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Tillema, Aron Michael

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Upside-Down Prophecy: Reflexivity and the Book of Jonah

By

ARON TILLEMA
DISSERTATION

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DAVIS

Approved:

Seth Sanders, Chair

Eva Mroczek

Naomi Janowitz

Jacqueline Vayntrub

Committee in Charge

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation is an exercise in bringing to bear broad theoretical trends in Religious Studies and Myth Theory to a biblical text that has long fascinated biblical scholars and popular culture alike. Biblical scholars are quick to say that the many strange narrative features within the book of Jonah such as a runaway prophet, mourning cattle, repentant non-Hebrew characters, and the oft-cited whale are superfluous, a distraction from the “real” moral purpose of the story of Jonah. Yet, I show that ancient and contemporary communities have been continually attracted to these same features modern scholars wish to ignore, suggesting they serve as dynamic points of reflection dealing with immediate social crises. It constitutes, in fact, key features of how myths function. For example, retelling Jonah’s silent flight among some laypersons and clergy allows them to ruminate on Jonah’s psychological profile and their feelings of being commanded to do things they do not wish to do. This trans-temporal project inspires not only a renewed focus on texts and the scholars who study them, but on the complex relationship between the Bible and society – now and in the past.

The first and largest section of the dissertation asks how the book’s earliest audience might have understood many of these strange narrative features. As a composition written within the context of the Babylonian exile and an uprooted Judean population, how is the book reflecting on space and place? As a post-exilic community that possessed a significantly altered relationship with non-Judean populations, to what extent can recently published archival material shed light on this new relationship? These questions and more animate the first section of this dissertation. The second section, comprised of contemporary ethnographic material, connects to the first through myth theory. I suggest that, like some of its earliest interpreters, modern communities continue to reflect on the book’s indeterminate features in order to solve imminent

social and cultural issues. Interviewing clergy and laypersons decenters modern scholarly sensibilities about the book of Jonah by pointing to its diverse use in social life, allowing us to rethink previously unquestioned assumptions about the purpose of sacred texts and thereby promoting partnerships with modern readers as significant interpreters of the Bible. This section has the advantage of taking data from modern, contemporary settings rather than attempting to reconstruct and recreate the audience(s) of the past, but ultimately suggests a similar movement between the two otherwise different sets of readerships characteristic of an incongruity felt between them when reading a text like Jonah.

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There are several people from my dissertation committee that I first want to acknowledge and thank for bringing this dissertation project to fruition. Seth Sanders has been a tireless supporter of this eclectic project, constantly asking how to bring interesting questions to the biblical corpus during our regular meetings. His work, *From Adapa to Enoch*, inspired me to similarly tie surprising sets of corpora together and think creatively with a text that has been read and combed over for millennia, while *The Invention of Hebrew* taught me to build theory out of existing data (rather than awkwardly doing so the other way around). His insistence to find a fit between theory and data has been a constant inspiration for this project alongside every other. His influence is especially pronounced in chapters two and three, and there is no doubt in my mind that his ideas and presence will continue to inform my scholarship.

Eva Mroczek has read more drafts of my scholarship than anyone else. In our department's rotation of first-year seminars, she encouraged me to continue writing about Jonah. My first piece on Jonah looks far different from that presentation I gave several years ago at UC Davis and it has undoubtedly improved based on her feedback. Additionally, she worked through drafts of two popular articles I digitally published through Bible Odyssey and many drafts of a piece on Lamentations currently under review. Her own scholarship, found especially in *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*, has consistently asked me to reevaluate ostensibly natural categories in order to critically reevaluate how they operate unnoticed in scholarship.

Naomi Janowitz was the first faculty member at UC Davis who formally introduced me to religious studies and challenged me to think in terms of semiotics. Much of the theoretical material she introduced to me has found its way into this dissertation and the rest of my work. She has been supportive and available since my first year at Davis and, notably, virtually met

with me nearly every week at the beginning of the pandemic as my family welcomed a newborn to work through the first chapter of this dissertation. She has read several drafts of each chapter and continues to offer insightful criticism. Beyond this piece, her mentorship has been invaluable as I navigated the recently established doctoral program at Davis and beyond.

Jacqueline Vayntrub's work has indelibly influenced my understanding of how to go about scholarly enterprise. I distinctly remember reading *Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on its Own Terms* and recognizing how expansive biblical scholarship could be in relation to other fields/disciplines. I hope to model this breadth in this project and in the future.

In each case, I am profoundly grateful and honored to be their advisee.

The newly established Department of Religious Studies at UC Davis has also shown itself to be sensitive and supportive to graduate students. As a recently founded department, the faculty and administration did their best to reflect on and resolve the many and various issues students deal with in a new program. From financial support over summers to collegial, quarterly lectures that encourage and inspire, I am grateful for the department's flexibility amidst trying periods like the pandemic and UC Strike. More particularly, I want to thank Mairaj Syed for helping me with application materials and mock interviews for teaching positions. Meaghan O'Keefe has been an excellent Teaching Assistant advisor, frequently listening to graduate students who had conflicting schedules. Allison Coudert occasionally invited graduate students over to her house where plenty of academic discussions were had. She challenged and supported every student's ideas – and it was made even more pleasant over the many excellent dishes served. Fellow graduate students in the program like Joey Torres, Sarah Neace, Benjamin Fisher, Stephanie Milton, Josh Shahryar, and Lauren Eastland began as professional contacts but ended as much more. I look forward to continue fostering the friendship we have developed for many

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My mother, Penny, raised me into the person and scholar I am today. She encouraged me to follow my interests and I am grateful for her continued support.

My father, John, could not be here to witness the completion of this dissertation. May we see one another again to celebrate.

My mother-in-law, Sherilyn Hickenbottom, has graciously watched my toddler so that I could write and research more times than I can count. In fact, she is doing so right now as I write this acknowledgment section! Her help was especially appreciated as I attempted to begin my

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Katey Hickenbottom, my sister-in-law, and Cameron Berry kept me sane with weekly phone calls. May we live closer to one another in the future!

And finally, an entire chapter (and more) ought to be devoted to my spouse, Sara. I could not have finished this project without you. You patiently listened to many of my ideas, both good and bad, over the meals we shared and, in many instances, forced me to think more clearly about my arguments and writing. You were traversing your qualifying exams as I was writing my final chapter and pointed me toward more recent work on American Christianity in order to set the ethnographic data of chapter four into its broader context. You have supported me in so many ways and I plan on returning the favor when you begin her dissertation project next year! But more than how you directly helped form this dissertation, I am constantly amazed at your excellence in everything you do and I am very proud of the partnership we have built together.

Introduction

“I would propose...that there is no pristine myth; there is only application...That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power.” – Jonathan Z. Smith in *Map is Not Territory*¹

A Brief History of Scholarship – The Function of “the Strange” in the Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah is strange. In fact, it seems almost a requirement that modern commentaries on Jonah begin with this observation.² In *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, Elias Bickerman argues the book is strange in part because of Jonah’s outright refusal to positively respond to the deity’s call. Jonah did not flee because of nationalistic fanaticism as some have claimed, but because he “refused to accept the perspective of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in which the prophet is no longer God’s herald, but a watchman who blows a horn to warn his people of coming danger.”³

Dominated by evolutionary ideas of religion that characterized much of Euro-American scholarship in the 19th and 20th centuries, Gerhard von Rad calls Jonah “The last and strangest flowering of this old and almost extinct literary form.”⁴ Jack Sasson ends his influential

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith. *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*. (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 299.

² More than twenty years ago, Sergei Frolov already metacritically engaged with this phenomenon. He begins his article, “The book of Jonah is often termed ‘unique’, or ‘strange’, and not without reason. Appearing in the corpus of twelve ‘Minor Prophets’, it seems to have little or nothing to do with this collection of oracles and disputations: it is a narrative containing only one, exceedingly concise, prophecy – ‘the shortest sermon in world history’.” In Serge Frolov. “Returning the Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24, no. 86 (1999): 85–105. See also Hans Robert Jauss. “The Book of Jonah: A paradigm of the ‘hermeneutics of strangeness,’ *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative: The European Tradition*. Edited by Roy Eriksen. Reprint 2020. Berlin, Germany; De Gruyter, 1994.

³ Elias Bickerman. *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 40.

⁴ Gerhard Von Rad. *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions. Volume 2*. Translated by D.M.G. Stalker. (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 291. See also Julius Brewer who labels Jonah, among the Old Testament, “Reaches here one of its highest points, for the doctrine of God receives in it one of its clearest and most beautiful expressions and the spirit of prophetic religion is revealed at its truest and best.” In Julius A. Bewer. “Jonah,”

commentary with language that suggests its unique role within the Bible, “I believe that the fate to which I am assigning this gem from Scripture is appropriate to a book that disturbs the predictable roles and distinct beliefs with which the Bible has taught us to be comfortable.”⁵

David Payne remarks that “The uniqueness of the book is, I suppose, the chief cause of the difficulty in reaching objective and definitive conclusions about some of the questions it raises.”⁶

James Limburg begins his commentary by noting its unique compositional form, “Jonah is the only prophetic book that is primarily a story about a prophet...this unique feature must be taken into account if the book is to be rightly understood.”⁷

More recent works continue to set the book apart for a variety of reasons. For example, in a postcolonial analysis of the prophets, Steed Vernyl Davidson singles out Jonah and Daniel as counterpoints to a corpus that has by-and-large adopted imperial modes of discourse.⁸ Ecological readings embodied by scholars like Yael Shemesh have noted the significant amount of non-human characters within the book and pointed towards the deity’s care for the animals at the end of the book that contrasts with much of the biblical corpus.⁹ Scholars who approach Jonah as part

in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 3.

⁵ Jack M. Sasson. *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*. (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 352.

⁶ David F Payne. “Jonah from the Perspective of Its Audience.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4, no. 13 (1979): 3–12.

⁷ James Limburg. *Jonah: A Commentary*. First edition. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 21-22.

⁸ Steed Vernyl Davidson. ‘Postcolonial Readings of the Prophets’, in Carolyn J. Sharp (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, Oxford Handbooks (2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 5 Oct. 2016). But see Ryu who condemns the narrator and deity who attempt to stifle Jonah – a representative of the colonized Judean community. See Chesung Justin Ryu. “Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 2 (2009): 195–218.

⁹ Yael Shemesh. “‘And Many Beasts’ (Jonah 4:11): The Function and Status of Animals in the Book of Jonah.” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10, no. 10 (2010); Gerald O. West. “Juxtaposing ‘Many Cattle’ in Biblical Narrative (Jonah 4:11), Imperial Narrative, Neo-Indigenous Narrative.”

of the corpus known as the “Book of the Twelve” contrast the book’s vocabulary and themes with the rest of the corpus.¹⁰ Such characterizations, made by both older and more recent scholarship, generally notes its compositional and literary features like a laconic, runaway prophet, its position among the Twelve despite its remarkably brief prophetic utterance, its unusual depiction of non-Hebrews, and the significant role non-human entities (e.g. the fish, the worm, the divinely caused storm and sweltering heat) play within the book. While modern approaches have tended to emphasize the book’s unique qualities from distinct perspectives, they remain committed to the book’s unique status within the biblical corpus.

For traditional scholarship, represented largely by biblical scholars from the 1960s to the 1990s, these strange features were typically rallied to support the book’s didactic message.¹¹ For example, the prophet’s disobedience served as an object lesson that the reader should understand as a negative example. The deity repeatedly chastises Jonah using the fish, the prophet’s disobedience contrasts with the mariners’ and Ninevites’ obedience to a foreign deity, and

Old Testament Essays 27, no. 2 (2014): 722–751; Jione Havea. *Jonah: An Earth Bible Commentary*. London, England: T & T Clark Ltd., 2020; Schalk Willem Van Heerden. “Shades of Green - or Grey? Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Jonah 4:6-11.” *Old Testament Essays* 30, no. 2 (2017): 459–477; in contrast, see also Thomas M. Bolin. “Jonah 4,11 and the Problem of Exegetical Anachronism.” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: SJOT* 24, no. 1 (2010): 99–109.

¹⁰ John Kaltner, Rhiannon Graybill, and Steven L. McKenzie. “Jonah in the Book of the Twelve,” in *The Book of the Twelve: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*. Edited by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer and Jakob Wöhrle. (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 164-175; Diana Edelman. “Jonah Among the Twelve in the MT: The Triumph of Torah over Prophecy,” in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*. Edited by Diana Vikander Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014. Naturally, there are several connections between Jonah and the Book of the Twelve. For example, Jonah frequently cites the minor prophets such as Joel 2:18. See James Nogalski. *The Book of the Twelve: Hosea--Jonah*. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2011), 404-406.

¹¹ Naturally, the interpretations that these scholars propose extend back long before the 60s. However, biblical scholarship seemed to have crystallized at this moment in time concerning what the message of Jonah is and how it conveys its message.

Jonah's continued obstinacy points to a didactic, moral tale about the importance of following the deity's will and his message of universalism towards the despised Ninevites. Such an approach remains influential among recent interpreters, even as this previously unassailable consensus has been destabilized. For example, Rob Barrett argues that previous interpreters have not paid sufficient attention to direct speech in the book of Jonah. Barrett contrasts the speech of the deity and the prophet thusly: "that both [the deity and prophet] at critical moments mean more than they say. Jonah does this inadvertently and ironically, while YHWH, I argue does so with purpose."¹² The contrast ultimately leads the author to conclude that the book's message concerns the deity's compassion for a recalcitrant prophet who is the only figure in the book to resist the deity's message.

Yet traditional scholarship appears uniform in its treatment of separating the narrator and characters from one another. As Serge Frolov has astutely observed, nearly every traditional reading of Jonah ends up pitting the narrator and deity, representative of the author's position, against the prophet.¹³ More recent scholarship has begun to theorize the very purpose of Jonah's strange features by returning to the supposedly obvious features and the message they support. What does it ultimately mean that Barrett can contrast divine speech with prophetic speech? Ehud Ben Zvi's influential *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* destabilized the traditional narrative in Jonah scholarship of a nationalistic prophet and gracious deity by centering the text's earliest composers and readers in Persian-period Yehud.¹⁴ The

¹² Rob Barrett. "Meaning More Than They Say: The Conflict Between Yhwh and Jonah." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 2 (2012): 237–257.

¹³ Serge Frolov, "Returning the Ticket: God and his Prophet in the Book of Jonah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 86 (1999) 85-105 (87).

¹⁴ What we mean by "traditional" or "mainstream," is worth noting. For example, Uriel Simon writes that such a narrative is "mainstream" insofar it has currency among predominantly

book's ironic tone, depicting Jonah as rigid and xenophobic, is self-critical. It reflects and "carries a message of inner reflection, and to some extent critical self-appraisal of the group within which and for which this book was written. This message leads to, and reflects, a nuanced self-image within the literati themselves and an awareness of the problematic character of the knowledge they possessed."¹⁵ The humoristic elements, then, become moments of self-critique for the book's readership rather than external criticism from a detached narrator targeting a distinct political party or 'post-exilic Judaism' more broadly.¹⁶

The ostensibly obvious satirization of the prophet is not the only feature that recent scholarship has destabilized. Ben Zvi, along with Thomas Bolin, additionally interrogate the importance of a bloodthirsty and violent Nineveh representative of Assyria more broadly by noting that at the time of Jonah's composition, Nineveh had long been destroyed.¹⁷ While traditional scholarship has largely relied on biblical intertexts like Ezra/Nehemiah and Nahum to import notions of empire and violence into the infamous city, Bolin notes that "When one compares the portrayal of Nineveh in Jonah on the one hand with those of Nahum and Zephaniah on the other, there are no common points, especially in regard to the nature of the city's

Christian interpreters. See Uriel Simon and Lenn J. Schramm. *Jonah = Yonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), ix.

¹⁵ Ehud Ben Zvi. *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 100.

¹⁶ Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 114. See also Amy Erickson. *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), XYZ

¹⁷ Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 15; Thomas M. Bolin. *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness the Book of Jonah Re-Examined*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 129-130. However, the recent work by Juliana Claassens maintains the importance of a violent Nineveh through the book of Jonah through the lens of trauma studies. See L. Juliana M. Claassens. "Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma." *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 3 (2015): 655–673; L. Juliana. Claassens, "Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as a Postcolonial Trauma Narrative." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 4 (2021): 576–587.

wrongdoing.”¹⁸ He points out that the terms for violence or bloodshed used to describe Nineveh in the different books do not overlap and instead suggests a new context – Greek and Hellenistic stories of Nineveh that depict its inhabitants as slothful and greedy. The city’s well-known destruction in these stories combined with Jonah’s message that Nineveh will not be destroyed leads readers to reflect on the nature of divine freedom and the tenuous nature of divine promise.

In some ways, Jonah scholarship has moved on from the traditional assumptions I have outlined above. Roughly ten years after publishing his book on Jonah, Bolin reviews its recent history of scholarship and summarizes its results:

The days when Jonah’s Nineveh was equated with the bloodthirsty city of Nahum, when the prophet Jonah was seen to represent a fictive post-exilic Judaism obsessed with ethnic purity or hatred of Gentiles, and when the author of Jonah was extolled as a preacher of universal divine love and tolerance are gone forever. Scholars working in Jonah must now deal with a Persian period Yehud which is much more complex and interesting than paraphrases of Ezra-Nehemiah have allowed for.¹⁹

Bolin is correct in his assessment that Jonah scholarship has largely moved beyond such a position, but interpretive paradigms are not so easily broken. For example, Alan Cooper’s metacritical work on Lamentations has shown that despite the apparent liberation of modern scholarship from traditional notions of authorship, contemporary scholars continue to import

¹⁸ Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 134.

¹⁹ Thomas M. Bolin. “Eternal Delight and Deliciousness: The Book of Jonah after Ten Years.” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9, no. 9 (2009). See also the most recent directions Jonah scholarship has taken in Aron Tillema. “The Book of Jonah in Recent Research.” *Currents in Biblical Research* 21, no. 2 (2023): 145–177.

themes of repentance and wrongdoing from Jeremiah into the book of Lamentations.²⁰ Yet, in fact, repentance plays a minor role at best, and modern scholarship's insistence on the significance of the 'strongman' of Lamentations 3 remains an interpretive key. In Tod Linafelt's words, centering the 'strongman' and his use of traditional Deuteronomic language helps readers 'survive' the book of Lamentations.²¹ To what extent do older interpretive models of Jonah continue to inform scholarly readings of the book today?

More recent commentators have attempted to forge new ways of understanding the book and its many strange features. Building on Ben Zvi's notion of atypicality and the metaprophetic nature of the book of Jonah, Annette Schellenberg argues that the strange features constitute a reflection on the classical prophetic past.²² For example, the book of Jonah's metaprophetic concern becomes clear for Schellenberg when notions of successful prophetic speech point to Deuteronomy 18 which dictates a prophet ought to be killed for false speech.²³ The many intertextual links Jonah contains suggest to Schellenberg that "This has to do with the book of Jonah, or more precisely with its authors, who critically and intensively reflected on the prophetic office."²⁴ In other words, Jonah as a postexilic text is less interested in archiving the

²⁰ Alan Mitchell Cooper. "The Message of Lamentations." *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, no. 28 (2002): 1–18.

²¹ Tod Linafelt. *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1-18.

²² Annette Schellenberg. "An Anti-Prophet Among the Prophets? On the Relationship of Jonah to Prophecy." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39, no. 3 (2015): 353–371.

²³ This observation extends back at least to Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer if not further.

²⁴ Annette Schellenberg. "An Anti-Prophet Among the Prophets? On the Relationship of Jonah to Prophecy." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39, no. 3 (2015): 353–371.

words of a prophet, per se, but in discursively constructing and reflecting on the office of the prophet in the past in order to rework it for contemporary readers.²⁵

The Strange as an Indicator of Cultural Reflexivity

My dissertation builds on this more recent work that understands the book of Jonah to reflexively respond to its community's new, diasporic context in Babylon, and later in its Persian and Hellenistic contexts, by reusing older, authoritative material.²⁶ I bring to bear approaches from disciplines like linguistic anthropology, semiotics, and theorists from religious studies, as well as recently published archival data pertinent to the period of Jonah's composition, however broadly conceived. The strange features throughout the book are not an unusual bug, but a feature of the narrative that points towards its attempt to rethink then-contemporary social and political issues. Yet rather than posit that the 'strange' furnish a singular meaning, (i.e. the book is about universalism, prophetic speech, obedience/disobedience) I suggest these compositional features serve as open-ended, indeterminate points of reflection that prompt readers to juxtapose them with their own contexts. This interpretive move attempts to capture the movement of religion,

²⁵ See also Diana Edelman who, building on Ehud Ben Zvi, argues that the production of prophecy fundamentally changed following the destruction of the Temple and the uniquely Judean process of creating prophetic books functioned as a past, but continuing witness that showed the community the deity "would punish the people when they broke this law, particularly by worshipping other gods or by failing to honour him correctly by following the various precepts that comprised his 'path.'" See Diana Edelman. "From Prophets to Prophetic Books: The Fixing of the Divine Word" In *The Production of Prophecy Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* Edelman. Edited by Diana Vikander Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 29-54. See also Seth L. Sanders. "Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre. First Isaiah as an Instance of Ancient Near Eastern Text-Building." *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 6, no. 1 (2017): 26-52.

²⁶ The title of the dissertation comes from the play on Jonah's prophetic utterance "to turn over or turn upside down" (הפך) that has been a source of reflection that extends back at least to Rashi.

and culture more broadly, by attending to the deeply contextual and historically contingent nature of retelling (sacred) stories.

This project, grounded in the discipline of Religious Studies, asks how ancient and modern cultures reflect on their religious commitments through the unusual book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible. Drawing on J.Z. Smith's work on myth, I argue that the book of Jonah's 'upside-down' elements such as a runaway prophet and a monstrous fish serve as keystones for religious 'reflexivity.' In other words, stories like Jonah are communicated in concrete historical moments to rethink religious commitments during periods of cultural upheaval. Retelling how the fish swallowed the prophet among white evangelical communities allows them, for example, to ruminate on the sometimes-contentious relationship between faith and science while couching their discussion in the authority and familiarity of a sacred text. Meanwhile, mainline Protestants consider the book's cross-cultural features while attending to an increasingly globalized society.

It is one thing to write about how one ancient community long ago used this narrative to pragmatically deal with their own issues. It is quite another to connect this text to its contemporary readership. Yet there is a potential advantage in such a comparison: attending to two of Jonah's widely separated historical contexts while attending to their differences can bring with it a valuable new perspective. A comparative approach that juxtaposes the two unique communities through a shared text allows us to decenter our own notions of the obvious and perhaps even find patterns despite the vast cultural differences. Instead, I consider it an opportunity precisely because of the fact that the book of Jonah, as well as the rest of the biblical corpus, has been read and commented on so frequently throughout its history. If Smith is indeed correct that myths and stories are created and told pragmatically, then we have a data pool as large as the book's interpretive history to which to compare it. Contemporary data will especially

be useful as we simply have access to a great deal more information than we do about the ancient world.

I attempt to capture the long, surprising history of the book's reception not through an intellectual history as others have done, but as a unique text rife with the ability to accommodate a multiplicity of issues due, in part, to its strange, 'upside-down' compositional features. Building on Michael Silverstein's interest in the production and movement of culture through language in "wine talk"²⁷ and Greg Urban's attempt to measure culture through artifacts,²⁸ I am more broadly interested in how this biblical text's features persistently allow for a reevaluation of imminent social issues among its readership. The rallying cry of semioticians that "a sign is not a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" jars with the observation in this study that similar signs across different cultures and spaces have been singled out as signs.²⁹ And despite being interpreted differently, what might this ultimately suggest about the dynamic compositional features of the book itself that has prompted such an enduring interest?

Smith's insight has proven useful in several disciplines, though his approach is far from systematic. He tackles the question of myth and its function in "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams: A Study in Situational Incongruity."³⁰ He examines two distinct myths in this chapter, that of the Babylonian Akitu festival and the Ceramese myth of Hainuwele, challenging consensus and submitting that myth is primarily about application. Smith concludes, "The

²⁷ Michael Silverstein. "Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life." *Language & Communication* 23, no. 3 (2003): 193–229.

²⁸ Greg Urban and Benjamin Lee. *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World*. 1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001; Greg Urban. "A Method for Measuring the Motion of Culture." *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 1 (2010): 122–139.

²⁹ Webb Keane. "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things." *Language & Communication* 23, no. 3 (2003): 409–425; Webb Keane. "On Semiotic Ideology." *Signs and Society* (Chicago, Ill.) 6, no. 1 (2018): 64–87; see also Parmentier

³⁰ See also sections of Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, 203-204; 299.

Babylonian Akitu festival and the Ceramese myth of Hainuwele are best described neither in terms of repetition of the past nor in terms of future fulfillment, but rather in terms of a difficult and incongruous present.”³¹ Smith reinterprets ritual acts such as the king being slapped and pulled by his ears not as a cross-cultural “dying-rising” symbol, but as a particular instantiation of a myth being rewritten and applied to a social situation – that is, a foreign king ascending the throne.³² While I am not as confident as Smith in being so obviously “seized by an element of incongruity” and that “the same element appeared incongruous to the originators of the text,” I take his point seriously that myths are not simply reenactments of the past, but continued application meaningful for the present.³³ Indeed, exploring the “incongruity” or “strangeness” of Jonah for its earliest readers will take up the majority of this dissertation.

Several students of Smith have further developed his insights in a more systematic fashion. For example, Sam Gill has recently published a volume dedicated to Smith expanding on several of his key concepts. He summarizes Smith’s approach to myth by drawing together and systematizing different texts of Smith’s, “Myth then is one form of religious mapping. Myth is a story concocted and told to deal with a situation at hand. It bears the tradition, but not so much a record of pristine truth or otherness revealed as the embodiment of a practical strategy for dealing with a situation.”³⁴ In this volume, Gill is especially interested in developing Smith’s notion of play through his own research in dance and experience as not as antithetical to Smith’s

³¹ Jonathan Z. Smith. *Imagining Religion: from Babylon to Jonestown*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 101.

