grace'. Schmidt comments ('*De Deo*', p. 129) that the Book of Jonah 'vermag zwar von ihrem Ansatz her die Freiheit Gottes zu wahren, auch das in der volkstümlichen Weisheit gelegentlich nicht der Fall gewesen sein mag'. See also Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, p. 112; J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 271.

4. So already the ninth/tenth-century Karaite commentator Daniel al-Qumisi, in his *Pitron Sheneim-Asar* (ed. I.D. Markon; Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1957), p. 42.

have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it'. God exercises freedom to pronounce judgment against, and be moved by compassion toward, Nineveh.¹

What Darr calls 'freedom' is not freedom at all. God acts in a clearly motivated way, under compulsion, in fact. He condemns the Ninevites for their wickedness (Jon. 1.2), but then he *must* spare them because of their (and his) adherence to the formula in Jeremiah 18. Jonah's objections, in this light, appear silly, or, worse, turn him into a hard-hearted Jew.²

Then, too, if the Ninevites were saved because of their repentance, what hope is there for those who do not repent? The logic of Jeremiah 18 ineluctably condemns them. The author of Jonah, in turn, condemns that logic. As A. and P.E. Lacocque observe in their provocative study of Jonah,³

The author of Jonah had the amazing boldness to show the 'anti-Jonah' in the persons of the wicked Ninevites. To the Jonah who hungered for certainty they opposed the ultimate uncertainty of 'perhaps' [Jon. 3.9]. They thus opened an immense possibility, namely, that God might choose extravagance over determinism...

In this view, God is free to save (or, as the Lacocques neglect to mention, to destroy) whomever he pleases, in whatever manner he chooses. The adroitly paired storm wind (1.4) and desert scirocco (4.8),⁴ tempest (1.4) and hot sun (4.8), Phoenicians (1.6) and Assyrians (3.9), great fish (2.1) and tiny worm (4.7)—all do God's bidding, with the

1. K.P. Darr, 'Jonah', in B.W. Anderson (ed.), *The Books of the Bible* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner's, 1989), I, pp. 381-84 (quotation on pp. 382-83).

2. Darr also remarks that 'Jonah's story refutes any notion that Israel alone deserves divine mercy, whereas the other nations of the world merit only divine justice' ('Jonah', in Anderson (ed.), *The Books of the Bible*, p. 383). Similarly, Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, p. 177. These are but modern reworkings of the kind of interpretation that Bickerman demolished. Cf. the salutary remarks in Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, p. 271.

3. A. Lacocque and P.-E. Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 90-100, 125-27 (quotation on p. 127). The authors' 'in-depth reworking' (*Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet* [Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1990]) arrived after the present article was completed. On the issue under discussion, see esp. pp. 122-25.

4. On this symmetry, see the sensitive remarks of G.H. Cohn, *Das Buch Jona im Lichte der biblischen Erzählkunst* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 12; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969), pp. 54, 59-60.

sole purpose of teaching Jonah what he knew all along, namely that 'deliverance is the Lord's' (2.10).

'Deliverance', as the author of Jonah depicts it, is neither a reward for merit nor a tempering of justice with mercy.¹ It is, instead, a free and gracious act of love. As such, it is a worthless people's only hope for survival. And the wellspring of this concept of deliverance is not covenant faith, but the simple trust in God's love and fear of his wrath that are the hallmarks of 'personal religion'.²

I intend to defend this understanding of the message of Jonah in two ways: by proposing a new interpretation of the critical passages in Jonah 3-4, and by examining one aspect of the intertextual relationship of Jonah with some of the other Minor Prophets, especially Micah and Nahum, the two books that follow Jonah in canonical order.