³² Seth Sanders has pointed out that recent analysis of the festival largely confirms Smith’s findings. See Céline Debourse. *Of Priests and Kings: The Babylonian New Year Festival in the Last Age of Cuneiform Culture*. Vol. 127. Brill, 2022.

³³ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 90.

³⁴ Sam D. Gill. *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 88.

modus operandi as we had once thought. Alongside jest and riddle, Gill suggests that “fit” is essential to myth as application - as participants experience “the banal felt presence of incongruity, the disturbing feeling (so ordinary to life) of the absence of fit.”³⁵

In this dissertation, I similarly build on Smith’s notion of myth as application, but ask more particular questions about my own corpus – the book of Jonah and the Hebrew Bible more broadly. As a text that has been interpreted for millennia, scholars have an enormous data set in which to test Smith’s idea.³⁶ I seek to develop his approach by asking what features of biblical texts, but Jonah more specifically, serve as application. Are there distinct literary features within the text that allow readers to more easily deal with social issues or “incongruity” when it is heard from the pulpit, in literature, through theatre, or other various tellings of the story? If myth is primarily applied, do different tellings of the ostensibly “same” narrative point toward different social issues among stratified social groups?

To answer some of these questions, I borrow a concept by Naomi Janowitz in her recently published *Acts of Interpretation: Ancient Religious Semiotic Ideologies and their Modern Echoes* highlighting the “contextual power of indeterminate rituals.”³⁷ Centered on two rituals at Burning Man, she moves beyond the scholarly and popular understanding of rituals and myth as rote reproduction of the past.³⁸ Instead, these supposedly non-regimented rituals and

³⁵ Gill, *The Proper Study of Religion*, 143. Smith here is especially interested in understanding myth not as a primordial, archaic story, but alive and meant to deal with ever changing situations.

³⁶ As historians of biblical interpretation know, biblical texts appear beyond scholarly commentary. From novels and artwork to political speeches, biblical texts continue to powerfully animate public discussions. These are each points of data to map out a text’s “afterlife.”

³⁷ Naomi Janowitz. *Acts of Interpretation: Ancient Religious Semiotic Ideologies and Their Modern Echoes*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2022), 113.

³⁸ As Janowitz tells us, many of the participants doggedly repeat the founder of the event’s answer to what the burning of an enormous effigy means, “Nothing.” And yet, the Man Burn comes to have a multiplicity of meanings among different participants.

sites create an explosion of meaning. When referring to the enormous Man Burn that takes place at every festival and surveying the meanings people attribute to it, “None of these meanings are inherent in the act but meanings are easily associated with it in the same manner that notions of ‘sacrifice’ motivate and explain many forms of selective destruction in religious rituals.”³⁹ This does not mean that participants attribute any meaning at all to the sign (in semiotic terms). There are mediating factors and Janowitz is careful to suggest that many of the rituals she describes import basic structures and function from comparable rituals. For example, the Man Burn is a token of a broader type of sacrifice. The Marrying Yourself ritual flaunts norms of typical marriages and also “follows the model of wedding as game and party set forth on the Burning Man website.”⁴⁰ In other words, the ritual must retain some elements of the criticized ritual to remain recognizable. Janowitz concludes by considering the function of such a ritual, suggesting that the Marrying Yourself ritual “solve the modern dilemma of fractured families by creating as a family group all Burners (current and past).”⁴¹

In a similar fashion, I suggest the indeterminate elements of the Jonah narrative can best be understood as responses to contemporary social issues. In contrast to modern scholars who largely see these narrative elements as minor, or even distracting, I argue their indeterminacy allows for a wide range of pragmatic use. The clergy and laypersons I interviewed probed the sullen and laconic prophet to consider the importance of mental health. The fish played a large role in many of my conversations with white evangelical congregants who questioned the relationship between science and faith. And many readers identified with Jonah rather than simply excoriate him, allowing readers to enter into the intimate, dyadic relationship between

³⁹ Janowitz, *Acts of Interpretation*, 114.

⁴⁰ Janowitz, *Acts of Interpretation*, 120.

⁴¹ Janowitz, *Acts of Interpretation*, 121.

Jonah and the deity. And while my contemporary data comes from a cultural environment far different than the book's original audience, I point backward and ask to what extent these same, strange literary features provoked the imagination of earlier readers who did not reside in the same discursive world of scientific rationality or the modern biblical scholar, but marveled at the possibility of being swallowed by a whale or identified with the prophet in unique ways to address their own personal problems.

Reading ancient texts alongside J.Z. Smith's insight that myths are fashioned in concrete, political and social environments has been more obvious among contemporary contexts, but this shouldn't preclude scholars of the ancient world from positing a similar dynamic. One geographically proximate example includes Aaron Tugendhaft's recent reading of the Baal Cycle in his *Baal and the Politics of Poetry*. By setting the myth alongside other political documents and mapping out the scribe's relationship within the broader social matrix of his time, Tugendhaft suggests that the myth is not solely about political legitimation or an entertaining story about the gods. Instead, he suggests that "The Baal Cycle offered its audience a means to take a critical stance toward contemporary political institutions and opened a space for them to reflect upon the workings of power, authority, and legitimacy. The poem offers less a *reflection of its world* than a guide for *reflecting upon it*."⁴² Naturally, Tugendhaft has access to an archive of a diverse set of contemporary texts at Ugarit that scholars of the Bible do not. And yet, there are avenues that biblical scholars possess that can illuminate how the book of Jonah reflects on past institutions and canonical texts, attuned to the political and social issues present at the time of its composition.

⁴² Aaron Tugendhaft. *Baal and the Politics of Poetry*. (Abingdon, Oxon: New York, NY, 2018), 6.

Mapping the Contours of this Dissertation

The first section (chapters 1-3) of the project illustrates how the ancient author(s) of Jonah rethought traditional, authoritative material within the Hebrew Bible in order to adapt to their new diasporic status in Babylon. The second section, (chapter 4) through ethnographic research comprised of interviews and site visits, considers how contemporary everyday laypersons continue to draw on this text in an active attempt to reflect on religious commitments and serves as a meta-critical corrective to dominant interpretive trends among biblical scholars. Through a trans-temporal comparison of these ancient and modern communities, we learn that the retelling of this canonical text is related to its dynamic ‘upside-down’ features historically anchored to its ancient community in Babylon, but that continues to engage contemporary imaginations.

In order to discover how these ancient authors reevaluated their religious commitments in their new, diasporic context, the goal of my philological section is to bring new insights from underutilized disciplines to demonstrate that the composition of Jonah is part of a program of religious reevaluation. The first chapter on composition and imagined geography continues to track how the book of Jonah sets out its own program of reevaluating religious commitments by rethinking the proper place of the deity. I trace how the two major places within the book, Tarshish and Nineveh, function in the narrative as places typically identified with obedience or disobedience, only to be reversed in the book’s second half. For the most part, biblical scholars have treated the two cities as places to be historically verifiable. Yet recent scholarship has drawn attention to the fact that the capital city of Nineveh was no longer significant at the time of the book’s composition.⁴³ As Peter Brown observes, “Descriptions of place do not exist merely

⁴³ See Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, XYZ; Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, XYZ.

for the sake of enabling the reader to compare imitation with reality...they are there to embody certain ideas which the writer wishes to convey.”⁴⁴ Instead, I build on recent scholarship and intervene in the field by moving away from mimetic representations of the two cities and provide a new reading of Jonah that examines how they do more than simply reflect conceptions of the city prevalent during the book’s composition. I show how the two cities structure the composition and that the deity shockingly appears in Tarshish and Nineveh – places that other biblical texts explicitly state the deity did not inhabit. Ultimately, this literary structure leads to a reevaluation of place, the characters who inhabit them, and the religious values that are inherently tied up with them.

My second chapter draws on linguistic anthropologists like Michael Silverstein, Susan Gal, Elizabeth Mertz, and Greg Urban who observe that language has the peculiar trait of “allowing its users to speak about speech as well as about other types of action.”⁴⁵ As a prophetic book, biblical interpreters have tended to focus on the prophet and his unusually pithy responses throughout the book. Yet a broader examination of the patterns of speech and their consequences, especially commands, show that they are routinely disregarded not only by the wayward prophet, but also by the other characters throughout the book. Such an analysis not only suggests a rethinking of religious values like prophetic (dis)obedience to the deity and prophetic speech, but also a reevaluation of broader issues of authorized speech amid shifting political and social locations. One goal of this chapter is to zoom out from the typical scrutiny of

⁴⁴ Peter Brown and Michael Irwin. *Literature & Place, 1800-2000*. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), 20.

⁴⁵ Greg Urban. “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth,” in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Edited by John Arthur Lucy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 241-242. See also his earlier version, “Speech About Speech in Speech About Action.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 310–328.

the prophet and demonstrate that broader patterns of speech decenter the wholly negative perspective towards Jonah may commentators possess. If we can find a pattern of disobedience beyond the prophet and in supposedly positive figures like the mariners and Ninevites, what conclusions can we draw about the dynamic between ostensibly authoritative figures and their subjects?

My third chapter opens up new possibilities for understanding the book of Jonah as a text of identity and acculturation by examining recently published material from the Āl-Yāhūdu archive – a set of cuneiform tablets, only recently organized, pertaining to the economic dealings of Judean exiles in Babylon from the 6th to 5th centuries.⁴⁶ While biblical texts often detail the lives of the Judean elite following the Babylonian exile,⁴⁷ new evidence from the Āl-Yāhūdu and Murašû archives provide an opportunity to understand the changing lives of ordinary deportees and their households in Babylon. They are busy trading, paying taxes, building homes, and establishing a life past deportation.⁴⁸ Yet, both post-exilic biblical texts and onomastic evidence from the archives bear witness to several generations of Judeans who have sought to preserve their religious and cultural legacy. Rather than the singularly negative attitude towards life in Babylon that some biblical texts voice, the archival evidence appears to complicate such a

⁴⁶ Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch. *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. Bethesda (Md.): CDL Press, 2014.

⁴⁷ 2 Kings 24:12-14, 16: “King Jehoiachin of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself, his mother, his servants, his officers, and his palace officials. The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign... The king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, the artisans and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war.”

⁴⁸ Kathleen Abraham. “West Semitic and Judean Brides in Cuneiform Sources from the Sixth Century BCE: New Evidence from a Marriage Contract from Āl-Yahudu.” *Archiv Für Orientforschung* 51 (2005): 198–219; Kathleen Abraham. “An Inheritance Division among Judeans in Babylonia from the Early Persian Period” in Meir Lubetski ed., *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean and Cuneiform*. (Hebrew Bible Monographs 8). Sheffield: 2007, 206-221.

notion. And whatever the case, retaining one's identity in a foreign land appeared to be a vital issue for particular segments of the Judean population.⁴⁹

Certain biblical texts detail an altogether negative portrayal of the exile. Most prominently, Psalm 137:4 laments, "How can we sing the songs of Yahweh's while in a foreign land?"⁵⁰ Others suggest the deported population make the best of their situation. Jeremiah presents a letter to the deportees after receiving a divine message:

'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

Here, the prophet exhorts the deported community to establish roots in the new and foreign area they have been exiled to. There is no fear of exogamy as in Ezra⁵¹ or rage towards the foreign city as in Nahum.⁵² In fact, the letter states that the people ought to seek the welfare of the city that they had been deported – a statement that likely reflected the daily lives of average Judeans as we know from the Āl-Yāhūdu and Murašū archives.

If some biblical texts vociferously oppose the cultural customs and acculturation of Babylon while others permit some level of integration, then what of texts composed after the

⁴⁹ Yigal Bloch. "Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule" *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 1, no. 2 (2014): 119-172.

⁵⁰ See also Isaiah 1, 5, 10, 2 Kings 19:23, Nahum, etc. For a thorough list of biblical texts relating to the exile, see Peter Machinist. "Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 4 (1983): 719–37.

⁵¹ "After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands... Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way." (Ezra 9:1-2)

⁵² "Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty—no end to the plunder!" (Nahum 3:1)

exile, but that do not explicitly name Babylon as the antagonist? Indeed, Jonah scholars have noted that part of its message packs its punch from the horror of this exile.⁵³ Yet ultimately, the deity’s message of forgiveness extends even to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire, and was likely meant to shock its readers who had been under the shadow of imperial domination since Assyrian incursions in the north. How might we understand such a turn?

The next stage of this chapter returns to the book of Jonah to more closely examine the relationship between how the prophet and deity engage with characters explicitly marked as ethnically and religiously different. While the Ninevites (chs. 3-4) are obviously not Judeans, the narrative goes out of its way in the first chapter to differentiate the Hebrew prophet from the sailors who might ostensibly be Judean, or at least West Semitic. As the mariners frantically determine the cause of the storm, they find out Jonah is the cause and barrage him with questions. Jonah responds, ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ (1:9) As James Limburg notes, “If a story is skillfully told, the storyteller can use questions to put each listener in the place of the one being questioned. The eight questions in Jonah 1 thus lead the listener to put himself or herself in the role of Jonah.”⁵⁴ Limburg’s point is especially interesting as it corroborates the peculiar fact that nowhere in the

⁵³ A brief sample of commentators who name the exile or Assyria as one of the driving forces of the narrative: Marian Kelsey. “The Book of Jonah and the Theme of Exile.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 1 (2020): 128–140; Hans Walter Wolff. *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), 85-6; James Limburg. *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 22; L. Juliana M. Claassens. “Rethinking Humour in the Book of Jonah: Tragic Laughter as Resistance in the Context of Trauma.” *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 3 (2015): 655–673; L. Juliana Claassens. “Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as a Postcolonial Trauma Narrative.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 4 (2021): 576–587.

⁵⁴ Limburg, *Jonah*, 25.

book is he explicitly named a prophet. In other words, readers may have been meant to identify in some capacity with the Hebrew prophet.

A brief look at the two groups of non-Hebrews in the book of Jonah, the mariners and Ninevites, reveals a much more ambivalent portrayal than some commentators may care to admit. On one hand, both groups become penitents par excellence when faced with the danger of the deity's wrath and ultimately avert the impending disaster (1:14, 3:5-6). The Ninevite king even goes so far as to declare a city-wide fast and recites a statement reminiscent of other prophets in the Hebrew Bible (3:7-9). On the other hand, by the deity's own admission at the end of the book, the Ninevites are said to be clueless and compared alongside domesticated animals (4:11). What might this say about the social context of a community finding themselves amidst several new ethnic groups?

This chapter diverges from past scholarship on Jonah by understanding it as a text exploring identity and acculturation informed by recently published archival material rather than a book about moral and ethical norms. Traditional commentators understand the character of Jonah as nationalistic and ethnocentric, while the deity asks readers to broaden their care for others in a universalistic turn where the deity cares for all peoples regardless of ethnic affiliation or past actions. Yet as J.Z. Smith reminds us in his analysis of the Babylonian Akitu festival, it is rarely the case that stories are created and "applied" only after their telling.⁵⁵ Instead, they are often created concurrently to attend to pressing political and cultural issues. Rather than begin with the ethical turn in Jonah as some commentators have, I propose that the book of Jonah was composed in light of the Judean community's new social situation – prompting the rethinking of

⁵⁵ Jonathan Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price" in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 93-94.

what it culturally means to reside in a foreign land. In addition, even if Jonah was not written precisely in the 6th century, the social and economic diversity persisted through most of the dates proposed for its composition – and the book’s attention to foreigners would remain relevant through the book’s canonization and beyond.

In addition to contributing to Jonah scholarship, this project also resists the ethnocentric interpretation that has often led to anti-Jewish conclusions. Following the long history of treating the prophet (who is occasionally represented as Judaism writ large) as an object lesson meant to be ridiculed, interpreters today continue to contrast Jonah’s supposed nationalist message with the universalism present in the New Testament. As Yvonne Sherwood notes:

A common story told in Biblical Studies circles is the story of the Old Testament’s gradual theological progress from primitive religion, embarrassing anthropomorphisms, polytheistic slips, towards ethical monotheism and universalism. These New-Testament-like sentiments reach their healthy evolutionary climax in Jonah, Ruth and Deutero-Isaiah, but are contrasted with a mutant, retrogressive strain, a falling off into the ‘dark age’ of narrow xenophobic post-exilic Judaism.⁵⁶

Rather than contrast Jonah’s xenophobia with the pious gentiles in the book, I complicate the clear-cut portrait of Jonah and the gentiles that interpreters have sought to uphold. By framing the book as a text reflecting on acculturation, identity, and the changing role of the prophet after the exile, we come to a more attentive understanding of how cultures historically thought about others in addition to meta-critically questioning our own modern framework about how past cultures operated. By doing this, the chapter seeks not only to broaden our understanding of how

⁵⁶ Yvonne Sherwood. *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55.

biblical texts relate to their material environments, but to contribute to recent scholarly interest in the process of acculturation among deported communities.

Beyond composition, the fourth chapter drawing on ethnographic approaches serves several roles. I draw from Gilles Deleuze's essay 'Plato and the Simulacrum' (1983) to rethink the hierarchical arrangement many biblical scholars adopt regarding the 'original' biblical text and its subsequent interpretations or in Smith's terms, the erroneous assumption that there is a primordial beginning to myths and a secondary exposition that frequently loses its creative quality.⁵⁷ In Deleuze's account, Platonism deals with the original-copy distinction through the hierarchical triad of the Unparticipated-participated-participant. To determine the 'original,' Plato establishes the Unparticipated as an authoritative, arbitrating figure capable of mediating between the two entities who are intrinsically unable to free themselves. However, Deleuze ultimately rejects this structure because he posits that difference between the participated and the participant is what ultimately enables comparison. Connecting this philosophical discussion to Biblical and Religious Studies, interpreters have long hewed to Plato's original-copy distinction. The original meaning of a text is arbitrated through 'unparticipating,' scholarly historical reconstructions of the ancient world and the thought patterns of the author. Building on Deleuze's rejection of Plato's hierarchical arrangement towards the original-copy distinction, I suggest that ethnographic approaches in contemporary religious communities constitute a significant challenge to the philosophical assumptions of certain aspects of Biblical Studies. Contemporary religious communities do not necessarily share the same historical values as academic readers do and interact with the text in a way that is not arbitrated by an original meaning accessible only to the astute historian or ancient audience. To engage in ethnographic

⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Rosalind Krauss. "Plato and the Simulacrum." *October* 27 (1983): 45–56.

research in this manner is to destabilize foundational notions of what constitutes a ‘text’ and who decides its final meaning. Moreover, while the history of interpretation of Jonah has been well documented up until the early modern era, very little has been written on its reception in contemporary contexts including the many ritual settings religious communities engage in like homilies, study groups, funerals/weddings, holy days, devotionals, and rituals.

In order to fill in the lacuna of reception history and furnish a meta-critical claim about biblical scholarship, I interviewed Jewish and Christian religious leaders and congregants in the Greater Sacramento area about the book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible. Additionally, because both religious communities possess the same text, it constitutes a benchmark in which to compare how both communities construct, and ultimately come to know their sacred text. Therefore, I have composed a series of uniform, carefully selected questions and formed an aggregate data pool to compare one community to another, considering the religious, racial, gender, and class diversity within the communities in the area.⁵⁸ I have specifically chosen questions that draw out possibilities of reevaluation of religious commitments and cultural values, and am also sensitive to the particular contexts of each community. At predominantly white evangelical Christian churches, I found a focus on the scientific veracity of the book – though not exclusively.

The ethnographic component of this project, then, remains intimately linked with the thoroughly historical component comprising the first three chapters of the dissertation. Rather than understand the modern material as a supplement, I seek to connect these through Smith’s notion of myth as application and Janowitz’s concept of indeterminate elements as being

⁵⁸ The project received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval from the University of California, Davis in October 2022.

contextually significant. These ‘strange,’ indeterminate narrative elements become accessible nodes where readers pragmatically reflect on their own social and political contexts.

In summary, this eclectic dissertation draws on a variety of approaches to demonstrate that rather than speak about broad notions of universalism/particularism or some moral concept, the book of Jonah is keenly interested in reworking notions of space, speech, and non-Hebrew populations to address its postexilic readership. Its many strange features are not frivolous oddities, but constitute attempts to reflect on the past – including the significantly altered understanding of the prophet, a dislocated population without access to the Temple, and a fundamentally new relationship to non-Judean populations. Importantly, each of these issues remains salient long beyond the Persian period and into the Hellenistic, providing a continued source of reflection for the book’s readership after its initial composition. The ethnographic component serves to show that many of the strange, indeterminate elements within the book continue to prompt reflection for its audience today. Despite some biblical commentators’ insistence on the “real” significance of the book as a moral, didactic tale, contemporary ethnographic data and a brief glance at the history of interpretation has demonstrated that the book functions much differently. Instead, its indeterminate elements such as a runaway prophet and hungry fish allow readers to speculate, reflect, and pragmatically solve then-contemporary social issues. These lay interpretations that focus on the (im)possibility of a fish swallowing a human or the rightness of a runaway prophet are not interpretive aberrations, but active attempts to make sense of ancient texts in contemporary society. Indeed, such an impulse stretches back to its ancient community which had to also muster the courage to draw on available resources to make sense of their diasporic situation in Babylon.

Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities: The Narrative Transformation of Place in the Book of Jonah

“Exotic places harbor rare things and make possible a kind of experience not common at home.”
Leonard Lutwack in *The Role of Place in Literature*¹

Introduction

In the past few decades, academics from various disciplines have begun to consider space and place as an analytic category that serves as more than mere background. The cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan notes that people form deep, emotional connections to real and imagined places.² Meanwhile, Gaston Bachelard considers the role households and other domestic spheres play in poetry, ultimately arguing that people experience landscapes and architecture beyond their functional capabilities.³ From Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus to semioticians’ concept of indexicality, place and space have played an increasingly significant category of cultural analysis, even when understood by different names and approached from different perspectives. Literary theorists note that depicting a place does not simply constitute describing its physical features. In fact, the impossibility of the task suggests that writers must choose particular details to emphasize for particular reasons. As Peter Brown observes, “Descriptions of place do not exist merely for the sake of enabling the reader to compare imitation with reality; rather, they are there to embody certain ideas which the writer wishes to convey.”⁴ While each take different approaches

¹ Leonard Lutwack. *The Role of Place in Literature*. (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 45.

² Yi-fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), x.

³ Gaston M. Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by M. Jolas. 1994 edition. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994), x.

⁴ Peter Brown and Michael Irwin. *Literature & Place, 1800-2000*. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), 20.

respective to their disciplines, all agree that the representation of space and place in literature and thought should not be thought of solely in terms of its mimetic function.

Yet for the most part, modern biblical interpreters have been drawn to literary realist representations in the book of Jonah who stress its material, physical verisimilitude to places, objects, and events that can be historically confirmed. For example, Edward Pusey attempts to demonstrate the veracity of the miraculous events in the book by referring to archaeological reports and botanical drawings in order to prove, respectively, that Nineveh was indeed large enough for someone to walk across it for three days, that the plant (קיקיון) in the final chapter that grows and dies in a night does truly exist, and that it can probably be identified as the castor oil bean plant.⁵ A critic should be quick to point out that typifying the field of biblical studies using a mid-19th century commentary on Jonah is unfair and anachronistic. This critic would be partially correct. More recent interpreters have largely moved beyond such a focus, but the tendency towards a realist depiction of Nineveh in the book remains, even if it is more often than not stated in the negative. For example, Leslie Allen recounts the usual propositions for the

⁵ E. B. Pusey. *The Minor Prophets: With a Commentary, Explanatory and Practical and Introductions to the Several Books*. (Oxford: J.H. & J. Parker, 1860), 253-254. For Pusey, the confirmation of these details serves to support his own religious convictions. After referring to reports of people being swallowed by fish he concludes: "Such facts ought to shame those who speak of the miracle of Jonah's preservation through the fish, as a thing less credible than any other of God's miraculous doings." See also Abraham Cohen. *The Twelve Prophets: Hebrew text, English translation and Commentary*. (Bournemouth, Hants: Soncino Press, 1948), 144-5; John D. W. Watts. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 76-78; Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page. *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 208-209; Thomas Edward McComiskey. *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1992), 544-545; Leslie C. Allen. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976), 203, 221-2; T. H. Hennessy. *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Malachi*. (Cambridge: University Press, 2014), 82; James Limburg. *Jonah: A Commentary*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 40-41.

location of Tarshish, “It is usually identified with Tartessos in southwest Spain near the mouth of the Guadalquivir.”⁶ Meanwhile, John Watts melds the symbol and the real together when he writes that “*Nineveh* is more than a real city. It is a symbol for all that is great and evil, all the world of people who are against God” while also pointing to archaeological reports proving it was indeed a spatially large city.⁷ Perhaps the main issue here is the assumption that the book is even attempting to realistically reflect and refer to the cities of Nineveh or Tarshish rather than function as anything else in the narrative, even when a precise location has not yet been determined for the latter. Modern commentators have historically focused on whether the miraculous in the book can be verified through scientific inquiry and oftentimes focused on the moral depravity and military prowess of the Assyrian empire to fill out the sparse details provided in the book.

Most recently, authors like Thomas Bolin, Amy Erickson, and Ehud Ben-Zvi have become less interested in squaring the meager details of the city provided in the book with archaeological records. For example, Bolin argues that Hellenistic sources inform Jonah more than the biblical ones – depicting Nineveh as an enormous, destroyed city of old.⁸ Meanwhile, Ben-Zvi argues that the real purpose of the city in the narrative is to contrast its literary depiction with the one experienced by its readers in the Persian or Hellenistic Period.⁹ Since early readers were aware of

⁶ Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 100-103.

⁷ Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 76; David W. Baker, (David Weston), T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke. *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 59.

⁸ Thomas M Bolin. *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 129-140.