II

Since the pioneering article by N. Lohfink,³ it has become common for scholars to regard the two episodes in Jonah 3-4 as a narratorial unity, their complex textual pre-history notwithstanding. The linchpin of any unified reading, as Lohfink observed, is the interpretation of 4.5, which establishes some sort of temporal relationship between the two episodes. My view, itself admittedly not free of difficulties, is that 4.5bβ establishes the *simultaneity* and *complementarity* of the two accounts.⁴

The stories about Nineveh and Jonah, in other words, illuminate and confound one another. Each one supplies vital details that the other is lacking, so that neither one is comprehensible except in the light

1. Contrast Cohn (*Das Buch Jona*, pp. 87-88), who sees this as the central theme of the book.

2. On the emergence (or, perhaps, re-emergence) of personal religion in post-exilic Israel, see McCarthy, 'Covenant in Late OT Times', in McCarthy *et al.* (eds.), *The Quest for the Kingdom*, pp. 86-88. I use the term 'personal religion' in the sense delineated by T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 147-64. I have discussed the concept in relation to the theology of the Book of Lamentations in my article, 'The Message of Lamentations' in Lassner and Machinist (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible*.

3. 'Jona ging zur Stadt hinaus (Jona 4, 5)', *BZ NS* 5 (1961), pp. 185-203; cf. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, p. 163.

4. Simultaneity in narrative has the advantage of disrupting ordinary narrative temporality, and thus disorienting the reader. See Stewart, *Nonsense*, pp. 146-70.

of the other. In the end, Jonah's strange encounter with God brings about the deconstruction and re-mystification of the superficially simple tale of Nineveh's repentance and salvation.

At the heart of the matter is an analogy cum wordplay, which centers on God's ability to do what he wants by means of seemingly unpromising agents. Thus, Jonah (the agent) is to Nineveh (he one acted upon) as the *qîqāyôn* (4.6)¹ is to Jonah. This analogy is not merely signalled by the wordplay *YŌNâ/qîqāYŌN*.² The *qî-* element in the plant name also evokes Jon. 2.11, where the fish 'vomits' (*wayyāQĒ*) Jonah out onto dry land.³ And God describes the *qîqāyôn* as having had a lifespan of a single day (4.10b), which corresponds to the amount of time that Jonah had spent in Nineveh (3.4), despite that city's enormous size. Jonah's physical presence was as ephemeral for Nineveh as that of the *qîqāyôn* was for Jonah.

With this analogy in mind, we can follow the two story-lines as they overlap and intertwine. Both stories begin with the human characters in a state of 'evil' (*rā'â*). Jonah prophesies against Nineveh, the 'great city' whose 'evil' has come to God's attention (1.2; 3.3-4). Having prophesied, Jonah experiences a 'great evil' himself (4.1).

The Ninevites' initial response to Jonah's word is to believe it; they take it to be reliable (*wayya^amînû*)⁴ and of divine origin (3.5). Jonah, in contrast, asserts that God is *unreliable*, in his reformulation (4.2) of one of the divine attributes listed in Exod. 34.6aβ-b:

1. I do not gloss this word because, as Good rightly observes, the identity of the plant is irrelevant (*Irony in the Old Testament*, pp. 51-52).

2. It also should be noted that NYNWH (Nineveh) contains the same consonants as YWNH (Jonah).

3. So, rightly, Halpen and Friedman, 'Composition and Paronomasia', pp. 85-86.

4. In general, *wayya^amînû* has been grievously overinterpreted (e.g. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, p. 150). I would understand it here in its simplest sense, 'to consider trustworthy, reliable'. For discussion, see A. Jepsen, '*āmen*', *TDOT*, I, (1977), pp. 293-309. Unfortunately, Jepsen also overinterprets in the present case (pp. 304-305). W. Rudolph takes the simpler view: 'Trotz der ungenügenden Ausrichtung der Botschaft trauen sie [the Ninevites] dem Boten des unbekanntes Gottes und nehmen die Warnung ernst' (*Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona* [KAT, 13/2; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971], pp. 358-59). But even Rudolph feels compelled to contrast Nineveh's receptivity to the divine word with Israel's deafness to it.

Exodus	Jonah
'erek 'appayim	'erek 'appayim
w ^r rab ḥesed	w ^r rab ḥesed
w ^e 'emet	w ^e niḥām 'al-hārā'ā

Instead of being 'reliable' ('emet),¹ Jonah's God 'renounces evil' (niḥām 'al-hārā'ā). The substitution is both intentional and polemical²—renunciation of evil, from Jonah's perspective, connotes unreliability. And the prophet's characterization of God seems to be accurate in context. The possibility that God's word is not truthful gives hope to the Ninevites (3.9; mi-yōdea'); the certainty that it is not moves Jonah to despair (4.2-3; yāda'it).³ The paradox here is disorienting: Jonah's sure knowledge that God will spare Nineveh is taken for unbelief, while Nineveh's hope in a false God manifests a true faith.