⁹ Ben Zvi writes, “This being so, it is worth stressing that the historical audience for which this book was composed lived in the post-monarchic, and likely Persian period and, accordingly, knew well that Nineveh was eventually destroyed.” See Ehud Ben Zvi. *Signs of Jonah Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*. London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 15.

Nineveh's destruction, it provided a chance to consider the broader question of the book that brings the status of the prophetic word together with the ultimate fate of Nineveh. For both, it was only later upon the crystallization of the canon that Nineveh portrayed in Jonah began to take on the militaristic and violent notions present in other biblical books. Ultimately, both Bolin and Ben-Zvi question whether the book of Jonah is reflecting a mimetic resemblance to the city at all and attend to the ways that place often means more than a geographical location.

Following the trajectory of these more recent scholars, I will provide a new reading of Jonah that examines how the two cities do more than simply reflect conceptions of the city prevalent during the book's composition. Instead, I show how the two cities structure the composition and that this literary structure ultimately leads to a reevaluation of place and the characters who inhabit them. Both cities, Tarshish and Nineveh, known and associated with particular motifs and ideas before and after the composition of Jonah will be introduced at the beginning of the book, but eventually reappear later under quite different circumstances. By following the transformation of how the two cities are known throughout the narrative, a striking pattern emerges that initially fulfills the reader's expectations, only to subvert them soon after. By fulfilling the reader's expectations about Tarshish towards the beginning of the book, expectations concerning Nineveh are turned upside down and the intentions of Jonah and the deity are finally revealed, making the previously implicit now verbally explicit. Ultimately, the book of Jonah actively plays with preexisting notions of place reminiscent of prophetic texts, but goes about it much differently. My hope is that tracking the changing nature of cities and places in the book of Jonah contributes to a re-evaluation of how the book of Jonah structurally conveys

its message.¹⁰ In fact, using typical notions of prophecy and place, only to reverse them later, is a significant aspect of the role myths play.¹¹ By composing this myth, it is attempting to deal with pressing social and political issues such as the place of the prophet, and what it might mean to be (dis)obedient when traditional notions of authority have been fundamentally and forcibly altered.

More than Measurements: Recent Scholarship on Space and Place in the Book of Jonah

Fortunately, biblical scholars have already begun analyzing the role of space and place in biblical literature. In *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*, Mark George argues that the Priestly writers were invested in creating a space rather than a place with a distinct location. The Priestly writers envisioned a uniquely Israelite space where its own internal logic and social hierarchy moved with it.¹² George helpfully suggests the tabernacle as a space is less about its specific dimensions and measurables in a material sense and more about its role in the formation of Israelite identity and the projection of an ideal hierarchy. As the author notes, commentators tend to “dutifully” review the furnishings, form, and material of the tabernacle, along with some potential historical and archaeological comparisons, but oftentimes have difficulty maintaining interest, even when it is clear the writers and compilers took a considerable interest in it judging by the sheer volume

¹⁰ Commentators have long understood the book of Jonah as a didactic narrative. What it precisely teaches is a question with many several answers. As Yvonne Sherwood notes, even the “mainstream” interpretations range from understanding Jonah as a divine disciplinary device in John Calvin’s sermons to a symbol of the epitome of salvation and grace in the Patristic literature. In Yvonne Sherwood. *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11-20, 32-41.

¹¹ As Eva Mroczek has noted, other biblical texts feature similar functions of myth. For example, the oracles against the nations in Amos likely reversed the traditional order and surprised its listeners as Israel becomes the object of the deity’s wrath. (Amos 1-2)

¹² Mark K. George. *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 8.

of space dedicated to it within the Pentateuch.¹³ In other words, commentators who attempt to map out the precise definitions provided in the Levitical account may be missing an important point about how the moveable structure functions as more than simply the place where the deity resides.

This vision cast by the priestly editors was but one perspective centering a portable, cultic space. George argues that such a vision of social hierarchy must have been birthed in a particularly turbulent period in Israelite history. The priestly writers sought leadership and order at a time when there was very little following the Babylonian exile. The traditional form of political and social structure had all but vanished as Jehoiachin, representative of the Davidic line, now dined in the courts of Babylon in order for the Babylonian political establishment to keep him within arm's reach. As George notes, "The social, cultural, and historical context of the exile – its social space – imposed upon the exiles the need to sort out new social relationships within the community. This social upheaval had implications for the exiles' social space."¹⁴ A new social order must be established and the priestly editors provided such a vision.¹⁵

Other scholars have already analyzed the role of place and space in the book of Jonah.¹⁶ In "Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Theory and Practice with Reference to the Book of Jonah," Gert Prinsloo treats the book of Jonah more particularly by

¹³ George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*, 1 George lists three main pieces of evidence that the Tabernacle was important: the sheer volume dedicated to it, the amount of detail in its objects, and its narrative location in the book of Exodus.

¹⁴ George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*, 42.

¹⁵ As George notes, this is just one of the many competing visions during and after the exile. Of the material that has survived, the Deuteronomic History, Second Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Lamentations respond to the problems of the exile. Some provide their own vision that contrast with others. See George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*, 42.

¹⁶ See also Talia Sutscover. "Directionality and Space in Jonah" in *Discourse, Dialogue, and Debate in the Bible: Essays in Honour of Frank H. Polak*. Edited by Athalya Brenner-Idan. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014.

referencing larger models of cosmic space in the ancient Mediterranean world. In his chapter, Prinsloo attempts to foster a concern with space in the Hebrew Bible by formulating a model applicable to the ancient Near East. In his words,

The study has a threefold purpose: to propose a comprehensive theoretical spatial approach; to apply the theory to the book of Jonah; to illustrate that spatial analysis can be an indispensable tool in the interpretation of biblical texts.¹⁷

Since its publication in 2013, scholars of the Hebrew Bible have become more attuned to the importance of space. Building on Edward Soja's modified model of Henri Lefebvre, Prinsloo seeks to systematically treat the book of Jonah in order to take notice of the complex ways space is reflected and produced.¹⁸ For example, he distinguishes between terms like narrative space, social space, and spatial orientation that contribute to the meaning-making of space in literary texts.

Such an enterprise is helpful insofar as providing a model not only draws in other fields that make the results communicable outside the confines of Hebrew Bible, but also opens up new avenues previous research may have overlooked. For example, while many commentators have noted the spatially downward trend of Jonah in the first chapter, little has been made of how it all fits together and its significance in the book of Jonah.

Prinsloo's model synthesizes multiple critical space theoretical approaches, while also warning that broad application of theory has the potential to oversimplify the worldviews(s) present in the ancient Near East very different from our own. In order to bridge this gap, he

¹⁷ Gert T. Prinsloo. "Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Theory and Practice with Reference to the Book of Jonah in *Constructions of Space V: Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World*. edited by Gert T. M. Prinsloo and Christl M. Maier. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5.

¹⁸ Prinsloo, "Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World," 11.

consults Mesopotamian and Levantine texts that suggest a broader worldview beyond one particular text. He finds that space can be charted along two axes – vertical/horizontal and west/east. These axes not only signify the geographical terrain of where deities and humans live, but also conceptions of life and death, moral and immoral, and order and chaos. For example, Nicolas Wyatt finds that “Temples...are places of ‘reality’ and therefore of sacredness. Distance from the self means a progressive approach to the ‘end of the world,’ where reality breaks down.”¹⁹ The Temple, for example, is simultaneously a place spatially nearer to the heavens, and thus the gods, and simultaneously possesses qualities of order, goodness, holiness, and others. Prinsloo should be commended for considering how space and place operates in texts like Jonah.

Yet in some cases, Prinsloo’s goal and his content appear at odds with one another. He takes on models known from the wider Ancient Near East to explore the book, yet he does not discuss why these models remain influential when the anchors that help explain this directionality have been destroyed in the exilic and post-exilic periods. Or as cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan notes about cosmological mythic space, it is an attempt to make the world coherent and is generally associated with “large, stable, and sedentary societies.”²⁰ Yet, how does the model retain significance when the Temple that grounds the vertical axis has been destroyed and the people have been dispersed to foreign lands? In what sense are coherent cosmological models that Prinsloo describes the product of stable, sedentary literati rather than exilic communities and how might we detect such a change?

In addition, Prinsloo separates interpretive problems from his critical spatial approach. He writes, “Prominent characteristics of the book and its interpretational problems will receive

¹⁹ Nick Wyatt. *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 39.

²⁰ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 88.

little attention”, he nevertheless asserts that “spatial analysis can be an indispensable tool in the interpretation of biblical texts.”²¹ His final conclusion that “A spatial reading reveals the author’s intent to portray YHWH as the universal God with compassion for everyone who turns ‘from his evil way’ (3:8)” curiously agrees with interpretations of Jonah common from the turn of the 18th century until today and suggests interpretation cannot necessarily be completely divorced from spatial analyses.²² I might suggest a more dynamic approach that takes into account the dynamism of exilic and post-exilic narratives that seek to transform conceptions of space. In any case, the conclusions put forth by Prinsloo suggest a reexamination of how space and place operate in the book and how alternative interpretations might fit into critical spatial models.

Despite these objections to Prinsloo’s analysis, a critical spatial approach to the book of Jonah remains useful for several reasons. First, textual markers within the book make apparent the importance of space. Jonah repeatedly “goes down” (יָרַד in 1:2 twice, 1:5) in the first chapter until he reaches the bottom of the ocean where themes of nearness and distance resound in the inserted psalm. His flight takes him west across the sea to the port city of Tarshish, even as he is called east, far inland. The place he is called to is Nineveh, the great city of evil where Jonah reluctantly travels. He then sits outside the city (presumably overlooking it) to see what would become of it. The book finally ends with an argument against the deity in an inhospitable place, (רוּחַ קָדִים חַרְשִׁית) possibly reminiscent of the harsh locations biblical traditions often suggest are sites of divine activity.²³ In summary, there is a great deal of movement within the book. Second,

²¹ Prinsloo, “Place, Space and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World,” 5, 12.

²² Elias Bickerman. *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 27.

²³ The author may have in mind harsh locations such as the desert wanderings in the Pentateuch, Elijah’s flight into the wilderness in 1 Kings 19, Jacob’s wrestling with an angel in Genesis 32, and more.

the book of Jonah is unique insofar as prophetic texts rarely narrate the prophet extensively. Concentration lies primarily on the prophet's words (I take up this issue in chapter 2). Here, however, we get a rare glimpse of a prophet on the move. What is the traditional "place of prophecy" and how does this depiction differ from other prophetic texts? Third, literature contemporary with the book of Jonah in the Persian/Hellenistic period and afterwards also demonstrates a concern with space – in many instances the problem of the defunct Temple (e.g. the moveable throne of the deity in Ezekiel, imaginative visions of a Temple in Isaiah, and the fervent rebuilding of the Temple and its environs in Ezra/Nehemiah).²⁴ Placed alongside its contemporaries, how can we think about a text that envisions space in such a radically different manner?

Laying the Groundwork

The book of Jonah not only attends to the question of prophetic space, but actively plays with it, seemingly integrating it within the message of the book. Where space and place constitute a great source of anxiety and hope in Ezekiel by imagining a moveable throne and new temple complex for example, Jonah appears to revel in simply reversing the expectations of the reader rather than putting forth a clear solution. Disobedience of the prophet is expressed in explicitly spatial terms and the depth of Jonah's despair is represented by his location at the bottom of the sea. Yet at the same time, the divinely sent fish serves as the source of salvation when our protagonist is swallowed. Even when Jonah accepts his call in ch. 3 and movement towards Nineveh suggests

²⁴ In many ways the problem of the Temple continues to be rethought by Jewish communities as the Second Temple is destroyed. See, for example, 4 Ezra, Lamentations Rabbah, and the Temple Scroll for the breadth of communities seeking to answer the problem posed by the Temple's destruction.

obedience, he soon expresses anger at his deity's response towards the Ninevites' repentance. Finally, the place of Nineveh plays an enigmatic role throughout the book. It is a place well-known throughout the Hebrew Bible as the capital of Assyria – the empire that exiled the northern kingdom of Israel. Yet while in Jonah, it appears to be the initial reason for Jonah's flight, the Ninevites themselves appear as model penitents when provided the shortest prophetic warning in the Hebrew Bible.

Judging from this brief survey, the role of space and place play a key role in understanding how Jonah functions politically and socially as we consider the changing place of the prophet in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Upon the uprooting of the Judean monarchy and cult rooted in a particular location, these texts must envision and develop a new model for prophethood, priesthood, and kingship.²⁵ As Hindy Najman notes in her analysis of the Second Temple text of 4th Ezra, it is not appropriate to simply state that prophecy ended upon the destruction of the Temple, but instead warns “Without further specification of prophecy's place within the broader economy of divine-human relations” such an assessment “risks an oversimplification.”²⁶ Attention to the prophet's role – their actions and words – should be at the forefront of tracking how the book envisions this change, in particular how the book of Jonah maps out this “economy of divine-human relations.” The mapping of this economy must

²⁵ If, as J.Z. Smith argues in *To Take Place*, Ezekiel envisioned a Temple structure that reorganized the political and social hierarchies as a priestly exilic text, what can we say about prophetic movement? See Jonathan Z. Smith. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 47-73. How is this text envisioning the place of prophecy? I wonder if it might be helpful to consider prophecy in Second Temple texts to show how different prophetic activity had become. The worry is suggesting that there's a sort of continuum or evolution of a single prophetic tradition. Still, it looks quite different than the pre-exilic prophetic texts like Amos and First Isaiah who have a relatively clear place in this economy.

²⁶ Hindy Najman. *Losing the Temple and Recovering the Future an Analysis of 4 Ezra*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4-5.

necessarily take into account how place and space, or in semiotic terms, the indexicality of prophecy, makes the role of prophecy (un)intelligible.

Beyond the axes Prinsloo applies to the book of Jonah, space and place resound throughout the narrative. While he largely borrows cosmological models from the wider Ancient Near East, the book of Jonah plays with space beyond the axes Prinsloo discusses. It is true, as Prinsloo and many other commentators point out, that Nineveh lies opposite of Jonah's intended location of Tarshish. But there is no need to posit a cosmological structure that imports notions of east/west or vertical/horizontal not explicitly marked within the book itself. Moreover, if the vertical axis is emphasized by Jonah's descent, why are there no textual markers marking his ascent?

Perhaps a more fruitful approach is to follow the importance of associating place with prophetic obedience or disobedience. Strikingly, Jonah's target audience is not Israel/Judah, but Nineveh, a city known for its violence and treachery throughout the Hebrew Bible, and known simply as a "great" and "evil" city in Jonah. Meanwhile, the port city of Tarshish becomes the desired location of the prophet as the narrator provides us the meager detail of the prophet's flight in order to flee "from the presence of Yahweh." (1:3)

The book of Jonah opens not only with the familiar prophetic call as many commentators note, but also the introduction of two cities at opposite ends of the earth. (ויהי דבר-יהוה אל...קום) (לך)²⁷ The composition creates a diagram by connecting the two cities together through the prophet Jonah's response of obedience and disobedience. In other words, there is nothing connecting these two cities anywhere, to my knowledge, except for Jonah and his silent flight.

²⁷ The divine injunction to "Get up, go!" is similarly given to Balaam (Numbers 22:20), Moses (Deuteronomy 10:11), Elijah (1 Kings 17:9), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 13:6).

We might say that in this case, the cities serve less as discrete references and more as imagined places hazily associated with particular motifs and ideas. It is upon these values that the book of Jonah builds these associations and reconsiders them throughout the narrative.

It is not unusual for prophets throughout the Hebrew Bible to be less than enthusiastic about their task.²⁸ It is unusual, however, for a prophet to outright flee from their assignment entirely. In addition, Jonah's disobedience is characterized by silence as he makes his way to a ship that will carry him far from Nineveh – and presumably the deity. It is only in ch. 3 that Jonah breaks his silence with the deity and reveals the reason for his flight as the cities arise once again to the narrative fore. While there is good reason, as Ehud Ben-Zvi argues, to treat the book of Jonah as a text meant to be reread, at this point in the narrative this is what the reader knows and new questions are opened up as the reader returns to the first chapter and Jonah's silence is now inflected by his rage in ch. 4.²⁹

Tarshish – A Place Where One Never Arrives

The second city introduced in the book of Jonah is the port city Tarshish. Commentators have, for the most part, said fairly little in the role it plays in the book and much more about its possible whereabouts. Whenever Tarshish is discussed, it is largely a matter of geographically locating its place on a map with various ports around the Mediterranean suggested. Some

²⁸ This unwillingness manifests itself in characters throughout the Hebrew Bible rather than solely prophets. See Moses (Exodus 3), Gideon (Judges 6), Elijah (1 Kings 19), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), etc. See Hillel I. Millgram. *Defiant Prophets: Jonah, Balaam, Jeremiah and Their Rebellion Against God*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2022.

²⁹ Ehud Ben Zvi. *Signs of Jonah Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 10.

suggestions include Tartessus in Spain,³⁰ Sardinia,³¹ or Carthage in North Africa.³² The significant distance between each of these proposals underscores the difficulty scholars have had pinpointing a distinct locale.³³ Part of the confusion is undoubtedly due to different accounts within the canon itself.³⁴ At least two biblical texts suggest these “Tarshish ships” were harbored in the Red Sea, while others point toward their use in the Mediterranean.³⁵

Rather than focus on the exact geographical location, perhaps the more pertinent detail is that it was a generic location known for shipwrecks. In 1 Kings, a text our author was likely familiar with at least in part, Jehoshaphat built ships “of the Tarshish type” but were ultimately wrecked. In the parallel text of 2 Chronicles 9:21, “He joined him in building ships to go to Tarshish; they built the ships in Ezion-geber. Then Eliezer son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, ‘Because you have joined with Ahaziah, the Lord will

³⁰ J. Patrick and G. R. Driver, “Jewels and Precious Stones,” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings, F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley (New York: Scribner’s, 1963), 496-500. See also P. Villard, “Les Limites du Monde Connue à l’Époque Néoaassyrienne”, in: L. Milano 1 S. de Martino 1 F. M. Fales 1 G. B. Lanfranchi (Hrsg.), *Landscapes. Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East. Part 2: Geography and Cultural Landscapes*, (Padova 2000), 73-81.

³¹ William Foxwell Albright. “The Role of the Canaanites in the History of Civilization”. In *Bible and the Ancient Near East*. Ed. By Ernest G. Wright. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), 328-362.

³² Paul-Richard Berger. “Ellasar, Tarschisch und Jawan, Gn 14 und 10.” *Die Welt des Orients*, no. 13 (1982): 50–78.

³³ André Lemaire identifies as many as ten proposals with extensive literature on each, ultimately concluding that Taršiš ought to be identified as Tarsos. See André Lemaire. “Tarshish-Tarsisi: Problème de topographie historique biblique et assyrienne” in *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography: Presented to Zecharia Kallai* ed. Moshe Weinfeld. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

³⁴ As David Baker concludes, “In these contexts, Tarshish has been generally understood to refer to a geographical location, but there is a difficulty in that the references point both toward the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, which makes a single-site identification tenuous.” See David Baker, “Tarshish”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), XYZ.

³⁵ In the Red Sea: 1 Kings 9:26-27, 10:22; 2 Chronicles 9:22. In the Mediterranean: Ezekiel 27:35; Isaiah 23:1, 14, 60:9; Jonah 1.

destroy what you have made.’ And the ships were wrecked and unable to sail to Tarshish.”

Outside of Jonah, the shipwreck motif is fairly common in other biblical texts. Ezekiel 27 recounts:

The ships of Tarshish traveled for you in your trade,

You were filled and heavily laden in the heart of the seas.

Your rowers have brought you into the high seas,

The east wind has wrecked you in the heart of the seas. (Ezekiel 27:25-26)

Along with Tarshish being a place of wealth, it is also a far-away place in the imagination of its readers as wondrous and disastrous events occur in between. It is a place of potential wealth as well as potential danger. As Jacqueline Vayntrub notes, the author(s) of Ezekiel plays with the maritime metaphor of “weightiness” as ships sail off from Tyre with an abundance of goods, while simultaneously cautioning that their weight will be their downfall.³⁶ Interestingly, these biblical texts tie together prophetic activity and the disobedience of the king in addition to the harsh east wind that is the cause of Jonah’s frustration in the final chapter.

Outside the biblical canon, the sparse evidence gleaned from Levantine inscriptions also largely characterize the place not necessarily as a distinct geographical location, but as a place of potential shipwreck and danger. It is a place where one never arrives. The Nora Stone (KAI 46), a brief dedicatory inscription discovered at the end of the 18th century, recounts the expulsion of “Milkaton,” a certain commander, from Tarshish and found refuge in Sardinia. He consequently sets up this dedicatory inscription to a deity, though the final line has been questioned. Early

³⁶ Jacqueline Vayntrub. “Tyre’s Glory and Demise: Totalizing Description in Ezekiel 27.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2020): 214–236.

attempts at reading the stone proved difficult,³⁷ but a growing consensus building on Albright's initial reading has emerged.³⁸ For our purposes, it is significant to note only that Tarshish is not Sardinia at least for these mariners. In addition, Milkaton was unable to remain at or reach Tarshish and was forced to flee elsewhere. As Peckham notes, "The fact that it is a dedicatory inscription suggests that their survival in Sardinia was a bit of luck, and does not imply that their stay was of any significant duration."³⁹ In other words, the inscription suggests a wayward flight from/to Tarshish, then to Sardinia, and finally another location unknown to us. While the inscription is brief, what little reference we have to Tarshish outside of the canon reflects a similar sentiment – that Tarshish appears to be a distant city fraught with danger.

In addition, Tarshish also appears in Neo-Assyrian contexts at the turn of the 7th century. While, again, there is considerable debate around the precise location of the city, in addition to some confusion over whether Tarsus and Tarshish are the same place, there are a few minor references to the city. For example, one royal inscription of Esarhaddon from the 7th century boasts that he "Wrote to all of the kings who are in the midst of the sea, from Iadnana (Cyprus) (and) Ionia to Tarsisi, and they bowed down at my feet." There are a few noteworthy details in

³⁷ Gibson notes that while the text is clear, "I find it impossible to give a translation." See John Gibson. *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, vol. III, Phoenician Inscriptions* (including inscriptions in the mixed dialect of Arslan Tash) (Oxford, 1982), 25. See also Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig. *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften. 5., erw. und überarbeitete Aufl.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 10. The authors note note, "Die Deutungen den kurzen Inschrift gehen weit auseinander."

³⁸ W.F. Albright, "New Light on the Early History of Phoenician Colonization" *BASOR* 83 (1941) 14-22; Frank Moore Cross. "An Interpretation of the Nora Stone." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 208, no. 208 (1972): 13–19; Brian Peckham. "The Nora Inscription." *Orientalia*, Nova Series, 41, no. 4 (1972): 457-68; William H. Shea. "The Dedication On the Nora Stone." *Vetus Testamentum* 41, no. 2 (1991): 241–245; Anthony J. Frendo. "The Particles Beth and Waw and the Periodic Structure of the Nora Stone Inscription." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 128, no. 1 (1996): 8–11.

³⁹ Brian Peckham. "The Nora Inscription." *Orientalia* (Roma), no. 41 (1972): 457–468.

this section pertinent to our discussion. While Esarhaddon repeatedly boasts of destroying cities throughout the inscription, these select cities are conquered through diplomacy rather than warfare. There may be a variety of reasons as to why kings demand tribute over destruction and, in addition to the difficulty of sailing to these distinct locales, there were also trade routes that Esarhaddon was likely keen to maintain.⁴⁰ Yet, at the same time it is curious to consider how the king demonstrates his power in this context. It is the kings who come to Esarhaddon bearing tribute rather than the opposite. The inscription notes that the king “carried off gold, silver, goods possessions, people – young and hold – horses, oxen, (and) sheep and goats, their heavy booty that was beyond counting, to Assyria.”⁴¹ The cities are never described in detail, as in other portions of the inscription, because he never visits them. Instead, it is the type of tribute and the distance between Esarhaddon and the cities that ultimately demonstrate royal power.

In addition, the notation of these cities here serves as more than mere reference. It is also a part of the royal rhetoric of geographic expansion to the farthest reaches of known and unknown territory. Soon after describing the great tribute brought by the kings “Who are in the midst of the sea,” Esarhaddon boasts that he “Achieved victory over the rulers of the four quarters and I sprinkled the venom of death over all of (my) enemies.”⁴² In other words, the mention of these cities appears part-and-parcel with the rhetoric of imperial expansion with these three cities representing the great lengths that Esarhaddon’s empire reaches. Unsurprisingly, the

⁴⁰ Seymour Gitin. “The Neo-Assyrian Empire and Its Western Periphery: The Levant, with a Focus on Philistine Ekron.” In *Assyria 1995, Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project*, ed. Simo Paropola and Robert M. Whiting, 1997: 77-103. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project; Susan Frankenstein. “The Phoenicians in the Far West: A Function of Neo-Assyrian Imperialism.” *Power and Propaganda* 1979: 263-294.

⁴¹ Erle Leichty. *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC)*. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 135.

⁴² Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon*, 135.

shipwreck motif does not appear in this royal inscription. Not only does Esarhaddon never travel by boat towards these cities, but representing the king in danger would undermine one of the purposes of the inscription as royal propaganda. As Wayne Horowitz notes in his study of the Babylonian World Map, this author's interest in distant places "reflects a general interest in distant areas during the first half of the first millennium, when the Assyrian and Babylonian empires reached their greatest extents."⁴³ Moreover, Donald Murray suggests that such a notion persists beyond a single Mesopotamian ruler's imperial imagination. From the late third millennium Sargon of Akkad to the Neo-Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar II, to cross the ocean was a feat of power.⁴⁴ And despite scholarly conceptions that the Persian Empire did not seek world domination, Murray shows how Darius too participates in this ancient rhetoric of expansion into the unknown.⁴⁵ Indeed, notions of a distant and wealthy city across the sea do persist here as we've seen elsewhere and fit nicely within the royal rhetoric of imperial expansion into distant cities whose kings come at the request of Esarhaddon.

The diverse contexts that the shipwreck motif and an area beyond the reach of many ultimately suggests a broader knowledge beyond one single scribal circle or culture. Material inside and out of the canon have confirmed that Tarshish is more than a geographical location, but also a place one seeks out, yet is oftentimes fraught with danger. Tarshish may operate, as Yi-Fu Tuan describes, as a sort of mythical space, "a fuzzy area of defective knowledge

⁴³ Wayne Horowitz. "The Babylonian Map of the World" in *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*. (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 40.

⁴⁴ Donald Murray. "The Waters at the End of the World: Herodotus and Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography" in *New Worlds from Old Texts: Revisiting Ancient Space and Place*. Eds. Barker, Elton T. E., Stefan Bouzarovski, C. B. R. Pelling, and Leif Isaksen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 47-60.

⁴⁵ Murray, "The Waters at the End of the World" in *New Worlds From Old Texts*, 50-53.

surrounding the empirically known; it frames pragmatic space.”⁴⁶ It operates, in some way, similar to Nineveh does in the narrative as we will see below. Both are locations likely known only by text and possess, for Tarshish, impressions as a place far across the sea only hazily known where danger and shipwreck regularly occur. Meanwhile, Nineveh likely took on notions of an ancient, destroyed city in the east.

Nineveh

The city of Nineveh and its relationship to Assyria has a long history within the canon and thus an extensive history of interpretation. In the first chapter of Jonah, the city of Nineveh is described by the deity as a “great city,” (עיר גדולה) interchangeable with those inhabiting it as “their wickedness” (רעתם) has come up before him.⁴⁷ Readers may be familiar with the image of Nineveh throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible as a place that is the object of Nahum’s prophetic rage and Zephaniah’s hope that the city will “be made a desolation.”⁴⁸ It may have been known as Assyria’s capital city and Sennacherib’s home as described in 2 Kings. The city falls into the background as Jonah flees and reappears as the prophet enters the city in ch. 3. Its

⁴⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, 86.

⁴⁷ Barbara Green in *Jonah’s Journeys* notes the polyvalent usage of the word ‘evil’ in the book of Jonah. She notes, “The fact that several characters share the word ‘evil’ (1:2, 7; 3:8, 10; 4:1, 2, 6) reminds us that we have multiple viewpoints here and that a common generic noun like ‘evil’ will shift its referent and valence, depending on who is talking. Evil for one is boon for another. And only two of the characters have names.” See Barbara Green. *Jonah’s Journeys*. (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2005), 84. Perhaps we can also point to the polyvalent usage of “great” that resounds throughout the book. The broad usage in Hebrew, and even the book of Jonah, may ask readers what different characters in the book mean by “great”. Does it simply mean large as part of the book suggests, or does it mean that it is important as it is suggested elsewhere?

⁴⁸ Though Bolin notes, “When one compares the portrayal of Nineveh in Jonah on the one hand with those of Nahum and Zephaniah on the other, there are no common points, especially in regard to the nature of the city’s wrongdoing.” (Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 134)

“greatness,” perhaps referring to its size is confirmed here, yet it may also be discreetly referring to the inhabitant’s reaction to Jonah’s announcement. Finally, the city becomes a formal object lesson as the prophet sits outside of it while he and the deity converse.

The deity’s request to “Get up, go” (קוּם לֶךְ) echoes throughout the Hebrew Bible as a call made only by the deity to important figures like Abraham, Jacob, Balaam, Elijah, Moses, and Jeremiah, yet Jonah heads in the complete opposition in an attempt to travel to Tarshish. While many commentaries puzzle over the precise location of the port city, perhaps the more germane detail is that it is also a distant location known for the danger of shipwreck – a key detail central to the plot of the book of Jonah that we have already explored in this chapter. Several biblical texts suggest that Tarshish was a distant port city where precious cargo would often be lost on its way.⁴⁹ Whether such locations were beyond the grasp of the deity in these texts is an interesting question that should be examined. Nevertheless, this appears to be Jonah’s goal in our text. The shipwreck motif is fulfilled, yet also develops as the prophet is ultimately “saved” by the deity when thrown overboard. Finally, Tarshish is mentioned once more as Jonah becomes exasperated and reveals the reason for his flight. It remains Jonah’s wish to flee to this location even as he recites the divine characteristics in frustration.

If Tarshish remains a desirable location for the prophet throughout the book and a place that fulfills readers’ expectations, the city of Nineveh serves quite the opposite role. For much of the book of Jonah’s interpretive history, the city of Nineveh captured the imaginations of readers as the wicked, loathsome city *par excellence*. Interpreters imported the sentiments of prophetic rage found in other biblical texts into the Nineveh we find in Jonah. The book of Nahum excoriates

⁴⁹ Ezekiel 27:25; 1 Kings 22:49; 2 Chronicles 20:36-37; Isaiah 2:16, 23:1, 14. It is also, as a distant port city would likely be, known for its wealth; see Jeremiah 10:9; Isaiah 60:9; Ezekiel 27:12, 38:13.

Assyria and its capital city offering no hopeful reprieve typical of prophetic literature. (Nahum 3:19) Zephaniah longs for the day the city is made a desolation, “a dry waste like the desert.” (Zephaniah 2:13) Ezekiel likens Assyria to an enormous cedar of Lebanon, (Ezekiel 31:3-14) while Isaiah understands the deity as using Assyria as a tool to punish other nations. (Isaiah 10:5-7) Several texts compare Assyria to the other international power of the day, Egypt. (Isaiah 19:16-25) The message of a deity who ultimately forgives even the most heinous of people dovetails nicely with many interpreters who find the forgiven gentile and gracious God an attractive theological motif. Yvonne Sherwood notes that the character of Jonah has been “swallowed up” by the character of Jesus and in many ways serves as an interpretive key throughout the narrative.⁵⁰ By and large, interpreters treat the original readers and the author(s) of Jonah to have understood many of these inner-biblical references.

More recently, scholars have cast doubt upon this thesis. Not only is the unity of canon that allows interpreters to assume the composer of Jonah and their audience to have all of these references on hand suspect here, but the book of Jonah makes very little reference to any of the themes above. Thomas Bolin notes that the city of Nineveh would have been long destroyed and remained in ruins when Jonah was composed in the Persian or Hellenistic period.⁵¹ In addition, the capital of Assyria became more well known as Dur Sharrukin. Instead, Bolin argues that Hellenistic traditions of an ancient, exotic, generically wicked city in the east inform the book of Jonah more than the biblical ones. Rather than the violent and warlike Nineveh depicted in the Hebrew Bible, Hellenic texts imagine the city as slothful, obscenely wealthy, and mismanaged. Meanwhile, Ehud Ben Zvi argues that the disjunction between the real, historical context of a

⁵⁰ Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 11-20.

⁵¹ Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 135-140. See also Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah*, 15.

ruined city and the biblical text that ultimately ends with the deity sparing the city provides a space for the reader to consider how prophetic speech operates in front of them.⁵²

Therefore, on one hand we have seen interpreters import other biblical texts in order to fill out a portrait of Nineveh in order to meet some theological underpinnings commentators have had. On the other hand, more recent scholarship has almost rejected biblical intertexts altogether and focused on the contrasting archaeological record to show something else entirely. How, then, does the book of Jonah relate to other biblical texts? Modern scholars have largely agreed that the book of Jonah pulls from other biblical texts, whether through citation, thematic illusion, or otherwise. The book of Jonah was not written in a void and Ben Zvi even argues that the book of Jonah is a meta-prophetic book “that deals with or is even devoted to issues that are of *relevance for the understanding of the messages of other prophetic books*.”⁵³ Much of the discussion hinges on the difficulty interpreters have knowing what texts the author had access to, when Jonah ought to be dated, and the book’s relationship to what scholars today call canon.⁵⁴

At the very least we can build out intertextual references to Nineveh from the book of Jonah itself, first noting references that scholars generally agree upon.⁵⁵ For example, while biblical scholars aren’t entirely sure what the purpose of using Jonah as a character suggests,⁵⁶ most

⁵² Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah*, 34-39.

⁵³ Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah*, 85.

⁵⁴ For example, Marian Kelsey writes that “While there are few allusions to the exile narrative proper, there are allusions” to exilic motifs. See Marian Kelsey. “The Book of Jonah and the Theme of Exile.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 1 (2020): 128–140.

⁵⁵ In his preface, Bolin questions the flawed interpretive approach that uses “Israelite history and the Bible to mutually support and explain each other” and instead attempts an “interpretation of Jonah...independent of any historical speculation derived from hypothetical reconstructions of Israelite history.” (Bolin *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 7) Building on his observation, I attempt to reconsider interpretive approaches to Jonah that assume a fixed canon that can be easily referenced by authors whenever they so choose.

⁵⁶ Traditionally, interpreters simply understood Jonah to be the author of the book, but when modernity questioned traditional notions of authorship and composition, scholars proposed new

understand the book to be referencing the same Jonah ben Amittai in 2 Kings.⁵⁷ By extension, we can assume that the author and Persian literati had access to this biblical text at least in part – a text that also curiously mentions the two cities the book of Jonah sets out to in the beginning. For example, five chapters following the introduction of Jonah ben Amittai in 2 Kings 14, we also find mention of the Assyrian king Sennacherib departing his siege of Jerusalem and returning to Nineveh. This isn't to say that Jonah is equating the two kings, but that at this point in time Assyria, and the city of Nineveh, was a significant place in the international politics of the day.⁵⁸ In other words, it may not have been all that surprising for Jonah's earliest readers to not only understand that Nineveh was a great city of the past, but that Judah and Israel had a storied past with it. This does not mean that the book should be understood as a history of prophetic activity in the 8th century or a handbook of how large the city of Nineveh was, but it does mean that these later readers were imagining an earlier period different than their own.

Beyond the Nineveh known throughout the Hebrew Bible, the book of Jonah describes the city as a place of great evil at the outset. It is the deity's first command for Jonah to go and "call

suggestions. For example, A.D. Martin proposed a "well-traveled person" wrote the book and uses Jonah as a satirical figure. In similar fashion, John Watts argues that "the historical Jonah was an enthusiastic nationalist" and in the book he is an anti-hero. So too does Julius Brewer believe that the story is meant to condemn Jonah, and thus his position, to ultimately teach the reader a correct theological position. Few modern interpreters continue to posit an 8th-century dating and those that do explicitly rally theological reasons for their position. See Billy Smith and Frank Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, 219.

⁵⁷ Ben Zvi devotes a chapter to the relationship between the Jonah in 2 Kings and the character in the book of Jonah. He concludes that while "the book of Jonah is not written to be textually reminiscent of the account of Jonah or Jeroboam II in Kings...the text of Jonah is written so as to strongly suggest to its rereaders that they should approach it from a perspective informed by their knowledge of the Jonah of Kings..." Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah*, 47.

⁵⁸ Limburg urges readers that "No matter when the story may have been written, we need to understand it in the context of the ancient Near Eastern world of the eighth century B.C., when Assyria was the rising world power and Nineveh was a great world city." (Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*, 22)

out against” the city because the people’s wickedness “has come up before me.” (1:2) First, the typical call to a prophet as we have here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible suggests Jonah would likely predict a negative oracle typical of nearly every prophet prophesying against foreign nations.⁵⁹ The textual markers stating that the city was “great” and “evil” confirm such a suspicion. In addition, the description of evil “coming up before” the deity from a city may harken back to the infamously wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis as the wickedness of the inhabitants rises towards the deity and stirs divine action.⁶⁰ In other words, the beginning of the book prepares the reader for Jonah to ultimately provide an oracle detailing the fall of Nineveh. The great, evil city will receive what is due.

Yet immediately following the deity’s command, the prophet flees in the opposite direction. While it may be surprising at first glance, prophets throughout the Hebrew Bible frequently resist their charge at the beginning, only to be won over later by promise, bargaining, or coercion. Further, many of the examples result in a direct dialogue between the deity and prophet. Curiously, Jonah flees in silence and only reveals his cause in speech after he proclaims judgement against the city and its inhabitants in the final chapter of the book leaving readers in suspense and guessing at Jonah’s intentions.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Sasson makes the case quite well of the expectations built into the alternating construction קרא אל/על. See Jack M. Sasson. *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*. New York: Doubleday, 1990), 75; see also Bolin’s cautionary response to Sasson noting that the grammatical construction does not always suggest denunciation. See Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 122.

⁶⁰ Though, notably, while the concept of wickedness rising up towards the deity remains the same, the verbiage in the two accounts differ.

⁶¹ The silence of the protagonist is reminiscent of Auerbach’s analysis of Abraham in the binding of Isaac. It builds an eerie suspense leaving the reader guessing and mostly disturbed. This silence will be productive for later readers (see chapter 4).

After the Ninevites' unusually penitent response, Jonah leaves the city frustrated and begins his dialogue with YHWH. The book provides the rare opportunity to witness the object of prophetic criticism respond in full measure. The city described at the beginning of the book as evil has, apparently, completely repented. Jonah's prophetic speech is incredibly successful. In other words, the foreign city becomes an ideal example of the relationship between people and prophet regardless – perhaps even in spite of – the prophet's intention.

Undoubtedly, the book continues to surprise readers by revealing Jonah's frustration with the successful result. If our initial diagram tied prophetic obedience and disobedience to place, the book has now suggested a new model where prophetic success and obedience is no longer connected to the city. Even when Jonah becomes "obedient" and reluctantly follows the divine command, the prophet ultimately resents the outcome. Indeed, obedience is now inflected by Jonah's verbal response. It is not that Jonah did not want to perform his prophetic role broadly, or felt inadequate as other prophets might, but that he had an uncanny prescience about how the deity might respond. As Jonah vents his frustration, he recites the divine characteristics normally recited by the Hebrew Bible's most faithful.⁶²

Therefore, at the outset we have two cities with particular notions likely held by its readers, yet also at odds with the values the narrative presents at the end of the book. Nineveh, a city known canonically as violent, wicked, and the seat of imperial power, or as a slothful, greedy city with incompetent rulers in Hellenistic literary traditions, becomes the object of the deity's judgement as the prophet is tasked with its condemnation. Prophetic obedience and the city of Nineveh become linked in our narrative in its opening lines. Undoubtedly, while the reader

⁶² The recitation of the divine attributes (or the 'grace formula') first appears in Exodus 34:6, but frequently appears in the Psalms, (86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 112:4, 145:8), Joel 2:12-14, and modified forms in 2 Chronicles 30:9 and Nehemiah 9:17, 31.

would be familiar with the deity's call towards specific individuals (prophets or otherwise) throughout the Hebrew Bible, the object of the deity's call must have been quite puzzling. Meanwhile, the port city of Tarshish known as a destination where shipwrecks occur becomes the desired safe-haven for our protagonist and the hopeful place where the deity does not have control. In both cases, the reader knows something the characters in the book do not, setting up expectations that are fulfilled before they are ultimately turned upside down. The two imagined cities surprise readers as they continue to morph while the narrative progresses.

The position of the reader and characters in the first chapter of the book set up a model that will surprise the reader as much as the characters within the narrative. As Jonah's disobedience is connected to his movement to Tarshish, ancient readers, whether they were familiar with the biblical texts or not, would have expected Jonah's seafaring flight to encounter this issue. Even more, the watery chaos associated with the sea is actively conjured in Jonah's song with the associated themes like distance from the deity (v. 2, 4) and death (v. 6-7) strewn throughout to create a typical song of thanksgiving that doesn't quite fit within the narrative. Unsurprisingly, cosmic chaos and disobedience are closely linked throughout the passage and the deity's treatment of Jonah is somewhat expected as the prophet is eventually saved and returns to shore. Still, at this point the prophet's intention remains elusive as he travels to Nineveh in silence with a reaffirmed call in 3:1, "The word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time."

At this point in the narrative, Jonah's silence prompts readers to adopt existing models of prophetic call narratives and the dynamic of dis(obedience) known from the book as well as other call stories. We've learned from chapter 1 and 2 that disobedience results in death, both literal and cosmic, and that it is conveyed through mythological tropes (the constant spatially 'downward' descent), metaphorical associations between sleep and death, as well as the physical

possibility of drowning in a capsized vessel. Readers may also be familiar with the many other call narratives put to prophets that ultimately result in obedience and the spectacular visions and divine speech that accompany them.⁶³ Of course, a typical exchange between prophet and deity generally includes a dialogue between the two followed by an accompanying sign of trust. Yet as Elata-Alster and Salmon note, “God answers Yonah’s wordless evasion of His word with an equally nonverbal sign: the text leaves no space between Yonah’s flight before God (ib. מלפני ה') and God’s hurling of a great wind into the sea (וה' הטיל רוח גדולה בים – 1:4).”⁶⁴ There is no dialogue typical of an exchange between the prophet and their deity. Here, there is only silent movement away from the deity, building narrative tension and forcing readers to draw conclusions.

Upon Jonah’s immediate success in Nineveh, Jonah finally reveals his intentions and begins a dialogue with the deity that ultimately fills in Jonah’s silent disobedience.⁶⁵ While Tarshish remains a place of disobedience from the perspective of the deity and reader, Jonah becomes a much more dynamic character as his obduracy becomes less about his own inability to be a prophet, but rather the intolerability of the dynamic character of Yahweh who reserves the ability to change his mind. Jonah reveals to the deity (and reader who is overhearing the conversation) the initial cause for his flight and Tarshish remains a place where the responsibility of prophecy and its effects no longer burden Jonah. The motif of the renewed servant who protests, but ultimately accepts the divine call, is rejected here as Jonah continues to favor Tarshish!

⁶³ Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Amos 7; 1 Kings 22; etc.

⁶⁴ Gerda Elata-Alster and Rachel Salmon. “Eastward and Westward: The Movement of Prophecy and History in the Book of Yonah.” *Dor Le Dor* 13 (1) 1984: 16-27.

⁶⁵ This is one reason why Ben Zvi’s argument that the book of Jonah is meant to be reread is productive. Characters in the book reference earlier material allowing a rereading to fill in content unknown to the reader beyond the initial reading.

The two locations, initially tied together through prophetic (dis)obedience, more clearly emerge towards the end of the narrative as sites where readers are forced to draw conclusions not only about the narrative and Jonah's place within it, but the relationship between (dis)obedience and place. If Jonah's flight in ch. 1 had left the reader puzzled with expectations set up of a ruined Nineveh and unintelligible flight leading to the prophet's watery grave, the two cities, and thus our expectations and values associated therein, must be rethought. It is not surprising to find the two cities reappear in chs. 3 and 4 in quick succession as the Ninevites repent and Jonah becomes irate at the deity's change of heart.

In 3:1-2, the second call to Jonah repeats almost word for word the first lines of ch. 2, asking Jonah to set out to Nineveh and proclaim the deity's message. In an apparent move toward obedience suggested by the text's note that he "went to Nineveh, according to the word of Yahweh," the text moves toward its climax as expectations towards the evil city are surprisingly reversed. The king and the city's inhabitants become model penitents as they react to Jonah's brief prophetic utterance with absolute trust and a performance of grief that reaches even to the animals who are clothed in sackcloth. The book of Jonah highlights the potential effectiveness of obedience and place evidenced by the Ninevites repentant response.

Moreover, the reader views Jonah in a new light as he explodes in anger over the deity's response. It is no longer about the simple model of obedience or disobedience formulated in the first and second chapter. Jonah's break from silence in his reaction to the deity's change of heart forces readers to recognize the prophet has not fled out of selfishness, a fear of death, or ethno-national interest, but a deep ambivalence about how the characteristics of the deity are enacted. For example, Rob Barrett notes that:

It must be allowed, however, that 4.2 is not really an explanation at all. It is no explanation for Jonah to say that he fled his commission because of YHWH's character, for the connection remains obscure: what is it about YHWH's mercy and tendency to relent from disaster that makes flight the rational consequence?⁶⁶

Moreover, Jonah's response no longer allows the reader to decide Jonah's rationale. Instead of assuming that the prophet did not know what he was doing, the prophet instead shows himself knowledgeable of authoritative, canonical texts and capable of reciting a poem in ch. 2 laced with traditional language, able to argue on his behalf beyond the typical relationship prophets have had with the deity, and show that Jonah may even be more prescient than the deity himself when anticipating the Ninevite's response.⁶⁷ The dialogue between the deity and prophet in the fourth chapter is a climactic outcome that makes verbally explicit the problems posed throughout the book of Jonah, notions of obedience and disobedience are turned on their head, just like the city and perceptions of its early readers.

Conclusion

Rather than focus on the geographical locations of each city, in this chapter I have followed the model provided by the book itself. Here, the composition ties the two cities of Tarshish and Nineveh to the prophet's behavior. What follows is a larger discussion of what it means to be a prophet, where such authority may lie, and the deeply ambivalent nature the composition proposes concerning the responsibility of the prophet to a deity.⁶⁸ They become sites where

⁶⁶ Rob Barrett. "Meaning More Than They Say: The Conflict Between Yhwh and Jonah." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 2 (2012): 237–257.

⁶⁷ Sasson, *Jonah*, 329.

⁶⁸ A topic of apparent interest in some other prophetic books of the time as well. See Alexander Rofé. "How Is the Word Fulfilled? Isaiah 55:6-11 within the Theological Debate of its

prophetic obedience and disobedience are rethought. Tarshish, the great port city presumably out of the purview of the deity, but also a place of great mystery and potential shipwreck, becomes the prophet's desired location even unto death as he later reveals in their dialogue. Rather than "learn" from the deity's saving acts, Jonah remains obdurate and wishes for death several times. Jonah's position becomes increasingly strange as he continues to desire the safe-haven of Tarshish even as we have already read of his failed attempt.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the repentance of the generically wicked city of Nineveh provides the rare opportunity to witness the power of the prophetic word and the outcome of prophetic (dis)obedience. The prophecy can be taken back, at least for a time, and Jonah (alongside the reader) must deal with those implications. In spite of Jonah's best attempts to not prophesy, he does so only reluctantly. We find out, only when the deity changes his mind, that Jonah had been worried about this outcome all along. His disobedience turns out to be not from fear or naivete, but an uncanny prescience that the deity might do such a thing all along.

In the final chapter of the book, the city of Nineveh becomes an object lesson for both the prophet and reader. Rather than the violently wicked and military powerhouse known throughout other canonical books, the book favors an imagined city far away that responds positively to the Israelite prophet where issues of prophecy can be considered. The deity, in its final verse, asks the prophet and reader the moral implications of Jonah's position as interpreters have pointed out

Time", *Essays in Honor of B.S. Childs*, ed. by B.M. Tucker et al., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988, 246-261.

⁶⁹ There are several possibilities scholars have provided for why Jonah fled in ch. 1. Very few of them are truly satisfactory as scholars themselves have noted. Jonathan Magonet lists five: 1) a miscarriage of justice, 2) the relationship between Nineveh and Israel, 3) Jonah's prophetic reputation, 4) God's compassion extending to Nineveh, or 5) whether there is no specific reason. See Jonathan Magonet. *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*. 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 87.

time and again. Yet one would be remiss to not also note that not only are these implications intimately tied up in how place informs those very principles, but that the composition structurally ties them in with complex and multifaceted issues like the fulfillment of the prophetic word, the role of space in prophecy, and the relationship between the prophet and deity.

Notions of (dis)obedience and place were undoubtedly significant issues for a population that had undergone displacement – losing autonomy to an ethnic group from afar. The lack of location in the opening lines of the Jonah narrative perhaps betrays the community’s complicated perception of significant cultic and royal sites like Jerusalem where the prophet was typically active. Instead, the book of Jonah provides two distinct places, hazy and ethereal, to reflect on understandings of obedience and disobedience. Israelite prophets could be disobedient, even unto death, whereas non-Hebrew populations associated with Nineveh or Tarshish could react to a prophetic word despite not fully comprehending its message. In this way, Jonah reworks notions of place, prophecy, and (dis)obedience, mapping out new avenues of relating to land. By setting up reader’s expectations about Tarshish and then turning the city of Nineveh upside-down, readers are forced to reckon with the idea that while place and obedience to deity are connected, what place and obedience look like may surprise us – perhaps a pertinent message for a community that had undergone displacement.

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Chapter 2: Reconfiguring Models of Speech and Action in the Book of Jonah

Introduction

From an incredibly short prophecy and a laconic prophet to ostensibly pious non-Hebrew characters, biblical interpreters have long noted the strange use of language in the book of Jonah. Yet few have looked more closely at the types of speech present in the book and their effects. This chapter will bring to bear insights from linguistic anthropology to the linguistic data present in the book of Jonah. I ultimately suggest that Jonah is not the only disobedient character in the book and that paying attention to the speech of others will strikingly show that commands issued by authoritative characters consistently fail.

In “The Secret Life of Texts,” Michael Silverstein returns to Edward Sapir’s *Wishram Texts* in order to explore how “texts are interdiscursive with respect to other text occasions” and that readers may not recognize the distorting process by which a particular sample of discourse has been made into a text. In Silverstein’s case of Sapir and his ethnographic interlocutors, he is especially interested in recovering how the anthropologist understood his role in the evolving process between ethnographer and participant of the text in question, “Winter Bathing.”¹ While Sapir understood the recitation from his interlocutor, Pete McGuff, of this “custom” as an “unproblematically expository ‘ethnologic’ text, McGuff appears to have understood the relationship and telling as a deictic myth performance that explains why he did not have a

¹ Silverstein is here referring to what linguistic anthropologists refer to as dialogism drawn from the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. The concept, picked up by biblical scholars, highlights the fact that “All rhetorical forms, monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer... This orientation toward an answer is open, blatant and concrete.” See M. M. Bakhtin, Michael Holquist, and Caryl Emerson. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 311.