After staking out their basic positions concerning God's reliability, both the Ninevites and Jonah take action. As Ackerman has observed, Jonah and the Ninevite king can be construed as 'antitypes'.⁴ The following parallel plot summaries will extend and amplify that point:

Nineveh (Jon. 3.5-10)	Jonah (Jon. 4.2-6)
The Ninevites fast and mourn.	Jonah prays; he demands to die.
Jonah's word reaches the king; the king gets up (wayyāqom) from his throne	Jonah leaves the city; he sits down (wayyēšeb).
The king puts on sackcloth (wayKaS SaQ), and sits (wayyēšeb) in the dust.	Jonah erects a SuKKâ, and sits (wayyēšeb) in its shade.

1. I am assuming that 'mn and 'emet are cognate. See Jepsen, 'āman', pp. 309-10.

2. So, rightly, Cohn, *Das Buch Jona*, p. 99 n. 2. Dozeman ('Inner-Biblical Interpretation') unaccountably misses this point altogether.

3. I follow the opinion of Eliezer de Beaugency that, at the time of his utterance in 4.2-3, Jonah 'did not know of [the Ninevites'] repentance' (*Kommentar zu Ezechiel und den XII kleinen Propheten* [ed. S. Poznański; Warsaw: Mekize Nirdamim, 1909], p. 159 [ad Jon. 4.1]). He cannot, therefore, have been ascribing God's mercy to that repentance. Rather, 'it turns out that I struggled and broke my body and had my strength exhausted along the way for nothing, for I realized that you would renounce the evil even without repentance' (*idem*, ad Jon. 4.3).

4. 'Satire and Symbolism', pp. 239-40, following Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, pp. 19-20.

The Ninevites mourn, fast, and turn away from their wickedness (rā'ā).

The Ninevites pray; they hope to live.

God sees (r'h) what the Ninevites have done.

God decides not to do the evil (rā'ā) that he had promised to do.

Jonah waits to see (r'h) what will happen in the city.

God provides a qiqāyôn to save Jonah from his evil (rā'ā).

Jonah rejoices.

This plot summary may be abstracted further, and condensed into three parallel plot elements:

1. The human character is in a state of evil.
2. The human character acts to counter the state of evil.
3. God unilaterally reverses the state of evil.

Jonah impugns God's reliability, builds himself a shelter,¹ and then waits passively. The Ninevites, in contrast, believe God, and put on an extravagant display of piety as they attempt to avert their fate. The point of contact between the respective actions of Jonah and the Ninevites (plot element 2) is the word play *KSh SaQ(Qim)* (3.6, 8) // *SuKKâ* (4.5). Jonah 'sits' (ySB) in the shade of his hut while the Ninevites 'repent' (ŠvB). Yet the outcome is the same in both cases: God rescues both Nineveh and Jonah from the 'evil' that befalls them. The Ninevites repent, and God spares them; Jonah cavils, and God 'saves' him too.

We hear nothing about Nineveh's reaction to God's reversal of its fate. The possibility envisioned in Jon. 3.9 // Joel 2.14 seems to have been realized.² As for Jonah, his rescue from evil makes him happy (4.6), and his story, too, seems to have reached a satisfactory resolution.

And then the worm turns. The following morning, God arranges for the demise of the qiqāyôn (4.7). The sun beats down on Jonah's head and, once again, the prophet wishes to die (4.8).³ Now it is time

1. See Cohn's important discussion of the contrast between Jonah's *sukkâ* and the God-given *qiqāyôn* (*Das Buch Jona*, pp. 87-88); also Ackerman, 'Satire and Symbolism', pp. 240-42; Lacocque and Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex*, pp. 87-90. I am sympathetic to the efforts of Ackerman and the Lacocques to find allusions to the Temple here, especially in the light of Isa. 4.5-6.