Guardian Spirit.² In other words, Silverstein ultimately argues that Sapir missed the pragmatic goal of the narrative in favor of the supposed content and ritual that happened long ago.³ By revisiting the transcript, Silverstein recovers an earlier entextualization that had gone unnoticed by the transcriber. As a reminder, entextualization is the process of creating a discourse like a conversation between two people into a bounded text.⁴ Doing so frequently loses the features and phenomena that may have been occurring during said conversation (e.g. other people overhearing the conversation, the sounds of birds chirping).

² Michael Silverstein. "The Secret Life of Texts" in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics* ed. John Arthur Lucy. (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 95-96.

³ Silverstein, "The Secret Life of Texts," 98-9; Metapragmatics is commonly defined as "Discourse about the pragmatic rules of some code."

⁴ Silverstein. "The Secret Life of Texts", 81. The process of entextualization continues to resonate within the field of linguistic anthropology. In Greg Urban's words, it is "The process of rendering a given instance of discourse a text, detachable from its local context." See "Entextualization, Replication, and Power" in *Natural Histories of Discourse* eds. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Richard Bauman provides a fuller description of the process, "By bounding off a stretch of discourse from its context, endowing it with cohesive formal properties, and (often, but not necessarily) rendering it internally coherent, serves to objectify it as a discrete textual unit that can be referred to, described, named, displayed, cited, and otherwise treated as an object" in *A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 4. Other scholars have emphasized other aspects of this phenomenon and given it other names such as "circulation" in Asif Agha. "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 38-59; "enclosure" in Paul Kockelman. "Information Is the Enclosure of Meaning: Cybernetics, Semiotics, and Alternative Theories of Information." *Language & Communication* 33, no. 2 (2013): 115-127; "imitation" by Michael Lempert. "Imitation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 379-395; "portable" with echoes of Vološinov in Haberland, H., Mortensen, J. (2016). "Transcription as Second-Order Entextualization: The Challenge of Heteroglossia." In: Capone, A., Mey, J. (eds) *Interdisciplinary Studies in Pragmatics, Culture and Society*. Perspectives in Pragmatics, Philosophy & Psychology, vol 4. Springer, Cham; or "verbatim" in Miyako Inoue. "Word for Word: Verbatim as Political Technologies." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47, no. 1 (2018): 217-232.

In similar fashion I seek to recover an earlier layer of Jonah – one attuned to the (meta)pragmatic functions of the book that were overlooked by its later interpreters.⁵ By earlier layer, I do not mean the compositional layers that biblical source critics seek to unearth, but a layer of pragmatic relevance that the book’s earliest audiences would have resonated with. More specifically, I reexamine the complex relationship between speech and action in the book, focusing on the prophet, the mariners, the Ninevites, and the deity. Taking their cues from other prophetic books, biblical interpreters have tended to focus on the prophet’s unusually pithy responses throughout the book and contrasted them with the plain, supposedly sincere speech of the mariners and Ninevites. Yet a broader examination of the patterns of speech and their

⁵ Here I follow Silverstein’s definition of metapragmatics from “Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function”: “Metapragmatic function serves to regiment indexicals into interpretable event(s) of such-and-such type that the use of language in interaction constitutes (consists of).” 37 Pragmatics and metapragmatics have continued to be a fertile area of research since Silverstein’s programmatic article in 1976 and further developed in 1993 with many focused on the production of social identities through difference. For example, Cara Penry Williams suggests that ethnometapragmatic accounts of language variation are indexed through a call to semiotic registers in “Appeals to Semiotic Registers in Ethno-Metapragmatic Accounts of Variation.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2019): 294–313. Jocelyn Ahlers finds several examples in the public use of indigenous languages by non-native speakers. She suggests that such use highlights the pragmatic function of language by creating a space between speaker and listener “in which a subsequent English speech event is understood by audience members to come from, and be informed by, a Native identity.” See Jocelyn C. Ahlers. “Framing Discourse.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2006): 58–75. In a recent article, Joon-Beom Chu argues that mock trial judges metapragmatically evaluate the tone of female law students who are either negatively assessed as too loud or quiet. See Joon-Beom Chu. “Losing Portia’s Voice: The Metapragmatic Evaluations of ‘Quiet’ and ‘Loud’ Female Law Students in US Mock Trial Competitions.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (2020): 353–368. Rita Simpson shifts to appropriate pronoun use in Thai and examines two metapragmatic conversations about proper usage that particularly emphasizes gender difference. See Rita C. Simpson “Metapragmatic Discourse and the Ideology of Impolite Pronouns in Thai.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 38–62. See also Greg Urban. “The Role of Metaforces in Cultural Motion.” *Signs and Society* (Chicago, Ill.) 6, no. 1 (2018): 256–280. See also Sonya E. Pritzker and Kiki Q. Y. Liang. “Semiotic Collisions and the Metapragmatics of Culture Change in Dr. Song Yujin’s ‘Chinese Medical Psychology.’” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2018): 43–66.

consequences, especially commands, show that they are routinely disregarded not only by the wayward prophet. In fact, the mariners and Ninevites also appear to upend traditional group dynamics when the followers routinely disregard the requests of their respective leaders. In other words, typical commands issued by authoritative figures routinely fail.⁶ Such an analysis not only suggests a rethinking of religious values like prophetic (dis)obedience to the deity, but also speaks to broader issues of authorized speech, a reworking of traditional notions of speech and action, and provides a new angle on the relationship between the characters of the book.

In order to do this, I build on insights gleaned from linguistic anthropologists like Michael Silverstein, Susan Gal, Judith Irvine, and Greg Urban who observe that language has the peculiar trait of “allowing its users to speak about speech as well as about other types of action.”⁷ In particular, I take Greg Urban’s “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth” as a theoretical model for the relationship between speech and action in order to the book of Jonah’s ethnometapragmatic theory about speech’s relationship to action.⁸ But in addition to describing

⁶ In many respects, this argument follows one made by a Classicist in Plato’s *Cratylus*. While scholars typically point to Plato’s argument as one in favor of a naturalist account of naming, Socrates repeatedly uses demonstratives to show that the relationship between the name and thing in some cases cannot be natural, but conventional. See Imogen Smith. “False Names, Demonstratives and the Refutation of Linguistic Naturalism in Plato’s *Cratylus* 427d1-431c3.” *Phronesis* (Leiden, Netherlands) 53, no. 2 (2008): 125–151.

⁷ Greg Urban. “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth” in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Ed. John A. Lucy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. See also his earlier piece, “Speech about Speech in Speech about Action.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385 (1984): 310–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/540612>. See also Judith T. Irvine who reiterates what is particularly unique about language and why linguistic anthropologists continue to use the term language ideology as opposed to, for example, Keane’s recent suggestion of “Semiotic Ideology.” “Revisiting Theory and Method in Language Ideology Research.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (2022): 222–236.

⁸ Urban, “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth,” 241-260.

the text's own idea about how speech and action relate, texts can also suggest new relationships, and thus new configurations of speech.⁹

Here I suggest that the book of Jonah invokes a normative ethnopragmatic understanding of speech made by typically authoritative individuals (deities, captains, kings), and routinely demonstrates their failure in regards to their subjects (prophets, mariners, subjects). In the final chapter, the deity no longer issues commands, but attempts to dialogue with the prophet in a wholly different manner – one that eschews authoritative commands and takes up a more didactic manner in an attempt to debate the prophet. A new model between deity and prophet, but also authority figures more broadly, is imagined in the final chapter, but is ultimately left open for readers to decide for themselves. In doing so, the book of Jonah ultimately reconsiders what constitutes the role of authoritative speech and serves as a reflective key for other texts in the Hebrew Bible it draws into its narrative.

As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal open in their most recent book, “Statements about language are never only about language - and they are never only statements.”¹⁰ Linguistic anthropologists and scholars interested in language before J.L. Austin's programmatic lecture

⁹ I want to thank Flagg Miller for directing me towards this incisive point: From a Peircean perspective that treats words, and especially entextualized features as signs, “A critical feature of indexical signs is that, out of context (and thus at the level of structuralist analysis), they are inherently undetermined. To become determinately construable, indexical signs are dependent upon the singular event within which, as material forms, they are contextualized.” See Constantine V. Nakassis. “Linguistic Anthropology in 2015: Not the Study of Language.” *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (2016): 330–345.

¹⁰ The full quotation is: “Statements about language are never only about language - and they are never only statements... Statements about language always reach beyond immediate linguistic forms. They implicate knowledge about the rest of social life; they intersect with other communicative means; they give signals about their speakers; and, inevitably, they are social actions embedded in history.” See Judith Irvine and Susan Gal. *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

have long noticed that language functions beyond reference or the transfer of information.¹¹ In “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth,” linguistic anthropologist Greg Urban suggests that there are multiple functions of language. For Urban, *meaning-bearing* or *signaling* functions of language, following his example, represented by the syntax and morphology of a verb ultimately contribute to how the utterance ought to be understood, in addition to *goal functions* of discourse, which “is used to accomplish particular ends that the speaker has.”¹² Importantly, such goal functions are generally more indirect than signaling functions and must be observed and identified in social life to understand its function and purpose.¹³ For example, in his example of Shokleng myths, one can read a command in the narrative as an imperative addressed to a specific person *in addition* to the speech as representing “a more extended representation of social situation and processes.”¹⁴ In this sense, the narrative can then play a normative role in the social life of a community as listeners/readers witness the speech’s desirability throughout the story. Naturally, as far removed as we are from the social life of our culture and text in question, it bears noting that solutions will necessarily be partial and incomplete. It is perhaps unsurprising that many linguistic anthropologists utilize ethnography and data that can be placed into a concrete social context. Nevertheless, if we do think a certain text accomplishes some cultural function, then we ought to also find a consistent pattern in how discourse is represented throughout.¹⁵ In this way, interpretation of the functions of discourse in

¹¹ J. L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

¹² Urban, “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth,” XYZ; See also Michael Silverstein. “Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description” in *Meaning in Anthropology*. Edited by Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.

¹³ Urban, *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Urban, 242.

¹⁵ Urban, “The Represented Functions of Speech in Shokleng Myth,” 242.

the narrative are prone to bias from the interpreter, but they are not arbitrary and open to debate. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I submit that there is a consistent pattern in how discourse is represented in our narrative, therefore presenting both normative functions of speech and its limits.

Typification and the Book of Jonah – 1 Samuel, Genesis, and Zechariah

In order to determine how the book of Jonah reworks traditional conceptions of language and its relationship to action, we must first establish what conceptions of language it is targeting. Naturally, the Hebrew Bible is not a single text with a single theory of language, but the opening verses of Jonah suggest where we should begin. The typical formula, “Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai” functions, in Urban’s terms, as a signaling function to inform the reader of the particular syntactic and morphological characteristics of this statement. For example, וַיְהִי is typically associated with narratives and begins the books of Ruth, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, Esther, and Ezekiel.¹⁶ The expression (וַיְהִי) is commonly found in prophetic narratives such as 1 Sam 15:10 for Samuel, 2 Samuel 7:4 for Nathan, and so on.¹⁷ It is a command issued from the deity to the recipient in order to accomplish or fulfill some task. However, it also accomplishes the goal function of reminding the reader of other prophetic utterances where divine speech is placed into the mouths of prophets for some task as it occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and the many allusions and assumptions packaged therein. In semiotic terms, it serves as an example of “typification” – it functions as a typical statement given to recipients of the divine message and readers ought to expect certain responses for a

¹⁶ James Limburg. *Jonah: A Commentary*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 37.

¹⁷ Limburg, *Jonah*, 37.

successful reception.¹⁸ Divine speech, for example, deeply affects prophets like Jeremiah whose attempt to retain it is described as “like a burning fire in my heart; if shut up in my bones, then I weary of holding it in, and cannot.” (Jeremiah 20:9)

Interestingly, there is also a phenomenon pertinent for our discussion that Isaac Rabinowitz finds – words in ancient Israel’s conception are not mere representations or symbols of referents, but understood as referents themselves. He argues they are “the palpable objects, the ‘real’ and perceptible actions and events, the sensible relationships and interactions – in the *concentrated form* of words.”¹⁹ Words, particularly divine and prophetic words, then, are in some ways coterminous with reality. This idea is borne out in texts that Rabinowitz points to such as Ezekiel 12:26-28, Numbers 11:23, Jeremiah 32:6-9, 2 Kings 9:36, Isaiah 6:8-11, and more.²⁰ For example, 1 Samuel 15:10 contains the same construction in Jonah 1:1 (וַיִּהְיֶה דְבַר-יְהוָה) where the rejection of Saul in the deity’s speech to Samuel occurs simultaneously with Saul’s disobedience in following instructions correctly a few verses later. Importantly, while this idea is supported throughout different books in the Hebrew Bible, all are related through divine speech or through a prophet understood as an extension of the deity’s word. Ideally, then, divine speech tends to have a tight, active relationship to action throughout the Hebrew Bible and will be borne out by the data set I introduce below.²¹

While interpreters have largely assumed the book of Jonah possesses a strange relationship between speech and action (typically framed as an obedience/disobedience

¹⁸ Gal and Irvine, *Signs of Difference*, 94-95.

¹⁹ Isaac Rabinowitz. *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel’s Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible*. Edited by Ross Brann and David I. Owen. (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 3.

²⁰ Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever*, 6-9; 49-52.

²¹ In fact, the matrix of obedience/disobedience is frequently conveyed by whether the community/individual listens or does not listen and act upon the words.

paradigm), I have examined three distinct texts within the Hebrew Bible that also contain a fair amount of narration detailing the relationship between speech and action. In addition, by comparing more than one text to Jonah, I am able to triangulate results, pursue common themes, and avoid the risk of attempting to find an unproblematic, neutral text with no apparent linguistic ideology. For example, biblical scholars know that the Priestly source already has a particularly complex understanding of divine speech most clearly seen in the first creation narrative and Levitical material.²² Or, as in 1 Samuel, the narrative explicitly sets up expectations about Samuel's speech when it relates, "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground." (1 Samuel 3:19) I identified commands in Genesis, 1 Samuel, and Zechariah in order to determine the speech's efficacy, the dynamics between sender and receiver, and any other information that may be pertinent to the discussion such as the role it might play in the broader narrative.

The sample drawn from the book contains roughly 90 commands in 1 Samuel with 70 of them being unequivocally followed or successful, 9 with uncertain success, and 10 unsuccessful commands.²³ For example, Samuel's farewell speech in ch. 12 is filled with commands, but whether the speech was meant to be more rhetorical in nature and reflects the Deuteronomic

²² Seth L. Sanders. "The Grammar of Creation." In *Ve-'Ed Ya'aleh (Gen 2:6): Volume 2: Essays in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Edward L. Greenstein*, edited by Peter Machinist, Robert A. Harris, Joshua A. Berman, Nili Samet, and Noga Ayali-Darshan, 851–72. The Society of Biblical Literature, 2021. See also Benjamin Sommer's brief treatment of P in Exodus where the source especially emphasizes the sense of sight reminiscent of the deity's evaluation of creation in its creation account. See Benjamin D. Sommer. *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 53-60.

²³ I especially looked at commands and filtered for grammatical imperatives, but also for speech that requests someone to act (i.e. vows, declarations in the presence of others, etc.). In several cases, commands were coordinated with one another (e.g. "Go, take!"). In these cases, I counted this instance as a single command with one effect.

historian's concerns ought to be considered.²⁴ Most common among the data set are simple commands that are followed soon after. For example, Samuel instructs a cook to "Bring the portion I gave you, the one I asked you to put aside" (1 Samuel 9:23) whereupon the narrator soon after relates, "The cook took up the thigh and what went with it." (1 Samuel 9:24) While seemingly redundant, this construction between speech and action is common in 1 Samuel.

Based on our findings from 1 Samuel, a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn that will be compared to our other texts. Unsurprisingly, 70 of the commands (successful or not) are issued by figures in some sort of authoritative position relative to the recipient of the command. Kings, priests, prophets, deities, and other higher status individuals commanded their subjects more frequently and with greater effectiveness than others. In addition, when lower status individuals did command their superior, it was often couched in deferential language. For example, the medium of Endor commands Saul, "Now therefore, you also *listen to your servant; let me set a morsel of bread* before you. *Eat*, that you may have strength when you go on your way." (1 Samuel 28:22, emphasis added) Not only does the medium identify herself as his servant (שפחה), but she uses the cohortative and justifies her actions by stating how it would benefit Saul. The majority of cases, however, are quite simple and consist of a king commanding troops who act on the individual's desire made verbal.

The data above shows that the majority of commands are successful and produce their desired effect. When commands do fail, it is often a source of conflict and serves to show something amiss with the figure issuing the command. For example, the speech and action of

²⁴ Ralph W. Klein. *1 Samuel*. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 112-120; P. Kyle. McCarter. *1 Samuel: A New Translation*. Translated by P. Kyle McCarter. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1980), 217-221; Walter Brueggemann. *First and Second Samuel*. (Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1990), 89-97.

Eli's sons demonstrate their wickedness – a source of contempt for the narrator who comments “Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord; for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt.” (1 Samuel 2:17) In another case, Eli commands Hannah to “Put away” (הסירי) her wine after thinking her drunk. I categorize it as a failed command since it is ultimately misguided, but it may also serve a literary function reiterated later in 1 Samuel where Eli does not correctly perceive divine activity.

What is not apparent in the brief statistics listed above is the precise narrative relationship between what is stated and the ensuing action. More often than not, action immediately follows the command issued. This can range from long, complex commands to more simple ones. For the sake of space, we can see the tight, active relationship in 1 Samuel 7:3-4 from Samuel to the Israelites:

‘If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’ So, Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the Lord only.

The relationship between speech and action here may feel redundant, but it seems to be a narrative feature of 1 Samuel. Finally, there are also several cases in 1 Samuel where speech, especially voiced by prophets, does not occur immediately, but does feel inevitable. For example, the death of Eli's sons or the destruction of Saul's household are both voiced by prophetic figures and may ultimately serve to build tension throughout the narrative.

Nevertheless, speech and action maintain a tight relationship throughout 1 Samuel and will be compared to another, more complex Pentateuchal text that contains narrative. Scholars from both documentarian and non-documentarian schools of thought agree that the book of Genesis

possesses several sources, thus potentially providing an array of differing linguistic ideologies and making it an ideal test case.²⁵

Interestingly, 1 Samuel and Genesis share a number of common features regarding their treatment of speech and action. The vast majority of commands are issued by an authoritative figure. The majority of commands are also successful and the narrator frequently records their efficacy. In addition, divine blessings and speech occasionally drive the narrative over a long period of time rather than being immediately fulfilled as in 1 Samuel. Interpreters have long noted the organic relationship between the deity's speech and its effects in the Priestly creation account, but there are also many non-P examples of the tight relationship between speech and action. For example, in the non-P version of the flood narrative, the deity instructs Noah to "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation" (Genesis 7:1) whereupon the narrator records that Noah "Did all that the LORD had commanded him." (Genesis 7:5)

Many commands are successful, but there are also several cases where commands between equally authoritative individuals goes awry, ultimately creating the conflict for the narrative. For example, Hamor commands Jacob to "Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves." (Genesis 34:9) While Jacob does initially intimate that he will indeed provide Dinah to Shechem, it is ultimately a ruse as Jacob's

²⁵ The Neo-Documentarian position has been promoted vigorously by Joel Baden in *The Composition of the Pentateuch Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 1-12, 34-44, 230-245. Meanwhile, Non-Documentarian positions will think in terms of fragments or literary blocks though the Priestly source in Genesis remains the most recognizable by both parties. For example, see Konrad Schmid on the Jacob Cycle in Konrad Schmid. *The Old Testament: A Literary History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 59-60. My focus on finding common ground between the two is inspired by Seth Sanders' digital humanities project on the Pentateuch that begins with the Priestly Tradition: <https://pentateuch.digital/>

sons return to kill Hamor's sons when recovering from circumcision. Here the narrator plays with the external speech of Jacob available to Hamor, his interior plot available only to himself and readers, and the ultimate outcome. In other words, 1 Samuel and Genesis both share a tight, positive relationship between speech and action. Of course, there are some important nuances in both texts that differentiate one from the other. Because Genesis is a dramatic narrative that largely deals with family relationships, there are several occasions where commands between family members are deceptive or siblings work together to come to an agreeable solution. Meanwhile, kingly commands from Saul that fail ultimately show that he is losing the kingdom to his rival.

As opposed to the two narrative texts above, Zechariah is clearly a post-exilic prophetic text with several visions interspersed one after another. There are, of course, speech-action relationships as we've seen in 1 Samuel and Genesis. For example, an angel attending Joshua commands his attendants to replace his shabby clothes whereupon they immediately do so. (Zechariah 3:4-5) But the most common speech-action relationship is a kind of lingering speech where in roughly 15 command episodes, only 4 are unequivocally efficacious. As opposed to the narrative texts of 1 Samuel and Genesis, Zechariah frequently contains commands with no definite response. Typical of the book, the deity commands Zechariah to "Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?" (Zechariah 7:5) It is not the case that the commands are followed or not, but that there is no narrative section to confirm or deny that the prophet say such words. What follows after this divine speech is simply another that deals with a separate issue. Such a contrast should only emphasize the type of genre we have in the book of Jonah. As opposed to the post-exilic prophetic text of Zechariah which might share categorical

features of a “prophetic text” and relatively proximal to the same historical situation, the book of Jonah is more clearly thought of as a narrative text about a prophet – a difference ripe for the author to explore the relationship between the prophet, the prophet’s speech, and its consequences.

Reworking Typifying Models of Speech and Action in the Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah maintains this tight relationship between speech and action as we’ve seen in 1 Samuel and Genesis, but reconfigures it in a surprising way. Rather than the majority of commands successfully issued by authoritative figures, the book of Jonah repeatedly portrays commands from those figures as ineffective. In the short book of Jonah, there are only 9 commands and only 2 of them are ultimately successful.²⁶ Moreover, as we will see below, the distribution of those efficacious and inefficacious commands only places this statistic into sharper relief.

In ch. 1, the book opens with Yahweh’s command to Jonah to ““Get up [קום] and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry [קרא] out against it; for their evil has arisen before me.”” (1:2) The arrival of the divine word does produce immediate action as in 1 Samuel and Genesis, but one that is unexpected. Jonah’s surprising response to the deity’s command is to flee in the opposite direction – a response that has frequently warranted *verbal* protest elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but only paralleled through bodily protest to such an extent in the Elijah narrative. Here, divine speech still warrants action, but strangely does not appear coterminous with its intended effect. This motif of a failure of speech and action continues throughout Jonah, but will

²⁶ I do not consider the deity’s second command to Jonah in 3:2 successful, but a case might be made for it. What is clear, however, is that Jonah only does so begrudgingly and that the narrator is playing with the importance of a willing prophet.

not remain within the deity-prophet dyad. Instead, the deity's command will be echoed by the captain of the ship suggesting that the book is not solely concerned with *prophetic* speech per se, but authority and speech more broadly.

As he boards a ship heading towards Tarshish, the deity hurls a storm at the wayward prophet's boat along with some unfortunate mariners. In response, the captain of the ship and mariners each approach the sleeping prophet with their own methods. The captain is given the first speech in ch. 1 after the deity, initially questioning how he could possibly be asleep during a storm. In a statement that recalls the deity's command four verses earlier, he requests that he "Get up, [קום] call [קרא] on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." (1:6) There is more that binds the two authority figures here than lexical repetition however. As Tribble notes, both the deity and captain encounter Jonah directly rather than as a part of a group, the deity with the prophetic formula and the captain below deck, with the text emphasizing such an encounter with the repeated preposition with suffix "to him."²⁷ [לן] In addition, both commands "progress in length, a development comparable to Yhwh's command in 1:2 with which they share vocabulary."²⁸ Finally, the construction of the captain's exclamation in v. 6 [מה לך] always expresses reproof from an authority figure.²⁹ In the captain's diction and cadence, the echo of the divine command is heard again and in some way serves as a proxy for it. Indeed, just as the deity's command is ultimately ignored in 1:2, so too does Jonah respond not

²⁷ Phyllis Tribble. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 136.

²⁸ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 137.

²⁹ Uriel Simon and Lenn J. Schramm. *Jonah = Yonah: The traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 9. See "How dare you crush my people?" (Isaiah 3:15); "Who are you to recite my laws?" (Psalm 50:16)

verbally, but bodily as he is roused from his sleep ready to receive questions from the group of sailors.³⁰

The text is ultimately silent concerning Jonah's verbal response. If we recall our attention to the relationship between speech and action then a pattern has already formed – divine and authoritative speech from the deity and captain, respectively, have thus far proven ineffective in getting their subordinate to do what they wish. The captain of the ship fades from the background never to reappear just like Yahweh, and the scene shifts back to the mariners' approach in v. 7. As Uriel Simon notes, "This lacuna protracts Jonah's silence as far as the narrative is concerned. Readers are left to conclude from the sailors' consultations that Jonah neither prayed to his God nor told them why he could not do so."³¹ Yet the reader is keenly aware of the parallel between the figures. Even as Jonah's silence builds throughout the narrative and his rationale for fleeing extends until the fourth chapter, his silence reflects the same response he had to the deity's command in 1:2. The narrative stalls and the captain's question ultimately does little to move the plot forward.

Meanwhile, Jonah presumably moves above deck and the sailors begin their own line of questioning. In order to determine who caused the storm, the mariners cast lots, a divinatory practice with wide cultural support, and they discover the storm has to do with the prophet. After it falls on Jonah, they begin to barrage him with biographical questions, 'Tell (הַגִּידְנָה) us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' (1:8) This time, Jonah responds to his interlocutor's command to reveal pertinent biographical information. Jonah's first words implicate him in the

³⁰ It's quite interesting to consider, ironically or not, that Jonah receives his command when sleeping as other prophets/priests have their commands/visions.