2. See Dozeman, 'Inner-Biblical Interpretation', pp. 213-16.

3. It does not seem to occur to Jonah that he might return to his *sukkâ*, perhaps

for God to teach him a lesson. But what is that lesson?¹ The usual view is well summarized by Darr:²

... God remonstrates this prophet [*sic*], who cares more for infallible prophecy and mechanical justice than for mercy in the face of whole-hearted repentance. If Jonah pitied the plant (himself?), which he had no part in creating, should not God feel pity for a repentant city with many thousands of human and animal inhabitants?

Although that widely proffered view embodies a valuable teaching, I do not think that it is the lesson of Jonah, for at least three reasons.

First, even assuming that Jonah did resent his prophetic 'loss of face',³ there is not the slightest indication that he begrudged the Ninevites their salvation, nor does he express any opinion about the proper divine response to human initiative.⁴ Jonah's prayer in ch. 2 manifests the ethos of personal religion: one cries out and hopes that God will respond (2.3). Acts of piety serve as offerings of thanks, not as attempts to win God's favor in a time of crisis (2.10).⁵

Secondly, God never says that he was merciful to the Ninevites because of their repentance. That is an inference derived from reading

because its shade (*sāl*) was lacking in redemptive power (*massīl*).

1. Cf. the anonymous Bible critic cited by Augustine, *Epistolae* 102, 30 (*apud* Giancarlo Rinaldi, *Biblia Gentium* [Rome: Libreria Sacre Scritture, 1989], pp. 402-403): 'Then what is the purpose of the gourd which sprang forth above the disgorged Jonas? What was the reason for its appearance? Questions such as these I have seen discussed by Pagans amidst loud laughter, and with great scorn.'

2. Darr, 'Jonah', in Anderson (ed.), *The Books of the Bible*, p. 382.

3. See especially Bickerman; also, e.g., M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 320. I refrain from discussing Sternberg's interpretation in detail because I cannot share one of his basic premises: that the reader arriving at Jon. 3.1 expects Nineveh to be destroyed, and is shocked by the reversal (p. 319). This reader never did, not even as a child. I am, in general, uncomfortable with Sternberg's arrogation of the epithet 'the reader'; the first person would be more honest.

4. Jonah is not portrayed as ruthless or homicidal—he acts to save the sailors, even though it seems to mean certain death for him (1.12). Jon. 1.15 is another verse like 3.10, in which it is possible, but not necessary, to infer a cause-and-effect relationship between the two clauses.

5. Cf. Elizer de Beaugency, *Kommentar*, p. 158 (*ad* Jon. 2.2): 'There are prayers in Scripture that are pleas, and others that express praise and thanks, for example, "and Hannah prayed" [1 Sam. 2.1], which consists entirely of praise and thanks, and this one [i.e. Jonah 2]'

Jon. 3.10 as a statement of cause and effect,¹ but that reading is not necessarily correct. Jonah's alternative is to assert that it is in God's nature to 'renounce evil' (4.2),² without explicating the relationship (if any) between human action and divine response.

Thirdly, the *a fortiori* reasoning allegedly found in God's statements in 4.10-11 makes no sense. God is supposedly saying, in effect, 'if you (Jonah) would spare that insignificant plant (for your sake), then naturally I (God) should spare all those people and animals (for my sake [?])'. In this view, Jonah's self-absorption is contrasted with God's magnanimity. The speciousness of the analogy becomes painfully evident, however, when someone (Abravanel, in this case) tries to elucidate it:³

God reproved [Jonah] and got to the heart of the matter when he said, 'You cared about the plant'. In other words, you cared about something that was not the work of your hands, that 'you did not work for and did not grow', for something that was considered worthless because it 'appeared overnight and perished overnight'. If that is the case, then how can 'I not care about Nineveh, that great city', that wondrous work of my hands that is a great and mighty edifice, unlike the plant?

Is the idea that God likes the big things that he makes more than the little things? Or that people have no right to grieve for the loss of good things that they did not make for themselves? Such notions, in my view, represent misreadings of the relationship between 4.10 and 4.11—not least the preposterous idea that God was responsible for the construction of Nineveh, and might regret its loss for that reason.