³¹ Simon, *Jonah*, 10.

situation the sailors find themselves in, but in contrast to the captain, their language does not mirror the deity's command in 1:2. Instead, they do what sailors typically do! The narrative relates, "Nevertheless the men rowed [ויהתרו] hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them." (1:14) Erickson suggests the verb in question has the connotation to "dig" reminiscent of Amos 9:2 where Yahweh's enemies (here Israel) attempt to dig to Sheol in order to escape divine wrath.³² Following Sherwood again, Erickson also considers that the sailors ally with Jonah through their actions as they too move downward [ירד].³³ Sherwood understands that "the sailors refuse to submit to the inexorable divine current...and protest their role as plot-pawns" by rowing against it."³⁴ The contrasting parallels between Deity-Captain and Jonah-Sailors is a tantalizing opportunity that may be strengthened by a clearer parallel between the Ninevites and Jonah. In any case, in this section it is ultimately the activity of the sailors rather than the captain that leads to the resolution of the chapter. As Jonah is thrown into the sea, the storm calms, the sailors fade from view while they provide sacrifices, vow vows to Yahweh, and Jonah sinks into the sea. The next scene begins.

As we've seen, neither the deity nor captain produces the intended effect through their commands. If such a phenomenon were limited to ch. 1, it may be better explained through other means, but as we will see, a similar dynamic reemerges in ch. 3 among the Ninevite king and his populace. As form-critics and interpreters of Jonah have noted, chapters 1 and 3 appear to mirror another in some fashion as Jonah makes his way to Nineveh and briefly interacts with the

³² Amy Erickson. *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 61. Amos 9:2 – "Though they dig down to the depths below, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens above, from there I will bring them down."

³³ Erickson, *Jonah*, 61.

³⁴ Yvonne Sherwood. *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 246-247.

populace.³⁵ Most obviously, Jonah receives a near-identical call at the beginning of ch. 3 that sets up reader's expectations. Will Jonah fulfill prophetic and reader expectations or upend them again?

1:2 – “Go at once [קום לך] to Nineveh, that great city, [העיר הגדולה] and cry out [קרא] against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”

3:1 – “Get up, go [קום לך] to Nineveh, that great city, [העיר הגדולה] and proclaim [קרא] to it the message that I tell you.”

Much has been written on the king's eventual response to Jonah's shockingly brief prophetic utterance. And yet, the reception of Jonah's statement takes an unusual turn when the populace itself hears and acts upon it before the king. Upon hearing Jonah's statement, “The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.” (3:5) But the story continues. Jonah's utterance eventually does reach the king and it appears much of his statement reflects what the Ninevites have already done – fast, put on sackcloth, and believe that the prophet's statement may ultimately come to pass. Referring back to Urban's analysis of the relationship between speech and action, Jonah's brief prophetic announcement is followed quickly by the population's action. Divine word immediately prompts

³⁵ Jonathan Magonet notes that the book divides down the middle with chapters 1-2 dealing with the initial failed call, while chapters 3-4 deal with the second, partially successful call to the prophet. Thus, the initial command by Yahweh serves as an anchor in which to contrast the characters' ensuing actions. See Jonathan Magonet. *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*. 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), XYZ; Lohfink develops this approach further, noting that single chapters contain concentric structures with the prophet's speech, for example, at the center of chapter one. Tribble provides a different structure of the book through a rhetorical analysis, but agrees that each chapter contains some structure that informs the next. See Phyllis Tribble. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), XYZ.

action. Indeed, the prophetic utterance Jonah has avoided for so long has proven immediately effective to a surprising degree. The image is one of complete mourning that provides no distinction among the group. Indeed, Sasson notes that the verb *'āman* (אָמַן) “often foreshadows good things to come” and a knowledgeable reader might expect a shift from what was initially going to occur.³⁶ In other words, the actions of the populace through communal penitence suggests they were enough to sway the deity from his prophet’s doom.

Once again, the relationship between leader and group appears strange if understood apart from the pattern already established in ch. 1. Some commentators seek to rearrange ch. 3 so that the king’s speech precedes the population’s actions. For example, Wolff argues that vv. 6-9 ought to be understood as a flashback “which catches up with events that have already taken place” even if it strains the rest of the passage.³⁷ As the text reads, the king makes his proclamation through his nobles only after the populace has already begun their mourning ritual. Commentators seeking to rearrange the passage rightly see something strange about its organization, but if we consider the group dynamics already present in ch. 1, we begin to see that the two scenes complement each other. Specifically, the king proclaims the fast through a top-down structure whereby he and his nobles follow suit, reminiscent of the deity’s command in 1:2 and the captain’s in 1:6. And while the king does add particular material in his speech that plays a role in the final chapter – the command for animals to also mourn and don sackcloth – perhaps the most significant portion of his speech hearkens back to the captain’s response in ch. 1:

³⁶ Jack M. Sasson. *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 243.

³⁷ Hans Walter Wolff. *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), 145.

1:6 – The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish. (ולא נאבד)”

3:7,9 – “This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh... ‘Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish. (ולא נאבד)”

In similar fashion to the captain’s failed command to Jonah, we do not know the result of the king’s declaration. Ultimately, it is unclear who the deity is responding to in 3:10 when he changes his mind. The plural object [מעשיהם] suggests a range of possibilities. Is it the populace, the king and his nobles, or both who ultimately stir the deity to divine action? What is significant, however, is the strange order in the Ninevites and the king appears to follow the prophet’s proclamation and how they go about doing so. While the Ninevites immediately repent communally “from the greatest to the least” the king also repents in a similar fashion, but also issues a proclamation replete with injunctions to his human and animal subjects: [אל-יטעמו מאומה אל-ישתו אל-ירעו ומים אל-ישתו]. By now, we should already be familiar with the role of authoritative commands in the book of Jonah. In both the cases of the deity’s command in 1:2 and the captain’s in 1:6, they ultimately appear ineffective and prone to failure. The subject can run away, ignore the command altogether, or take up a new tactic that ultimately moves the plot forward. In this case, the populace is already responding to the prophet’s proclamation by mourning. Such a command strikes the reader as a king who appears out of touch with his subjects or plain humorous.

In fact, scholars have long noted the image of the Ninevite king is strange here, if not outright ludicrous. Lowell Handy finds the motif of the humorous foreign king in Second

Temple literature fairly common and the king of Nineveh might be no exception.³⁸ He finds that foreign kings in texts like Esther, Daniel, Tobit, and Judith serve as stock characters who are generally greedy, violent, jealous, prideful, and make rash decisions that seem disproportionate to the issue at hand. For Erickson, the king's dramatic degree becomes absurd since he has "never seen any evidence of God's power; he has not even heard Jonah's message firsthand."³⁹ In other words, there is a motif of foreign kings in Second Temple literature who literarily serve as dramatic characters meant to be contrasted with the protagonist of the narrative.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the king's speech is how it reflects Israelite/Judean piety reflected elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. His call for the populace to "turn from their evil ways", as Limburg notes, appears frequently in the prophets, the Deuteronomic history, as well as wisdom literature.⁴⁰ For Limburg, "the author of Jonah...is shaping the Assyrian king according to the model of Israelite piety."⁴¹ Crenshaw catalogs every instance of the phrase "Who Knows?" (מִי יָדַע) and finds that of the ten times it is used, five of them "leave a door open to possible response that will change the situation for human good" while the other five suggest the impossibility of divine response with Jonah falling squarely in the former.⁴² Unsurprisingly, of the latter five, four of them are found in Qohelet. It is true that the king's speech hearkens back to texts within the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the distribution among its occurrence with important figures throughout the Hebrew Bible suggests the king is reflecting traditional Israelite piety. Yet placed within the mouth of a foreign king who appears to issue commands to his

³⁸ L.K. Handy. "Of Captains and Kings: A Preliminary Socio-Historical Approach to Jonah" *BR* 49:31-48.

³⁹ Erickson. *Jonah*, 65.

⁴⁰ Limburg, *Jonah*, 83.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² James L. Crenshaw. "The Expression *Mi Yodea'* in the Hebrew Bible." *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1986): 274-288.

populace who is already responding to Jonah's proclamation stretches the possibility of complete sincerity. This is not to say that the character of the king himself was insincere in his action or speech, but that the author has added complexity to an otherwise straightforward form of piety modeled after pious language found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The goal function, in Urban's terms, immediately becomes more complicated as readers are forced to not only reckon with familiar language in the mouth of a foreign king, but also its ineffectiveness.

To summarize the argument so far, the parallel dynamics between the captain and mariners in ch. 1 and king and subject in ch. 3 suggest a far more complex role in the narrative than to simply serve as contrasting elements to a nationalist prophet. Instead, I have shown that there is a variance of perspective and approach within each of these groups. While Yahweh, the captain, and king of Nineveh each use commands, occasionally even echoing one another, the book has repeatedly shown that they ultimately fail in some fashion. Jonah flees from the deity's initial command, the captain's command to Jonah, echoing the deity's command in 1:2, proves unsuccessful, and the king's command in ch. 3 to his populace borders on the ridiculous as his subjects have already begun the mourning process.

Yet as readers know, the book does not end with chapter 3. An extended dialogue begins between Jonah and Yahweh after the repentance of the Ninevites that fundamentally differs from the deity's brief commands in chs. 1 and 3. Instead of attempting to get the prophet to do something, the deity shifts towards Jonah's response to his success and prepares an object lesson. As Jonah sits outside the city and asks to die, both reminiscent of Elijah's request and his own in 1:12, Yahweh makes a plant grow over Jonah to provide shade from the heat. (4:3-6) For the first time in our narrative, Jonah is happy. But it is short-lived. The deity also appoints a worm to consume the plant and Jonah once again becomes angry. (4:7-9) The book ends with the deity

analogically reasoning through Jonah's many responses (4:10-11) by arguing that the plant Jonah cared for is comparable in some ways to the city of Nineveh, "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?"

In short, Tribble rightly notes that in the final chapter, "The commanding God (in 1:2; 3:2) becomes the questioning God."⁴³ And in some ways, the typical prophetic story could have ended without the final chapter. The prophet receives a command, dictates it to its target, and the people either listen and repent or do not. The prophet's task would be complete. But ultimately, the book of Jonah is not truly about Nineveh. In the final chapter, Yahweh and his prophet set up a dialogue where each offers a defense of their actions following the previous three chapters. And while, as Erickson summarizes, "It is not clear whether God's questions aim to wound, dismiss, show compassion, or understand Jonah's point of view," what is clear is that this type of dialogue constitutes a back-and-forth as opposed to the typical authoritative command we've seen thus far. It constitutes a wholly different type of utterances that fit more within wisdom than prophetic literature.⁴⁴ As Sasson notes, the final chapter neatly gives each interlocutor the same amount of space to give their position and that such a symmetry is likely too developed to be accidental.⁴⁵ Such a form suggests that this unit is about debate and argument reminiscent of Job's alternating speeches.

Yet Jonah does not willingly enter into such a debate. Interpreters have widely disputed what to make of Jonah's responses to the deity's object lesson and final monologue. Is Jonah's rhetorical question in 4:2 ("Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country?") the

⁴³ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 205.

⁴⁴ S.C. Jones. "Dialogue." *Encyclopedia of Biblical Reception* 6:732 (2013).

⁴⁵ Sasson, *Jonah*, 318.

question of “the arrogant dogmatist?”⁴⁶ Or perhaps we should understand the verb to denote that Jonah was saddened or wounded as Sasson suggests.⁴⁷ Erickson argues that Jonah’s resistance is exaggerated, but is in line with other prophetic figures who mediate divine presence.⁴⁸ The apparent denouement of this chapter depends a great deal on how interpreters figure Jonah’s response to the deity’s decision at the end of ch. 3.

For our purposes, what is significant here is that it is Jonah who issues a peculiar command to the deity at the end of his monologue and insists on it throughout the rest of the chapter: “Take (קַח־חַיִּי) my life from me, for it is better for me to die than live.” (4:3) The command, like all others in the book, ultimately fails to produce its intended result, even as it is unusually issued by the prophet in the deity-prophet dyad. In addition, this particular request differs from a traditional command where a supposed authoritative individual is vested with the power to order others to do some act. Jonah’s command recognizes the sovereignty of the deity, as one who is able to kill whoever he likes, but still demands something of the deity. But much like commands throughout the rest of the book, it is not rejected outright, but simply ignored. And yet, he continues to insist on this request twice more in 4:8, 9.

Perhaps our analysis that considers the relationship between speech and action, specifically commands and their intended result, might help clarify Jonah’s position. Rather than depict the prophet as an aggrieved child or a blustering nationalist who refuses to understand the deity’s didacticism, Jonah insists on this request as the only tool available to him in the deity-prophet dyad when the primary motivation for Jonah thus far has been the commanding deity. Jonah now demands something of the deity perhaps knowing it will not be granted.

⁴⁶ Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 166.

⁴⁷ Sasson, *Jonah*, 273-275.

⁴⁸ Erickson, *Jonah*, 389-390.

Findings from Tracing the Failure of Commands in Jonah

When we recognize that the book of Jonah seems to be reworking traditional notions of speech and action throughout the book through the feebleness of commands, we come to a few conclusions. First, in contrast to mainstream interpreters who have historically understand the book to push for a universalizing message by setting up the “gentile” groups as an ideal model while lampooning a nationalistic prophet, we have seen that each of these groups are not monolithic.⁴⁹ In fact, the respective leaders of each group respond quite differently to the crises they face that traditionally align with the deity’s initial call or by alluding to covenantal confessions found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, we notice that Jonah is not the only individual who has disregarded the orders of their leader. In some cases, the prophet and

⁴⁹ Payne thinks both serve as foils in order to contrast their readiness to submit to the Israelite deity. See David F Payne. “Jonah from the Perspective of Its Audience.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4, no. 13 (1979): 3–12; Bruckner emphasizes the irony throughout the book in order to demonstrate that Jonah’s position of strict justice ought to be replaced with “God’s better justice.” See James K. Bruckner. *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*. Zondervan, 2004. More recently, Barrett contrasts Jonah’s death wishes in chs. 1 and 4 with the Ninevites’ and mariners’ doing everything they can to live. See Rob Barrett. “Meaning More Than They Say: The Conflict Between Yhwh and Jonah.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 2 (2012): 237–257. Magonet understands the book to be about the “danger of chosenness” and for Jonah, “the chosen one seeing himself as the centre around which the universe must resolve.” For T.H. Hennessy, “Jonah, the recalcitrant prophet, is set forth as typifying a privileged but selfish and exclusive people.” See T. H. Hennessy. *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Malachi*. First paperback edition. (Cambridge: University Press, 2014), XYZ. Watts, who might be representative of traditional modern scholarship, sums up the message of the book as ‘Don’t be like Jonah.’ He goes on to state that the book’s message “Served as a bulwark against the narrow particularism that allowed Jews to think they alone were worthy of God’s message while others were not.” See John D. W. Watts. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 72-73. In some cases, these scholars argue that contemporary biblical texts serve as comparative models showing that this was an active debate at the time of Jonah’s composition. In other words, the foreigners in the passage are didactically used to contrast their faithful response to Jonah’s ineptitude with citations to the New Testament often in tow.

groups actually work together and align themselves to resolve the crisis. To notice the diversity in how each group is represented within the book is to resist interpreters who have treated the captain/mariner and king/populace dyad as a single unit in order to advance their own views of the naïve, but obedient gentile.

Second, we have found a consistent pattern in how discourse is represented throughout the book. This does not mean that all narratives with imperative coordination function in the same way though. In Urban's example of The Giant Falcons myth, he finds that imperative coordination throughout the narrative ultimately provides the lesson to listeners "*obey as precisely as possible the commands of someone worthy of trust.*" Urban reasons that following cultural norms is essential to group survival and thus not surprising to find such a phenomenon so common in the narratives he analyzed.⁵⁰ Yet in Jonah, characters routinely disregard commands of their superiors. If those characters were clearly chastised for their disobedience, we might say that the book ultimately builds social solidarity by exhorting readers to follow their superior's orders. Such a view would accord well with modern interpreters' view that the book serves to discipline Jonah, and by extension its readers, by showing the wrongness of its protagonist all the while extolling the deity's openness to foreign nations.⁵¹ More recent scholarship, however, has painted a more nuanced portrait of the prophet and we need not write off Jonah as a bumbling schlemiel.⁵² Instead, we might turn to the book as a product of its own

⁵⁰ Urban, "The represented functions of speech in Shokleng Myth," 248-249.

⁵¹ It is still possible that readers are meant to identify with Jonah to some extent. Wolff notes that Jonah is never identified as a prophet, but rather as "a Hebrew" even when he is fulfilling specific prophetic roles. In addition, See Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 99.

⁵² Uriel Simon notes that such a binary between particularism and universalism "has no substantial anchor in the text. Its keystone – the prophet's willingness to give his life rather than expose his people's stubbornness to God and man, or in order to prevent the salvation of the power destined to destroy Israel – is simply not to be found in the book." See Simon and Schramm, *Jonah*, ix. Indeed, the particularism and xenophobia some commentators suggest

community reflecting on its contemporary situation using a figure from the past to explore issues like authority, speech, the role of the mediating prophet, and how one ought to read other prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible.

Third and finally, we might consider in what historical context the book of Jonah is rethinking notions of prophecy, authority, and speech. Interpreters have long been interested in dating the book according to its linguistic and thematic features. Early interpreters for example, noted elsewhere, have found the book dated to the pre-exilic or exilic period due to its interest and supposed anger towards Nineveh. More recent scholarship, however, has dated the book to the Persian or Hellenistic periods occasionally using the same data (e.g. Aramaisms, the wicked eastern city and king as a feature of Hellenistic historiography, etc.).⁵³ Indeed, biblical scholars have also been keen on further distinguishing among epochs within the Persian period and encouraging others to date biblical texts to early or late Persian periods. For example, David Carr argues that the three features pointing towards Persian-period composition are a move from vague Pentateuchal traditions in the early Persian period to clear citation and extraction,

characterize the book may fit with Jonah's reluctance to prophesy to Nineveh, but the prophet possessed no such attitude towards the mariners in ch. 1. Meanwhile, Ehud Ben Zvi argues that the book of Jonah "reflects and carries a message of inner reflection, and to some extent critical self-appraisal of the group within which and for which this book was written." Rather than posit an enlightened prophet or author able to externally criticize their own community, Ben Zvi posits a Jerusalemite literati belonging to the "same limited social group in ancient Yehud. The basic role of the readers and rereaders of the book was to continue the communication of the divine message conveyed by the implied author of the book to the Judahite society, to activate as it were the message encoded in the text." See Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah*, 100.

⁵³ Importantly, David Carr notes that "There probably is not a major distinction to be made between the features of early 4th century Persian-period Judean texts and later 4th and 3rd century Hellenistic-period Judean texts." See David M. Carr. "Criteria and Periodization in Dating Biblical Texts to Parts of the Persian Period" in *On Dating Biblical Texts to the Persian Period: Discerning Criteria and Establishing Epochs*, Edited by Richard J. Bautch and Mark Lackowski. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 13.

extravagant prophetic hopes of restoration to governmental sponsorship, and a trend towards Aramaization beyond archaic Hebrew.⁵⁴

It is possible that we could date the book to the late Persian period based on these criteria as others already have. As Benjamin Sommer cautions, there are good reasons why searching for a compositional date among thematic elements ought to give scholars pause.⁵⁵ Yet the goals of this chapter are much more semiotically inclined and we might simply settle for the conclusion that the pragmatic failure between speech and action in the book of Jonah metapragmatically unmoors traditional understandings we found in 1 Samuel, Genesis, and elsewhere. Naturally, this might point to a social situation where native kingship had ended and priests and prophets no longer attended to specific political institutions. Traditionally authoritative individuals have lost their place in the warp-and-woof of social life as a landless prophet travels to prophesy to a foreign king. The book becomes a key in looking back on other texts to ask questions of proper authority and speech. No longer content with the standard model of authoritative command, the book tentatively proposes a model more akin to wisdom dialogue and debate in the last chapter, even as it does not disclose the possibility of its failure.

Conclusion

It is perhaps unsurprising to miss the metapragmatic functions of texts among cultures far different than our own. Silverstein only partially recovered such an entextualization through an

⁵⁴ Carr, "Criteria and Periodization in Dating Biblical Texts to Parts of the Persian Period," 15-16.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Sommer. "Dating Pentateuchal Texts and the Perils of Pseudo-Historicism" in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*. Eds. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz. Forschungen Zum Alten Testament 78. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.

intimate knowledge of the ethnographer, Edward Sapir, the language and narrative structure of the myth in question, and an attention to its non-referential aspects. In addition, he recognized that Sapir held assumptions about his interlocutor and custom he was recording that ultimately This is what he means by the “Secret Life” of texts – that they potentially hold layers of entextualizations that have gone unnoticed. Indeed, it is only until recent scholarship inaugurated by commentators like Ben Zvi that have noticed the metaphoric nature of the book. He reasons:

A narrative book that focuses on the relation between YHWH and prophet and is included in a repertoire of prophetic books, in all of which YHWH and prophet are the main characters, was probably received by the ancient, primary readerships as what today we call a ‘meta-prophetic’ book, that is, a prophetic book that deals with or is even devoted to issues that are of *relevance for the understanding of the messages of other prophetic books*.⁵⁶

Naturally, all prophetic books contribute something to a broader, typified understanding of prophecy, but Ben Zvi argues that the book of Jonah is meant to be read alongside and inform other prophetic texts. This chapter built on this observation by asking more specifically how the book envisions the relationship between speech and action – more specifically commands and their effects. If, as Bruce Lincoln writes, authority “is not so much an entity as it is (1) an effect; (2) the capacity for producing that effect; and (3) the commonly shared opinion that a given actor has the capacity for producing that effect,” then traditional notions of authority appear strained if

⁵⁶ Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 85.

we examine cases throughout the book of Jonah.⁵⁷ In fact, the mirrored episodes in chs. 1 and 3 may not elicit comparisons bound by the foreigner's ethnicity, religion, or ethical responses, but by their shared disjunction between leader and group, mariner and captain, citizenry and king. In other words, the prophet is not the only disobedient character in the book we would expect to conform to typical group behavior.

All groups exhibit a strange dynamic where it is the larger populace rather than the leader that ultimately moves the plot forward. Even as scholars have noted, for example, how the commands the captain puts to Jonah in ch. 1 in some way mimic the deity's initial command and the king of Nineveh's speech hearkens back to the captain's, the broader pattern has not yet been recognized and integrated into the purpose of the book. It is my hope that such an analysis moves the interpretive history beyond its emphasis on universalism and particularism by bringing in other disciplines to shed new light on this ancient text. In particular, I have attempted to account for some of the strange features within this small book in order to show how the book of Jonah in particular is reworking traditional notions of authority, speech, and non-Israelite ethnic groups through a reflection on commands and those who issue them.

⁵⁷ Bruce Lincoln. *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10-11.

Chapter 3: Thinking with Others: Acculturation and Identity in the Āl-Yāhūdu Archives and the Book of Jonah

Introduction

In this chapter, I compare recently systematized archival evidence roughly contemporary with the composition of the book of Jonah in the 6th-5th centuries. The Āl-Yāhūdu archives are a set of largely economic tablets that reference several Judean families in exile living their lives beyond deportation. By setting this data alongside Jonah, I decenter intertextual notions of a nationalistic prophet (and audience) and reexamine the status of the non-Hebrew characters in the narrative. I ultimately show that the book depicts a much more ambivalent portrait of these characters than previous interpreters have suggested.

In A. Leo Oppenheim's introduction to Mesopotamian civilization, his subtitle "Why A 'Mesopotamian Religion' Should Not Be Written" became famous for its pessimism over the possibility of describing Mesopotamian religion due not only to the paucity of sources scholars have available to them, but also the type. Scholars have two types of evidence, according to Oppenheim, that would help reconstruct such a portrait: archaeological and textual.¹⁸⁵ The former consists largely of monumental buildings, temple structures, palaces, and more of which that "can reveal, even if perfectly preserved, only a fraction, a dim reflection, of the cultic activities which they served."¹⁸⁶ Meanwhile, textual sources consistently come from elite classes such as priests, scribes, and royal officials and ultimately "lack that essential quality of *Sitz im Leben* and therefore bespeak the nature of Mesopotamian scholarship rather than the nature of Mesopotamian religiosity."¹⁸⁷ In both types of evidence, we only receive a glimpse into a certain

¹⁸⁵ A. Leo Oppenheim and Erica Reiner. *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. Rev. ed. / completed by Erica Reiner. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 172.

¹⁸⁶ Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 173.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 180.

type of religion – a stratum of Mesopotamian society capable of producing monumental architecture and literary texts such as prayers, mythological texts, and ritual texts. Of course, Oppenheim did not end this chapter on religion here, but proceeded to write sections on caring and feeding the gods, psychology, and divination.

Recent scholarship has remained indebted to Oppenheim’s sobering approach even as it has challenged some of his claims. Niek Veldhuis, for example, questions why the literary realm should be so excluded from religious life in Oppenheim’s account. He writes, “The distinction in academic discourse between ‘real religion’ and ‘mere literature’ presupposes that there existed an identifiable set of beliefs and practices that we may call ‘real religion’ that was in some ways separate from other realms of life – including literature.”¹⁸⁸ While recognizing that literary products often come from a particular stratum of elite society, Veldhuis argues that his particular text he is working on, *Nanše and the Birds*, bears some significance on discussions of Mesopotamian religion even if it falls outside of Oppenheim’s definition of religion.