Abravanel's continuation confuses the issue even further. He has God say to Jonah:

You cannot argue that you did not care about the plant for its own sake, but, rather, for the benefit that it provided you with, namely the shade, because Nineveh provides me with acknowledgement and glorification that are like the shade.

At least Abravanel recognizes (as most commentators do not) that the story depicts the plant not as something worthless, but as the agent of

1. See Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, pp. 45-48; Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 346-47.

2. See Eliezer de Beaugency, *Kommentar*, p. 159 (*ad* Jon. 4.2).

3. For a modern restatement of Abravanel's position, see, e.g., A.J. Hauser, 'Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove', *JBL* 104 (1985), pp. 21-37, esp. p. 37.

Jonah's salvation (4.7). Nevertheless, he fails to show that the Ninevites provide God with an analogous benefit, no matter how many of them there are. They are not, after all, agents of benefaction like the *qiqayôn*, but beneficiaries of divine mercy, like Jonah in ch. 4.

When Jonah grieves for the plant that had shaded him, God says to him, 'As for you, you cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight' (4.10). The point is not that Jonah's caring was trivial or self-absorbed. It is, rather, that God, the one who *did* 'work for' and 'grow' the plant (so to speak) in order to give Jonah shade and respite (4.6), also destroyed it without compunction, thus reducing Jonah to his previous sorry state (4.3 // 4.9). Jonah cared about the plant, and rightly so; God did not.

Now Nineveh, like Jonah, has also been granted respite from 'evil', but God's treatment of Jonah is cold comfort for them. What God says to Jonah about the 'great city' is clearly parallel in construction to what he had said about the plant:

Jon. 4.10	Jon. 4.11
'anâ hastâ	wa'anî lô' 'âhûs
'al-haqqiqâyôn	'al-nîr'wêh

The universal assumption that 4.11 is interrogative ('Should I not care about Nineveh?') flies in the face of the parallelism with 4.10. That assumption, apparently based on an exegetical a priori, represents just one possibility; it is neither necessary nor inevitable. God's utterance also can be translated as a simple declarative: 'As for me, I do not care about Nineveh'. The implication would be that God cares no more about that huge city full of ignoramuses and beasts than he had about the *qiqâyôn*. Their repentance means nothing to him, and he has kept his real reason for sparing them (if, indeed, he had one) to himself.

The Book of Jonah itself gives no grounds for choosing between the interrogative and declarative renderings of 4.11, since it simply ends here.¹ My preference for the latter is based on reading Jonah in the light of Nahum. In the immediate context of Jonah, however, the point of the ambiguity is to suggest that God's treatment of Nineveh, when scrutinized, might be just as unintelligible to the human observer as

1. As the Lacocques remark concerning the 'open-endedness' of Jonah (*The Jonah Complex*, pp. 99-100), 'It seems... that it is one of the important features of the book that it does *not* bring the plot to a veritable end'.

his treatment of Jonah.¹ God buffets the prophet about against his will, makes him prophesy and then falsifies his word, rescues him from his pathetic emotional condition and then condemns him to it once more. One can infer that Nineveh's situation is no less absurd, and that it is, therefore, fraught with insecurity.

III

The ending of Jonah leaves the ultimate fates of its principal actors undetermined. What will become of Jonah and Nineveh? Jonah seems to be consigned to death, since the threat of 4.7-9 has not been countered. Jonah does not react to God's words in vv. 10-11, nor does God state his intentions concerning the prophet. As for Nineveh, nothing has occurred to disturb the apparent equilibrium attained in 3.10.

The denouement of Jonah, in my view, takes place *outside the book*. The book's full significance emerges only in the light of its canonical setting—especially in relation to the prophetic books (Hosea–Nahum) that are concerned primarily with the Assyrian crisis. The assemblage begins with the first announcement of divine judgment against Israel, and ends with the destruction of Assyria. I propose that the *Book of Jonah* (as opposed, perhaps, to its constituent parts), was never intended to be read apart from that canonical context. An intertextual reading of the book is, therefore, both valid and necessary.