Michael Seymour addresses two of Oppenheim’s arguments – the pessimism of his account due to the availability and provenance of sources and his argument about the conceptual gulf between polytheistic and monotheistic religion. In the former, he simply states that since Oppenheim wrote, we now have a great deal more texts coming from a “wide spectrum of times, places, and social contexts” and are in “a stronger position to conduct micro-history than to build grand narratives.”¹⁸⁹ Taking Oppenheim’s point to a certain extent, Seymour questions why scholars should not then build larger narratives out of the micro-histories scholars can more

¹⁸⁸ Niek Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature, and Scholarship: The Sumerian Composition Nanše and the Birds: With a Catalogue of Sumerian Bird Names*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 16.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Seymour, “Mesopotamia,” in *Oxford Handbook of The Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, ed. Timothy Insoll (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 775-794.

easily write today. In the latter argument, Seymour does agree, albeit implicitly, that the religious beliefs of scholars have often propelled Mesopotamian scholarship in the past and continues to animate it in some fashion. And yet, if scholars are inclined to produce an account of an archaeology of religion, one has an obligation to provide some synthesis no matter how tentative and imperfect.¹⁹⁰

In the biblical material, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith shows how supposedly non-religious realms can interact with and influence religious concepts. She demonstrates that siege warfare in the Levant pursued by Tiglath-Pileser III to Nebuchadnezzar II altered the perception of YHWH as a warrior deity as prophetic and Deuteronomistic texts increasingly portray the deity employing siege tactics against his opponent. She writes, “Ominously, YHWH appropriated Assyrian (and Babylonian) military tactics – staging a blockade causing famine and dehydration (Isa 5:13, 29:3), erecting siege rams and siege works (29:3, 7) and battering gates (24:12).”¹⁹¹ In other words, not only should we consider whether literary texts ought to be connected to religion, but supposedly “non-religious” events and texts force us to redefine our own concept of religion.

Indeed, biblical texts pose another set of issues that may only compound Oppenheim’s warning. Whereas Mesopotamian texts are (ideally) found in controlled archaeological excavations, biblical texts often contain a lamination of sources from different periods of time and place. Not only do these texts likely come from an elite stratum of society, but it is often a challenge to firmly establish its provenance. Nevertheless, to echo Bloch-Smith’s observation about the sometimes-contentious relationship between archaeology and biblical criticism, “One contribution of archaeology to biblical studies is to raise questions prompted by material

¹⁹⁰ Seymour, “Mesopotamia,” 788.

¹⁹¹ Elizabeth Bloch-Smith. “The Impact of Siege Warfare on Biblical Conceptualizations of YHWH.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 1 (2018): 19–28.

remains.”¹⁹² What is important for our discussion is that neither material remains nor literary texts can serve as a definitive narrative. For example, Bloch-Smith writes on the ethnogenesis of Israelite identity in the Iron Age and suggests that while there do not seem to be meaningful cultural differences between the Canaanites and Israelites recorded archaeologically, the Israelites and Philistines did have significant cultural differences. Shaven beards, circumcision, a professional military, and abstinence from pork make up just four distinct characteristics that appear in both archaeological and textual records.¹⁹³ Thus, while the Hebrew Bible remembers distinct characteristics of the Philistines, at the same time it elides or forgets differences between the Canaanites and Israelites.

Veldhuis, Seymour, and Bloch-Smith all recognize that a synthesis of text and archaeological material can contribute to a fuller portrait of ancient cultures, though each caution against taking either as providing the key for historical reconstruction. This simple point should inform interpretive treatments of biblical texts – in our case the book of Jonah. In fact, I bring to bear recently published, systematized archival material that will shed light on the economic and social situation of exiled Judeans. Rather than the monumental, royal evidence typically unearthed by archaeologists and lamented by Oppenheim, these documents bear witness to the daily lives of Judean families trading and establishing a life past deportation.

As is the case of much biblical scholarship, the book of Jonah has been subject to the ideological and historical trends throughout its interpretive history. In terms of modern scholarship, the book of Jonah has often been subject to a sort of litmus test in order to verify the

¹⁹² Bloch-Smith, “The Impact of Siege Warfare on Biblical Conceptualizations of YHWH,” 19-28.

¹⁹³ Elizabeth Bloch-Smith. “Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten in Israel’s History.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 3 (2003): 401–425.

book's scientific accuracy filtered through a particular kind of theological dogmatism. Scholarly questions revolved around discovering a type of plant that could grow and die in a day, whether Nineveh truly was a three-days walk, and displaying global accounts of fish who swallow and expel people unharmed. At the same time, the book seems to resist simplistic accounts of dating as it provides very few explicit details in its narrative about its provenance. The "king of Nineveh" does not receive a name, there is no detail about the prophet's hometown, or any other details that definitively link a date to the composition. In turn, scholars have often resorted to linguistic dating and thematic elements that might resonate with its original audience. And as the history of dating has shown, this has proven to be a highly speculative task as early interpreters dated the book from the 7th-8th centuries while more recent scholarship has moved the book to the late Persian or Hellenistic periods.

Most important for our discussion is how interpreters have attempted to fill out the meagre description of Nineveh (and by extension Assyria) provided in the book Jonah despite its significant role. It apparently serves as the impetus of Jonah's flight in ch. 1, repeatedly described as "great/large (העיר הגדולה) throughout the book," the object of Jonah's brief utterance in ch. 3, and a source of reflection in ch. 4 between the prophet and deity. Yet it is also described in generic terms that do not necessarily intertextually connect to other biblical texts describing the infamous city. It is described as "wicked" (רעה), a "three days walk across" (מהלך שלשת ימים), and a place where the inhabitants "do not know their right hand from their left" (לא-ידע בין-ימיו) (לשמאלו). None of these are particularly helpful features in determining the book's historical "veracity" and more recent scholarship has begun to think of these features as literary more than historical.

Questions remain about what the authors, and by extension Jonah, thought about the city during the book's composition. Mainstream interpreters have typically looked to exilic and postexilic links within the canon itself to fill out the portrait of Nineveh, buttressed by archaeological sources describing the Neo-Assyrian war machine's imperial policies. For example, David Payne writes "It seems impossible that Nineveh can have failed to create an immediate impression on any reader. At any time from that of the historical Jonah onwards, it stood as the epitome of everything that was cruelly hostile to Israel and Judah."¹⁹⁴ Phyllis Trible concisely notes that Nineveh served as a "symbol of cruelty par excellence."¹⁹⁵ Commentators then typically point to biblical texts detailing the cruelty of one of Assyria's capital cities. The book of Nahum devotes all of its three chapters hoping for Nineveh's downfall: "All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?" (Nahum 3:19) Such an image is not limited to Nahum, but resounds throughout other biblical texts as well. Peter Machinist describes Assyria in the book of Isaiah as "that of an overwhelming military machine, destroying all resistance in its path, devastating the lands of its enemies, hauling away huge numbers of spoils and captives to its capital or elsewhere in its realms, and rearranging by this devastation and deportation the political physiognomy of the entire region."¹⁹⁶ Zephaniah too has some choice words for prideful Assyria, "This is the city of revelry that lived in safety. She said to herself, 'I am the one! And there is none besides me.'

¹⁹⁴ David F. Payne. "Jonah from the Perspective of Its Audience." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4, no. 13 (1979): 3–12.

¹⁹⁵ Phyllis Trible. *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 271.

¹⁹⁶ Peter Machinist. "Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 4 (1983): 719–737.

What a ruin she has become, a lair for wild beasts! All who pass by her scoff and shake their fists.” (Zephaniah 2:15)

Moreover, commentators have then turned to post-exilic texts like Ezra and Nehemiah to paint a portrait of Judahites who are wary of foreigners with a tendency towards an ethnocentric nationalism. According to this position, the ensuing trauma of exile has caused the returnees to shun outsiders as they point to texts like Ezra 9:1-2 as a sentiment among those who returned to Judah.¹⁹⁷ John Watts argues that “Narrowly nationalistic attitudes to foreigners may be seen sometimes in Old Testament writings, particularly the oracles against the nations. It is these attitudes that are parodied in the figure of Jonah.”¹⁹⁸ A.D. Martin is more specific and writes that the book of Jonah transcends the bigotry and nationalism present in the postexilic period.¹⁹⁹ Perhaps the most thorough treatment is when Elias Bickerman began interacting with onomastic material from Nippur and corroborating them with Ezra and Nehemiah. He argued that a YHWH-alone party took hold among Ezra and Nehemiah and “unyieldingly demanded that the exiles and their descendants serve YHWH exclusively.”²⁰⁰ Whether one can divine such a spirit among onomastics is debatable, but the trend of interpreting the book of Jonah as a correction to

¹⁹⁷ “After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, ‘The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.’” (Ezra 9:1-2)

¹⁹⁸ John D. W. Watts. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 74.

¹⁹⁹ A. D Martin. *The Prophet Jonah: The Book and the Sign*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1926), 3.

²⁰⁰ Elias Bickerman. “The Generation of Ezra and Nehemiah.” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978): 1–28.

a jingoistic postexilic spirit is readily seen throughout 20th century commentaries and remains influential in the 21st.

Finally, it turns out that the biblical texts did not need to exaggerate their impressions of the Assyrian incursion. Archaeologists and historians have been able to put together Assyrian policies and tactics that substantially differ from any previous regime. For example, while exiling conquered populations was not an intrinsically new practice, Bustenay Oded argues that “Mass deportation became a regular feature of Assyrian imperial policy and the most important means of its domination of other peoples, with far-reaching political, demographic and cultural consequences.”²⁰¹ For example, siege ramps found at cities like Lachish circumvented the defense of battering rams that often needed to be carried up winding tel’s to reach the city gate and could instead target weaker portions of city walls.²⁰² As opposed to the later Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires, the Assyrian regime was highly interested in assimilating its exiled population to its own customs.²⁰³ And as Mario Liverani argues, Assyria constituted one of, if not the first, ancient empire.²⁰⁴

While this approach to the book of Jonah remains influential, more recent scholarship at the turn of the 21st century has begun to rethink specific intertextual links that import notions of

²⁰¹ Bustenay Oded. *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*. (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), 2.

²⁰² See Yosef Garfinkel, Jon W. Carroll, Michael Pytlik, and Madeleine Mumcuoglu. “Constructing the Assyrian Siege Ramp at Lachish: Texts, Iconography, Archaeology and Photogrammetry.” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 40, no. 4 (2021): 417–439. Siege ramps are mentioned at least twice in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Kings 19:32 and Isaiah 37:33.

²⁰³ See Hayim Tadmor. “Assyria and the West: The Ninth Century and its Aftermath,” in *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East*. Edited by H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts. (Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 40-42.

²⁰⁴ Mario Liverani. *Assyria: The Imperial Mission*. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 1-9.

violence, exile, and ethnocentrism into Jonah. In fact, some have noted that the canonical links between Jonah and other texts may be misleading altogether.²⁰⁵ Thomas Bolin notes that the language of warfare used to describe Nineveh throughout most of the biblical texts is simply not present in Jonah. For example, Jonah describes Nineveh generically as “bad/evil” (רעה) and a city that does “violence” (חמס) while the books of Zephaniah and Nahum are more specific: “bloody” (דמים) and “full of deceit.” (כלה החש).²⁰⁶ Jonah does not share the same vocabulary with other canonical books concerning Nineveh.

And while early 20th century interpreters have noted that the city had long been destroyed at the time of Jonah’s composition, scholars like Thomas Bolin, Ehud Ben Zvi, and Amy Erickson have instead connected the image of Nineveh in Jonah to Greek and Hellenistic literary traditions.²⁰⁷ Instead of a violent and bloody exile, notions of an eastern city that ultimately fell to greedy, slothful rulers permeates these traditions. As Erickson comments, “In Jonah, this excitability and gullibility are evident in the king of Nineveh’s immediate and extravagant response to Jonah’s five-word sermon.”²⁰⁸ And drawing on Lowell Handy’s analysis of the sailors and Ninevites, she connects the image of the king of Nineveh in Jonah with other post-exilic texts like Judith, Tobit, Esther, and Daniel where this great ruler is able to make grand,

²⁰⁵ Thomas M. Bolin. *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness the Book of Jonah Re-Examined*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 134.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 134.

²⁰⁷ As early as 1912 in the *International Critical Commentary*, scholars recognized that Nineveh “was no longer in existence” at the time of Jonah’s composition in Mitchell Hinckley, Gilbert Thomas, J. M. Powis Smith, and Julius August Bewer. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*. (New York: Scribner, 1912), 8. For commentators who take this observation into account in their interpretation of the book, see Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 135-140; Ehud Ben Zvi. *Signs of Jonah Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 14-33; Amy Erickson. *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 62-64.

²⁰⁸ Erickson, *Jonah*, 65.

impulsive decrees capable of determining the fate of many.²⁰⁹ The ruler is more a literary trope rather than a depiction of concrete historical reality referencing any particular king.

If recent scholarship has uncoupled intertextual links on Nineveh between Jonah and other canonical texts, it has instead suggested the city should be considered in light of its Persian and Hellenistic background as a city in the east ruled by greedy, slothful despots.²¹⁰ Rather than a violent and ruthless city representing the exile and connecting the book to other post-exilic texts that outline contentious relationships between the returning exiles and non-Judahites, how might we understand the significant presence of the non-Hebrew characters (mariners and Ninevites) in the book of Jonah? As Uriel Simon asks, “The inescapable question here is why these supporting characters are so emphatically described as gentiles.”²¹¹ Traditional scholarship contrasts gentile piety with the prophet’s disobedience, but as we’ve seen here and in previous chapters, such a dichotomy is not so simple. For example, Simon rejects Elias Bickerman’s argument that the book of Jonah represents gentiles as “the worst of sinners” because he never explains “how the gentile sailors serve the objective of giving the book universal validity.”²¹² The current state of research, then, has not returned to what purpose the gentiles in the book of Jonah serve other than as props who prompt the laconic prophet to action in some fashion. Jonah scholarship would be helped by a discussion of the current state of research on the effects that post-exilic life had on Hebrew notions of non-Hebrews.

²⁰⁹ Lowell K. Handy. “Of Captains and Kings: A Preliminary Socio-Historical Approach to Jonah,” *Biblical Research*, 2004.

²¹⁰ Explicit references to the exile do not appear in Jonah, but Marian Kelsey’s recent work shows that allusions abound. See Marian Kelsey. “The Book of Jonah and the Theme of Exile.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 1 (2020): 128–140.

²¹¹ Uriel Simon and Lenn J. Schramm. *Jonah = Yonah: The traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), xxxiii.

²¹² Simon and Schramm, *Jonah*, xxxiii.

This chapter overlaps with ch. 1 regarding notions of Nineveh and non-Hebrew characters, but remains methodologically distinct. While ch. 1 utilized literary analysis to trace notions of (dis)obedience connected to place, this chapter examines archival material to illuminate the social and economic situation of deported Judeans. It destabilizes the monolithic perception of a dreary exile by suggesting that at least some Judean families began to do quite well in terms of their economic and social status. Thus, rather than problematically import intertextual conceptions of Nineveh and exile from other biblical texts, I ground the book of Jonah and its non-Hebrew characters in this then-contemporary evidence.

Negotiation, Not Didacticism – Acculturation and Identity in the Āl-Yāḥūdu Archives and the Book of Jonah

My research attempts to fill in this lacuna and opens up new possibilities for understanding the book of Jonah as a text of identity and acculturation by examining recently published material from the Āl-Yāḥūdu archive.²¹³ While biblical texts often detail the lives of the Judean elite following the Babylonian exile,²¹⁴ material evidence from the Āl-Yāḥūdu and Murašû archives provide an opportunity to understand the new lives of deportees in Babylon. Indeed, in one article Laurie Pearce asks the simple question, “How Bad Was the Babylonian Exile?” She suggests that the economic and social lives of some deportees were actually fairly good, despite

²¹³ Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch. *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*. Bethesda (Md.): CDL Press, 2014.

²¹⁴ “King Jehoiachin of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself, his mother, his servants, his officers, and his palace officials. The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign. . . . The king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, the artisans and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war.” 2 Kings 24:12-14, 16

canonical literary evidence such as Psalm 137 that suggests otherwise.²¹⁵ They are busy trading, marrying, paying taxes, building homes, and establishing a life past deportation.²¹⁶ Yet, both post-exilic biblical texts and onomastic evidence from the archives bear witness to several generations of Judeans who have sought to preserve their religious and cultural legacy. Rather than the singularly negative attitude towards life in Babylon that some biblical texts voice, the material evidence appears to complicate such a notion. And whatever the case, retaining one's identity in a foreign land appeared to be a vital issue for the exiled Judean population.

Certain biblical texts detail an altogether negative portrayal of the exile as many interpreters have pointed out. After all, being uprooted from one's land and forcibly marched to another would not likely inspire warmth towards one's captor. Still, other biblical texts suggest the deported population make the best of their situation.²¹⁷ For example, Jeremiah presents a letter to the deportees after receiving a message from his deity:

'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' (Jeremiah 29:5-7, NRSV)

²¹⁵ Laurie E. Pearce. (2016). How Bad Was the Babylonian Exile? *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 42(5).

²¹⁶ Kathleen Abraham. "West Semitic and Judean Brides in Cuneiform Sources from the Sixth Century BCE: New Evidence from a Marriage Contract from Āl-Yahudu." *Archiv Für Orientforschung* 51 (2005): 198–219; Kathleen Abraham. "An Inheritance Division among Judeans in Babylonia from the Early Persian Period" in Meir Lubetski ed., *New Seals and Inscriptions, Hebrew, Idumean and Cuneiform*. (Hebrew Bible Monographs 8). Sheffield: 2007, 206-221.

²¹⁷ Ariel Kopolivtz argues that the future vision described by Ezekiel in Ezekiel 47-48 actually assigns land to *gerim*, resident aliens of non-Israelite origin. See Ariel Kopolivtz. "Land for the Landless: Assigning Land to Non-Israelites in Ezekiel's Restoration Program." *Biblica* 101 (2020), 352–372.

Here, the prophet exhorts the deported community to establish roots in the new and foreign area they have been exiled to. There is no fear of intermarriage as in Ezra²¹⁸ or rage towards the foreign city as in Nahum.²¹⁹ In fact, the letter specifically states that the people ought to seek the welfare of the city where they had been deported – a statement that likely reflected the daily lives of average Judeans as we know from the Āl-Yāhūdu and Murašû archives.

If some biblical texts vociferously oppose the cultural customs and acculturation of Babylon while others permit some level of integration, then what of texts composed during the (post)exilic period, but who do not explicitly name Babylon as the antagonist? Indeed, Jonah scholars have noted that part of its message packs its punch from the horror of the exile.²²⁰ Yet ultimately, the deity’s message of forgiveness extends even to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire, and was likely meant to shock its readers who had been under the shadow of

²¹⁸ “After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, “The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.” (Ezra 9:1-2)

²¹⁹ The beginning of Nahum 3 dramatically begins Ah! City of bloodshed! (הוי עיר דמים) and never follows with the typical prophetic turn of conditional mercy dependent on the good behavior of individuals.

²²⁰ A brief sample of commentators who name the exile or Assyria as one of the driving forces of the narrative: A. D. Martin. *The Prophet Jonah: The Book and the Sign*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1926), 3-4; David W. Baker, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke. *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 47; Hans Walter Wolff. *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), 85-6; James Limburg. *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 22.

imperial domination since Assyrian incursions in the north.²²¹ How might we understand such a turn?²²²

The next stage of this research project returns to the book of Jonah to more closely examine the relationship between how the prophet and deity engage with characters explicitly marked within the book as ethnically different than Jonah. It is true that the book of Jonah includes a surprising amount of important non-Hebrews in its narrative as I have briefly noted above. While the Ninevites in chs. 3 and 4 are obviously not Hebrews, the narrative goes out of its way in the very first chapter in order to differentiate the Hebrew prophet Jonah from the sailors who could ostensibly be Judean, or at least West Semitic. As the mariners frantically determine the cause of the storm, they find out Jonah is the cause and begin asking him a barrage of questions – one of them being his ethnic and religious identity. Jonah responds, ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship YHWH, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ (1:9) As James Limburg notes, “If a story is skillfully told, the storyteller can use questions to put each listener in the place of the one being questioned. The eight questions in Jonah 1 thus lead the listener to put himself or herself in the role of Jonah.”²²³ Limburg’s point is especially interesting as it corroborates with the peculiar fact that nowhere in the book of Jonah is he explicitly named a prophet. Additionally, the final line of ch. 4 is a question put to the prophet, and by extension the reader, who must reflect on the line of reasoning YHWH submits. Interestingly, the

²²¹ Notably, one Jewish scholar understands the dualism of universalism and particularism as a concern partial to Christian commentators. See Uriel Simon. *Jonah = Yonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Trans. Lenn J. Schramm. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), ix.

²²² Some recent approaches include trauma and postcolonial readings of the book. See Justin Chesung Ryu. “Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 2 (2009): 195–218.

²²³ Limburg, *Jonah*, 25.

beginning and end of the book highlight the silence of the prophet. In other words, Judean readers may have been meant to identify in some capacity with the Hebrew prophet, at least at the beginning of the book in chapter 1 and the end in chapter 4.

A brief look at the two groups of foreigners in the book of Jonah, the mariners and Ninevites, reveals a much more indistinct portrait than some commentators may care to admit which I have outlined in chapter 2. On one hand, both groups become penitents par excellence when faced with the danger of the deity's wrath and ultimately avert the impending disaster. The Ninevite king even goes so far as to declare a city-wide fast and recites a statement reminiscent of other prophets in the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, by the deity's own admission at the end of the book, the Ninevites are said to be completely clueless and are compared alongside the animals of the city. As Tzvi Abusch notes, the analogical argument YHWH presents to Jonah hinges on "the association/equation of the Ninevites with the beasts (also non-human)."²²⁴ Such a characterization fits well with other post-exilic portraits of foreign kings that Erickson and Handy propose. What might this say about the social context of a community finding themselves interacting with several new ethnic groups?

A Portrait of Deported Judeans Based on Archival Evidence

There are several archives now available that help scholars reconstruct the life of the deported Judean population. Perhaps the most recent archive that cuneiform scholars continue to publish on is the Āl-Yāḥūdu archive as large collections of primary texts have been collected into

²²⁴ Tzvi Abusch. "Jonah and God: Plants, Beasts, and Humans in the Book of Jonah (An Essay in Interpretation)." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 13, no. 2 (2013): 146–152.

volumes with more forthcoming.²²⁵ Indeed, even before these volumes were published, there had been considerable interest in how these texts shed light onto the daily lives of everyday Judeans and exiled groups.²²⁶ In fact, one significant takeaway from these texts is that at least some Judeans integrated into Babylonian society very quickly. These archives are particularly interesting as they figure non-royal Judeans that likely point to “the east and southeast of Babylon, beyond the city of Nippur, delimited to the east by the river Tigris and to the south by the marshlands.”²²⁷ In addition, they help fill in details of an otherwise murky period that has been difficult to investigate for several reasons, with the earliest text documented at 572 BCE to the latest at 477 BCE.²²⁸

The Āl-Yāhūdu texts are largely administrative and economic, with Assyriologists most often relying on onomastic evidence in order to identify the ethnicity of the individual involved in the transaction. As Laurie Pearce reminds us, not only are these archives located in the administration of empire rather than cult, “there is no known cuneiform evidence that addresses

²²⁵ Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology, 28; Bethesda, MD: CDL Press – The University Press of Maryland, 2014). See also Cornelia Wunsch, *Judeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia in the Schøyen Collection*. With Contributions by L. E. Pearce (Babylonische Archiv, 6; Dresden: ISLET, forthcoming).

²²⁶ A considerable body of literature exists on the settling of deportees with many focusing on a particular ethnic group. For example, see Betina Faist. “An Elamite Deportee”, in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded*. Edited by Oded, Bustenay., Gershon. Galil, Mark Geller, A. R. Millard, and A. R. (Alan Ralph) Millard. Leiden: Brill, 2009. See Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, 3 for a more complete list. In addition, the Weidner texts detail rations distributed to high-ranking officials including Jehoiachin and his sons. See E. Weidner. 1939. “Jojachin, König von Juda, in babylonischen Keilschrifttexten.” pp. 923–935 in *Mélanges syriens offerts à René Dussaud*. Paris: Paul Geunthe.

²²⁷ Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, 7.

²²⁸ Laurie E. Pearce. “Cuneiform Sources for Judeans in Babylonia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: An Overview.” *Religion Compass* 10, no. 9 (2016): 230–243.

explicitly any aspect of the religious or cultural practices of Judeans in Mesopotamia.”²²⁹ What Assyriologists interested in diaspora have done in some cases is to construct an analysis of families through several generations and attempt to determine the social and economic status of these family units or individuals. In order to flesh out the data, Assyriologists have often asked questions of status (Where is this Judean in relation to the empire?), duration (when might this person have arrived in the area and what might this say about assimilation?), occupation (Is this a poor family of farmers or have they been trained in some other role?), and connection (What connection does this Judean have to potentially high-ranking officials, if any?).

One set of texts coming from Āl-Yāhūdu centers on a Judean family and serves as an excellent example of how Assyriologists have pieced together occasionally mundane business dealings to fill out a fuller portrait of exiled life. One Samak-Yāma, father of Rapā/Rupa-Yāma, and grandfather of Aḥīqam, shows a Judean family who seem to increasingly add to their fortune after each successive generation.²³⁰ While no economic texts deal with Samak-Yāma, we see Rapā-Yāma borrowing money and delivering foodstuffs like barley and dates. In text no. 8, we read “6.0.5 kor (1,110 liters) of good-quality dates and 5 kor (900 liters) of barley (are) owed to Tūb-Yāma, son of Mukkêa, by Rapā, son of Samak-Yāma.” The recipient Tūb-Yāma bears the Yahwistic theophoric element, though the tablet bears names of non-Judeans as well. For

²²⁹ Pearce, “Cuneiform Sources for Judeans in Babylonia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods,” 230-243.