The prophets who address the Assyrian threat struggle mightily to understand the nature of God's wrath and love, and Jonah contributes to that discussion by way of interpretation and elaboration.² First and foremost, one notes five midrashic adaptations of the attribute formula in Exodus 34. The following are the relevant texts (all except for

1. So already Eagleton, who comments that 'God's mercy is indeed a kind of absurdity' ('J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah', in Schwartz [ed.], *The Book and the Text*, p. 236).

2. It should be obvious that I am not interested in the historicity or the literary history of the components of the 'Book of the Twelve', but in the way that they function together as parts of a unified collection. See, provisionally, D. Schneider, 'The Unity of the Book of the Twelve' (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1979); much more work needs to be done. I am aware of two new works on the topic, neither of which was available to me when I was writing this paper: P. House, *The Unity of the Twelve* (JSOTSup. 97; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); J. Nogalski, 'The Use of Stichwörter as a Redactional Unification Technique within the Book of the Twelve' (Doctoral dissertation, University of Zürich, 1991).

the Nahum excerpt cited according to NJPSV, with the allusion to Exod. 34.6-7 emphasized in each case):

1. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: 'Forgive all guilt (*kol-tiśśā' āwōn*) and accept what is good. Instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips'... I will heal their affliction, generously will I take them back in love; for my anger has turned away from them (Hos. 14.3, 5).

2. Rend your hearts rather than your garments, and turn back to the Lord your God. For *He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment*. Who knows but He may turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind for meal offering and drink offering to the Lord your God (Joel 2.13-14)?

3. '... Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from his wrath, so that we do not perish.' God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Lord, saying, 'O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that *You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment*' (Jon. 3.8-4.2).

4. Who is a God like You, *forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression* (*nōśē' āwōn w'ōbēr 'al-peša'*); who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of his own people, because He loves graciousness! He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will keep *faith* [*met*] with Jacob, *loyalty* [*hesed*] to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by (Mic. 7.18-20).

5. The Lord is a passionate, avenging God; the Lord is vengeful and fierce in wrath. The Lord takes vengeance upon his enemies, he rages against his foes. *The Lord is slow to anger and of great forbearance* (*'erek 'appayim ūg'dol-kōah*), but *the Lord does not remit all punishment* (*w'naqqēh lō' y'naqqeh*) (Nah. 1.2-3a).

The 'historical' question of the Book of Jonah—what will become of Jonah/Israel and Nineveh/Assyria—is subsumed in the canonical context (where the historical reality of Assyria is not an issue) to a theological question: what moves God to shape human destiny for good or for ill? Exod. 34.6-7 serves as a fixed point of reference for various answers to that question.

The first text cited above belongs to the sublimely equivocal con-

clusion of Hosea (chs. 13-14). The Israelites are utterly guilty and have forgotten God (13.1-6). God, therefore, will slaughter them (13.7-11). He spared them despite previous iniquity (13.12-15a), but now he will destroy them (13.15b-14.1). The people are admonished to return (14.2-4), and God declares, finally, that he will redeem them because of his love for them (14.5-9). The tension between God's justice and his love is manifest—divine anger is motivated by human sin; divine love, on the contrary, may or may not be contingent upon human action. The restoration prophesied in Hos. 14.5-9 may never have taken place, but the text does not blame that failure on the absence of repentance.

The contingent character of salvation is taken up in Joel 2.12-14. Israel does not want a god who is 'reliable' (as in Exod. 14), but one who 'renounces punishment'. Reliability means the inevitable fulfilment of an oracle of destruction (Joel 2.1—'The day of the Lord has come!'); it is essential, however, that God be willing to reverse his decree. First Joel suggests that such reversal *might* be effectuated by repentance (2.14), then he tries to demonstrate that it certainly is, the beginning of 2.19 strongly implying cause and effect. Joel 2.19 looks like a midrash on Hos. 2.24¹ that seeks to counter Hosea's vacillation and unclarity. In order to accomplish that, Joel explicates the restoration envisioned by Hosea in terms of a causal link between Israel's repentance and God's mercy.

That causality is put to the test by the Book of Jonah, with Nineveh serving as the test case. The very use of Nineveh, together with the plain unreality of the city's repentance (animals in sackcloth),² indicates the hypothetical thrust of the story. A single question with three mutually exclusive answers brings the problem of Jonah to a head:

1. Note the use of *'nh* and the sequence 'grain and wine and oil' denoting restoration in both texts. The context of Hos. 2.24 (vv. 18-25) suggests unilateral divine action; in Joel 2.19, restoration is God's response to all the fasting and praying in vv. 15-17.

2. The penitent beasts of Jonah represent the same kind of literary play as the big fish, namely the literalization of such poetic turns of phrase as Joel 1.20a, 'The very beasts of the field cry out to you'. One might also imagine a midrashic play on Exod. 34.7a, taking *'alāpīm* to mean 'beasts' instead of 'thousands'.

Question: Should God spare repentant Nineveh?

Answer 1—the answer of Joel: *yes*, because the God who ‘renounces evil’ reverses his decree for the sake of those who repent.

Answer 2—the answer of Jonah the prophet: *no*, because the God who ‘renounces evil’ is not being ‘true’ to his word.

Answer 3—the answer of the Book of Jonah: God does as he pleases, and it is folly to try and justify or rationalize his behavior.

The author of Jonah recognizes the error of Joel, who has merely substituted one mechanistic view of God for another. Naturally one would like God to forgo destruction and work salvation at every opportunity, but that is not the way things are. If an oracle of doom is reversible according to some formula, then, logically, so is a promise of restoration—the contrary view of the Jewish tradition notwithstanding. And *any* formula that requires God to be just in a mechanical way is likely to work against Israel in the long run; the Exile is proof of that.

On the other hand, the position of the prophet Jonah (the character as distinct from the author of the book) is also untenable. It is just as erroneous to say that God *cannot* reverse his decree as it is to say that he *must*. And thus, as the Lacocques realized, the Ninevites hold the only theologically respectable position, on the slippery ground of *maybe*.

If we recontextualize the views of Joel and Jonah within the Assyrian crisis, we are compelled to draw two absurd conclusions: God must save the hated Ninevites because they have repented; and, he must destroy his beloved Israel because their demise has been prophesied, yet they have not repented. Absurd conclusions, obviously, are derived from false premises. The incomprehensible ending of the Book of Jonah—Nineveh saved and Jonah condemned—is the *reductio ad absurdum* of a false theology.

God cannot be constrained by a mechanistic formula, nor can he be predicated by any set of attributes. Such formulas and attributes constitute no more than vague guidelines, tentative gropings towards an understanding of God’s character. Israel’s hope, in fact, abides in their *untruth*, in the extent to which God’s capricious and unrequited love will motivate his behavior (the point, after all, of Hosea). The dark side of that view is that God’s destructive wrath might be just as arbitrary and unconstrained, as in the case of the *qīqāyōn*. One hopes and prays for God’s love, while recognizing that nothing is certain.

And that is the point of Mic. 7.18-20, which provides the real resolution of the Book of Jonah. Again, as in Jonah, the focus is on the meaning of the divine attributes *rab ḥesed we’emet*. Jonah (the character) intimates that insofar as God allows his *ḥesed* to alter his course of action, he is not a God of *’emet*. Micah, like the author of the Book of Jonah, recognizes divine caprice as a boon for Israel. God annuls Israel’s punishment entirely out of *ḥesed*; neither repentance nor acts of expiation are required (Mic. 7.18). God simply tosses Israel’s sins into the sea, Mic. 7.19 explicitly alluding to Jcn. 2.4. And God’s love is not at odds with his truth. Rather, *’emet* and *ḥesed* are one and the same thing; thus the parallelism of Mic. 7.20.

Just as God saves Israel, he also wipes out Nineveh. The bizarre conclusion of the Book of Jonah is, finally, turned topsy-turvy with a vengeance by the Book of Nahum. Where his enemies are concerned, then, God is not *rab ḥesed*, but *g^edol-kōah*, ‘fierce in wrath’ (Nah. 1.3).¹ He does not care about Nineveh, and he does not remit the punishment of those he hates. God’s wrath is just as inexplicable and uncontrollable as his love, but that, too, is part of what it means for him to be freely and truly God.

1. Note the intertextual allusions of Nah. 1.3-4 to the tempest language of Jon. 1-2.