²³⁰ The theophoric element -yāma- may not appear Yahwistic at first glance, but there is a consensus among Assyriologists that it is for two reasons. First, the DINGIR sign preceding the name suggests we are dealing with a deity. Second, phonological changes from Hebrew to Late Babylonian show that the final /h/ was lost and “the original two syllables of -yāhu were commonly reduced. Most widely it is thought they were reduced to -yaw, producing, e.g., aḥi-ya-a-ma.” See Alan Millard. “Transcriptions Into Cuneiform,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*. Edited by Geoffrey Khan. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 838-847.

example, the tablet lists Marduk-bēl-ilī as one of the witnesses, an obvious devotee of Marduk, ultimately suggesting that Judeans engaged in business dealings outside of their own ethnic network. Indeed, in text no. 7 Rapā-Yāma delivers barley from the estate overseen by the *rab mūgi* through one Enlil-šar-usur. While not certain that Rapā-Yāma was simply delivering materials due to the king since he was likely granted land, the later evidence concerning his son's, Aḥīqam, estate suggests that he “manages more than just his own plot.”²³¹

When Rapā-Yāma dies, his son Aḥīqam takes over his dealings and we see an expanded economic base. Pearce and Wunsch note that in text no. 17, we can see he owes four minas of silver to a royal official and that “This amount by far exceeds the agricultural output of a small settlement.”²³² This family is not simply paying taxes according to the land allotted them, but has assumed a great deal of economic autonomy as he forms new partnerships, owns slaves, and further allotted wealth to his five sons with all but one bearing Yahwistic names.²³³ From what we can tell, this family has the ability to work alongside local Babylonians, scribes, officials, and other deportee groups.²³⁴ Significant for our purpose is that these relationships between Rapā-Yāma and Babylonian officials existed only a generation after the destruction of Jerusalem, suggesting that acclimation and some level of integration did not take several generations as one might expect.

²³¹ Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, 109.

²³² Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, 7.

²³³ Aḥīqam has five sons: Nīr-Yāma, Haggâ (not explicitly Yahwistic, but certainly West-Semitic), Yāhû-Azza, Yāhû-izrī, and Yāhûšu.

²³⁴ Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, 8.

Another group of texts follows a (likely) Judean businessman Ahīqar, son of Rīmūt, operating in the town of Našar. He is married to Bunnannītu, a Babylonian name, and has a son bearing the Yahwistic name Nīr-Yāma. Like Ahīqam and his family, he is busy managing large-scale agricultural work that does not suggest taxation from a minor allotment of land, delivering and receiving a great deal of fish, dates, and barley, and more. For example, text no. 87 relates that Innin-zēr-[ibni], son of Bēlet-ah-iddin, both Babylonian names, owes a whopping 360 liters of barley to Ahīqar, to be delivered “at the storehouse gate at the estate of Našar.”²³⁵ The tablet is typical in that demonstrates that his business dealings are replete with Babylonian witnesses and the scribe, Arad-Gula, son of Nabû-šum-ukīn.

Outside of the Āl-Yāhūdu texts, since the late 19th century scholars have known about another Judean family dealing in agricultural business known as the Murašû family (now known as the Murašû texts).²³⁶ They were largely involved in agriculture and leasing land around Nippur and show a surprising amount of economic and social mobility. In fact, Pearce notes that by the “mid-fifth century, some Judeans had gained socio-economic standing comparable to that of some of their Babylonian neighbors.”²³⁷

²³⁵ Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, 233.

²³⁶ See H. Hilprecht and A.T. Clay. 1898. *Business Documents of Murashû Sons of Nippur Dated in the Reign of Artaxerxes I. (464-424 B.C.)*. BE 9. Philadelphia.; Michael Coogan. 1976a. “More Yahwistic Names in the Murashu Documents.” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 7: 199–200; 1976b. *West Semitic Personal Names in the Murašû Documents*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 7. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press; Matthew W. Stolper. *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašû Archive, the Murašû Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*. Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1985.; Spar, I. and E. von Dassow, eds. 2000. *Cuneiform Texts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Private Archive Texts from the First Millennium B.C.* CTMMA 3. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²³⁷ Laurie E. Pearce. “Cuneiform Sources for Judeans in Babylonia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: An Overview.” *Religion Compass* 10, no. 9 (2016): 230–243.

Judeans also occasionally occupied positions among the merchant class and royal service, though the latter category possesses a few difficulties that intersect with scholarly capabilities of identifying ethnic identity through onomastics. The northern city of Sippar, a major administrative center, holds archives showing that at least one Judean family are even recognized as royal merchants.²³⁸ In 2007, Michael Jursa identified the family of the patriarch Arih conducting business in Sippar in the late 6th century. Arih himself bears four sons with one of them, Amušê, bearing 5 children.²³⁹ Therefore, we have three generations (if we include Arih) of this family's activity that Jursa has identified through five texts, with Bloch identifying a sixth.²⁴⁰ The name Arih does not denote a specific deity, but likely West Semitic since he was born sometime in Judah before the Exile. His children bear both Judean, Babylonian, and neutral names: Basiya, Mardukā, Ahi-Yāma, and Amušê. Ahi-Yāma and Amušê suggest the Judean origins of the family, while Basiya and Mardukā show a degree of assimilation into Babylonian culture. The next generation bears a much starker image. Four of the five children of Amušê bear Babylonian names, with the fifth daughter likely of Babylonian origin: Bēl-uballit, Šamaš-iddin, Nanû-ittannu, Bēl-iddin, and Kaššaya.²⁴¹ Such a dramatic change in naming suggests a surprising

²³⁸ See Yigal Bloch. 2014. "Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule." *JANEH* 1:119–172; Michael Jursa. 2007. "Eine Familie von Königskaufleuten jüdischer Herkunft." *NABU* 2007-22.

²³⁹ Jursa. "Eine Familie von Königskaufleuten jüdischer Herkunft," 2007-2022.

²⁴⁰ Bloch, "Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile," 119-172.

²⁴¹ While her name does not contain a Babylonian theophoric element, Bloch notes that the name has precedent in Babylonian royal and cultural tradition. See also Paul-Alain Beaulieu. "Ba'u-Asītu and Kaššaya, Daughters of Nebuchadnezzar II." *Orientalia* (Roma) 67, no. 2 (1998): 173–201.

degree of assimilation within this family. Indeed, in BM 65149, we witness the family arranging Kaššaya's marriage to the Babylonian family of Arraru.²⁴²

Beyond the family's assimilation through onomastics and marriage, several members held distinct roles within the Babylonian administrative, palace, and temple structures. Text 4 shows that Mardukā held silver designated as *makkur* dŠamaš "the property of Šamaš." Bloch notes that this would mean he is working in some fashion with the property of the local Ebabbar temple in Sippar. In addition, Ahi-Yāma and Basiya are both titled *tamkār šarri* "royal merchants" suggesting that these individuals had some sort of Babylonian institutional support beyond the typical merchant.

Bloch then argues that such assimilation among the merchant class was not unusual. In fact, Ran Zadok notes that three of the witnesses in the marriage contract of Kaššaya bear Babylonian names, but have Judean origins.²⁴³ Arad-Gula, Šamaš-apla-usur, and Niqūdu son of Mušallummu all bear Babylonian names, with the first two clearer than the last, but all interestingly have a distinctly Judean lineage. As Bloch summarizes, "This is suggestive of assimilation into the native Babylonian society, and specifically into the local society in Sippar (where Texts 1 and 2 were drawn), given that Šamaš was the chief deity of Sippar."²⁴⁴ In other words, merchants seem particularly disposed to assimilation into Babylonian society and culture in as much as onomastics and economic texts can provide evidence for.

²⁴² Kathleen Abraham, "West Semitic and Judean Brides in Cuneiform Sources from the Sixth Century BCE: New Evidence from a Marriage Contract from Āl-Yahudu," 198–219. See also Ran Zadok. *The Earliest Diaspora: Israelites and Judeans in Pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia*. Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 2002.

²⁴³ Zadok, *The Earliest Diaspora*, 58.

²⁴⁴ Bloch, "Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile," 2014.

Further, it seems that the exiled Judean population was not categorically treated differently than other deported ethnic populations among the Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires. While they have been studied less extensively, other minority populations appear to have also settled and made communities under the auspices of each respective government. For example, Israel Eph'al notes that one text, written in Babylon, documents the sale of a field and cistern with at least one of the people bearing a typically Egyptian name. Moreover, the transaction was completed "in the presence of the assembly of the elders of the Egyptians." Eph'al concludes by stating that "This assembly had a jurisdictional standing recognized by the Achaemenid authorities."²⁴⁵ Such a term is reminiscent of exilic biblical material that describes the Judean exiles as having some sort of council or authority (Ezek. 8:1; 20:1) Indeed, just as we have scant, but important information on the deportation of Jehoiachin, so too can we see that leaders of other ethnic groups wound up in much the same situation, for example, from Ashkelon and Tyre.²⁴⁶ T.E. Alstola's recently published dissertation on deportees of the 6th through 5th centuries compares the exiled Judeans with a group from Neirab, ultimately showing that integration and socio-economic status differed greatly depending on one's profession and location.²⁴⁷

Finally, several biblical texts suggest that the exiles underwent various forms of chattel slavery. For example, Jeremiah 25:14 refers to a time when the Babylonians will receive what they had done to others: "For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also, and I

²⁴⁵ Israel Eph'al. "The Western Minorities in Babylonia in the 6th-5th Centuries B.C.: Maintenance and Cohesion." *Orientalia* (Roma) 47, no. 1 (1978): 74–90.

²⁴⁶ Israel Eph'al. "The Babylonian Exile: The Survival of a National Minority in a Culturally Developed Foreign Milieu" in *Gründungsfeier am 16. Dezember 2005*. Centrub Orbis Orientalis, Göttingen, 2005: 21-31.

²⁴⁷ Tero Alstola. *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020.

will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.”²⁴⁸ But according to the reviewed evidence, were Judeans chattel slaves, or should they perhaps be classified as something else? The material evidence shows that while the exiles were not simply allowed to return to their homeland, they were integrated into the Babylonian and Persian economic and social environment. Indeed, F. Rachel Magdalene notes that “They were holders of bow-fiefs and were qualified as *šušānūs*, a kind of personal status that precisely protected them from being sold as chattel slaves.”²⁴⁹ So too does Dandamaev conclude that they cannot be formally categorized as chattel slaves “since they were not included in the palace or temple households, but were settled in places set aside for them, particularly in the Nippur region.”²⁵⁰ In other words, Babylonian and Persian administrations granted income-producing and taxable lands to deported populations in order to rehabilitate formerly inhabited lands decimated by previous wars. These populations were also likely liable for periodic military service and corvée duties, though there is also evidence that particularly wealthy individuals could hire a replacement on their behalf. Once again, the material evidence points towards a stratified portrait among the exilic population and ultimately decenters any monolithic view of the exile.

As we have seen, topography and onomastic evidence open up a small window into the lives of minority groups in the Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires. It is significant to note that many of these groups, under new policies enacted by Babylon, were permitted to remain intact when deported to a new land in order to provide valuable resources for the costly economic

²⁴⁸ See also 2 Chronicles 36:20; Isaiah 47:6; Lamentations 1:3.

²⁴⁹ F. Rachel Magdalene. “Slavery Between Judah and Babylon: The Exilic Experience,” in *Slavery Households in the Near East*. Edited by Laura Culbertson and Indrani Chatterjee. (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2011), 127.

²⁵⁰ M.A. Dandamaev “Egyptians in Babylonia in the 6th-5th centuries B.C” in *La circulation des biens, des personnes et des idées dans le Proche-Orient ancien: Actes de la XXXVIIIe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Paris, 8-10 juillet 1991*. RAI 38: Paris, 1992: 63.

tasks the Empire(s) had planned. This would allow Judeans, for example, to maintain a strong ethnic identity among certain sectors even as some like the merchant class chose to assimilate more than others. Bloch compares the tendency of merchant families that take Babylonian names to courtiers (commonly referred to as *Beamtennamen*) and their children.²⁵¹ While merchants often adopted Babylonian names, there are examples of Babylonian-named fathers giving their children Yahwistic names. For example, one Šamaš-iddin, meaning “Šamaš gave,” has a son named Yāhū-šarra-usur, meaning “Oh Yahweh protect the king!”²⁵² Did a Babylonian father give his son a Yahwistic name for the court, did his son gain the name when he entered the court, or perhaps it is some other process altogether. Moreover, courtiers regularly possess names for the king’s benefit and may conceal the individual’s real ethnic identity or affiliation. Whatever the case, we can see the Judean’s deity becoming a part of an international court.

To conclude this section, the material evidence points to a varied rather than uniform portrait of the exile, destabilizing the view of a purely antagonistic disposition by the deported population. To be sure, some biblical texts record starkly negative views of the exile and a deep longing to return. Still others suggest that the deportees make do with where they are at and put roots down. Fortunately, the archives discussed above have greatly illuminated what life was like for at least some Judean exiles. Some, at least according to onomastics, have assimilated more or less into Babylonian culture and taken traditionally Babylonian names. The family of Ahiqam shows several generations of deportees who engage in increasingly large economic transactions that ultimately point beyond land granted by the authorities. They do commerce with both Judeans and non-Judeans and we can even see marriage between a Judean and Babylonian in one

²⁵¹ Bloch, “Judeans in Sippar and Susa during the First Century of the Babylonian Exile: Assimilation and Perseverance under Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Rule,” 119-172.

²⁵² OECT 10 152 (Ash. 1878.005)

of our examples. Courtiers could apparently take the theophoric onomastic element of the Judean's deity without issue and shows the polyvalence of minority populations under Babylonian and Achaemenid rule.

Much more data could be reviewed and more still will be uncovered as evidence continues to surface. This section largely reviews the recent literature in order to recognize that the violent and bloody Assyrian exile may have not only been several centuries before the book of Jonah's composition, but that the deported populations appear to have gained some level of autonomy and cultural independence under Babylonian and then Achaemenid rule. With this in mind, we return to the book of Jonah and consider it in this new light. What might we instead recognize among the sailors and Ninevites we may not have seen before? What portrait does the book of Jonah paint of these two groups and how might they be read by Judeans in the diaspora?

Returning to the Book of Jonah

As we have briefly mentioned above and in other chapters of this dissertation, commentators on Jonah have tended to understand the exile as a wholly negative experience. After all, it does help fill in the vague "evil" describing Nineveh at the outset of the book and provides a dramatic turn at the end of the book. Consequentially, they tended to associate the non-Hebrew characters in the narrative as a sort of "type" of foreigner that stands in for everyone. Yet shockingly, these characters are portrayed by these same scholars as antitheses to the prophet Jonah who is altogether disobedient. Readers ought to take a lesson from these gentile populations and witness what happens to Jonah when one does not follow God's command.

It is true that the book does appear to emphasize the non-Hebrew ethnicity of the sailors and Ninevites, contrasting them with Jonah being a Hebrew. Jonah's response given to the

sailors describing himself as a “Hebrew” (עברי) is typically used in contrast to other people groups (1:9).²⁵³ While the sailors do come around to Jonah’s deity (conversion of the mariners has been debated), it is clear that they were not penitents of YHWH beforehand (1:5, 16). The Ninevites who hear Jonah’s miniature warning repent immediately, and though it is unclear if it should be taken as a sign of devotion or irony, it contrasts with Jonah’s disobedience. Paralleling the two groups does not help either as the mariners repeatedly attempt to handle the storm through their own efforts (1:5, 13). As Uriel Simon questions, “The inescapable question here is why these supporting characters are so emphatically described as gentiles.”²⁵⁴

Yet at the same time, scholars may have occasionally overlooked the features within the book that actually suggest commonality and intelligibility between the many groups. In fact, it is precisely because these features are so typical in the Hebrew Bible and wider ancient Near East that they may have been discounted as insignificant to the narrative. Where interpreters occasionally pick up on the commonalities, they are often read as humorous or ironic in order to further contrast the activities of the gentile group with Jonah. We have already highlighted some of these features in chapters 1 and 2, but it is worth reviewing them again here in light of the archival evidence discussed above. As I argue, the background characters in Jonah do not simply serve as contrasting figures with the prophet and deity. Instead, the book complicates these figures by making them somewhat familiar to any Judean reader through international practices, ultimately creating an ambivalent portrait throughout the book that parallels its undecided ending.

²⁵³ See, for example, Gen. 39:14, 43:32; Ex 1:15, 3:18, 10:3; 1 Sam 4:6, 9, 29:3; etc. *BDB* notes that the word עברי is often put in the mouths of foreigners or otherwise used to distinguish Israelites from foreigners.

²⁵⁴ Simon and Schramm, *Jonah*, xxxiii.

Interpreters have been quick to point out that the mariners in chapter 1 ultimately assent to the deity's will in contrast to Jonah. Yet the mariners also resort to a practice that would have been familiar with any West Semitic reader: the casting of lots. Indeed, it is perhaps surprising to note here that knowledge of the storm does not come from, say, the traditional means a prophet might receive information as Jonah did in 1:2, but instead through this practice intelligible by anyone. Lots can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible as a system to discover a guilty party as in Joshua 7:10-19 where the new leader sets out to discover who among the families of Israel stole property not rightfully belonging to them. Each family presents themselves before him, lots are cast, and the process is notably successful as Achan son of Karmi confesses to the crime (7:20-21). Their use has a wide distribution in the Hebrew Bible and were also used often to determine an allotment of some material good like land or provisions (Judges 20:9; Nehemiah 11:1; 1 Samuel 14:41; Nahum 3:10; Psalm 125:3) Finally, lots can also be used to help resolve conflict between two parties as Proverbs 18:18 states, "The lot puts an end to strife and separates those locked in dispute." Its authority was understood to come from the deity (Proverbs 16:33) and there is little to no evidence for its disputation in the Hebrew Bible. Uriel Simon notes that the narrative slows down when the mariners cast lots, referencing the process three times, in order to "involve readers in the tension felt by the characters themselves."²⁵⁵ Both the mariners and supposed readers of Jonah were interested in the authoritative process and results, even if readers already understand that Jonah is at fault.

Lots are not the only piece of evidence that suggests the composition provides a more nuanced portrait of the non-Hebrew groups than some previous scholars have noticed. Interpreters remain vexed about the mariners' motives for and against heeding Jonah's request to

²⁵⁵ Simon and Schramm, *Jonah*, 10.

throw him into the sea (1:13). Jerome, for example, marvels at the sailors' choice, "They refused to shed blood, choosing rather to perish than lose. What change!"²⁵⁶ Meanwhile, other commentators point out that it is well-known among seafarers that one should avoid the shore during a storm lest one wrecks the ship. Sasson, citing Bishop Synesius's letter to his brother from the 5th century, narrates a story about a Jewish captain purposefully sailing into open waters because he knew a storm was coming.²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is important to note that they are not immediately antagonistic toward the "Hebrew" and do not throw Jonah overboard to save themselves. They ultimately do so at his urging when all other options are exhausted (1:15). The portrait of the sailors here is not necessarily overwhelmingly positive, but they take up lots and are concerned with the life of someone who so expressly voices how different he is from them.

In addition, the captain's speech expresses a hope in the mercy of the gods that parallels the king of Nineveh's speech in ch. 3 as well as other faithful expressions throughout the Hebrew Bible. Echoing the divine charge to Jonah (1:2), the captain's hope can be found elsewhere in the Hebrew where others also express an oft-fulfilled wish in the face of destruction. His posture, as Thomas Bolin argues, is one that recognizes the terrifying aspect of a truly free deity who can do what he pleases.²⁵⁸ Indeed, Bolin notes that the captain's speech introduces a central theme in the book – "The uncertainty of divine care for humankind."²⁵⁹ The captain provides language for what has so far been unnamed, becoming an important, yet brief figure in the book. So too do the mariners become ideal penitents through their linguistic posturing (1:14). As Simon points out,

²⁵⁶ Translated from the French: "Ils se refusaient à verser le sang, aimant mieux périr que perdre. Quel changement!" In Jerome. *Sur Jonas*. Translated by Paul Antin. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1956), 73.

²⁵⁷ Jack M. Sasson. *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation*. (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 142.

²⁵⁸ Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 81.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

“Not only do they call upon the Lord his God when he himself refuses to pray, but in utter contrast to his stubborn rejection of his mission, they accept the burden of being the instruments of God’s will.”²⁶⁰ This theme is especially significant in the first chapter where the image of the deity appears more intent on getting his way by cajoling his prophet and the mariners than the caring deity we see in the final two chapters.

Finally, the mariners perform sacrifices and make vows, (1:16) public signs of recognition that it was YHWH who saved them from a previously unknown guilt. Vows can be a sign of thanksgiving after the fact and it is clear this is the type of sacrifice the mariners are making. Scholars have long debated whether the mariners ultimately converted to some sort of Yahwism, and while conversion may support my argument, I don’t find these arguments convincing.²⁶¹ In any case, it does not appear the text is interested in this type of question. Rather, the sailors likely gave thanks to the deity who spared them, possibly adding YHWH to their repertoire of deities.²⁶² Sasson notes that archaeologists often find models of ships that served as “votive testimonials of their good fortune.”²⁶³ Offerings of thanksgiving had a clear place in the Levitical system of sacrifice (Leviticus 7:11-21) and occurs in Psalm 116 when the psalmist declares, “I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice (אֲזַבַּח זִבְחַ תְּוֹדָה) and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows (גִּדְרֵי) to the Lord, in the presence of all his people.

²⁶⁰ Simon and Schramm, *Jonah*, 14. See also Limburg who writes, “Told that the only way to save their own lives is to sacrifice another who is a stranger to them all, they resist. They will do anything to avoid causing the death of a fellow human being, even one who is an admitted runaway.” In Limburg, *Jonah*, 144.

²⁶¹ Some rabbinic commentaries state that the sailors entered the covenant by circumcising themselves. See Levine 1978: 70

²⁶² See also other texts where non-Hebrews recognize YHWH’s power. For example, the revival of the widow’s son by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:24; the healing of Naaman’s condition in 2 Kings 5:15; Hazael recognizing Elisha’s power in 2 Kings 8:14-15. Notably, these are all narrative stories centering on prophets.

²⁶³ Sasson, *Jonah*, 140.

(116:17-18) Through sacrifice and the swearing of vows, these mariners become recognizable in the imagination of their readers, even an ambivalent portrait concerning the status of non-Israelite sacrifice emerges elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶⁴

So too do the Ninevites and king of Nineveh engage in practices and speech acts familiar to a Judean audience. Not only are they the recipients of a prophetic utterance from a Hebrew prophet, but they respond to it in typically Semitic forms of mourning – with sackcloth and fasting. Upon hearing the news, the king takes it a step further and fasts, mourns, and sits in sackcloth and ashes. Their behavior was enough to turn YHWH from the impending destruction (3:10) and is the impetus of Jonah’s frustration in the following chapter. Despite the king’s strange proclamation that commands animals to mourn as well, a detail that will become important at the end of the next chapter, the scene of mourning an impending destruction would have been familiar to readers in every period.²⁶⁵

The king’s speech echoes the captain’s in ch. 1, but it takes on traditionally cultic language intertextually referencing material from the Hebrew Bible. For example, the king’s rhetorical question in 3:9 is characteristic of postexilic texts and frequently invokes a cluster of theological language.²⁶⁶ Following James Crenshaw’s analysis of the expression, the king’s use of the expression falls among other significant characters like David and the prophet Joel.²⁶⁷ The

²⁶⁴ It is clear within the Hebrew Bible that the status of sacrifices offered by non-Israelites are worth mentioning. See Leviticus 17:8-16, Numbers 15:13-16, 1 Kings 8:41-43.

²⁶⁵ Despite the strange image of animals fasting and wearing sackcloth, it may be important to remember that the utter destruction of cities often included the animals as well. The theme of divine sovereignty over nature in the book of Jonah also helps us recognize that incorporating animals here are not entirely unique. At one time modern interpreters drew parallels to Persian material showing animals mourning as well: XYZ see E. Pusey

²⁶⁶ “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” (מִי-יֵדָע יְשׁוּב, וְנָחַם הָאֱלֹהִים; וְשָׁב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ, וְלֹא נֹאבֵד) (Jonah 3:9)

²⁶⁷ James L. Crenshaw. “The Expression Mî Yôdēa’ in the Hebrew Bible.” *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1986): 274–88.

modest data shows that the king, despite reacting strongly to Jonah's prophetic speech, mirrors the theological language of theological piety found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Undoubtedly, the strong overlap between the king's speech, an authoritative non-Hebrew, and some of the Hebrew Bible's most significant characters, would have given its Judean readers time to reflect not only on the content of the king's speech, but the king himself.

Conclusion: The Relationship Between the Archival and Biblical Material

In contrast to traditional scholarship that has emphasized differences between Jonah and the non-Hebrew groups, I have returned to the book of Jonah in order to highlight commonalities between Jonah, the non-Hebrew groups, and its early readers. Generic practices like casting lots, performing sacrifices, and making vows in addition to language reminiscent of other biblical texts show that these characters were not conceptualized as wholly different entities, but instead took part in practices familiar to any Judean audience. When discovering the guilt the mariners had incurred, they turned to the casting of lots. After surviving an ordeal, they made thanksgiving sacrifices and vowed vows to YHWH. The Ninevites respond to their city's imminent destruction by fasting and mourning. The king recognizes the difficult situation that divine freedom imposes on him following a prophetic utterance and makes a speech reminiscent of other authoritative figures in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, perhaps we can return to the deity's final question and note that it does suggest a broader notion, simply referring to them as "human" (אדם) rather than their marked status found elsewhere in the book.

I suggest that this nuanced portrait of these groups in the book of Jonah can be fruitfully placed alongside material and archival evidence following the exile. As we have already noted, we do not have evidence of religious or cultic practice from the reviewed archives. Even more,

we do not have evidence of Judean scribes that might directly link biblical texts to archival material. Still, this has not stopped scholars from connecting the two through other means. Jonathan Stökl argues that sections of Ezekiel point to an author who has undergone cuneiform training in some fashion by pointing to Akkadian loanwords and is familiar with the structure of texts like Gilgamesh and *Maqlû*.²⁶⁸ Continuing with Ezekiel, Abraham Winitzer suggests that the prophet is in dialogue with Babylonian scholastics on issues of cosmology, early Israelite tradition like the construction of the Tabernacle, and more.²⁶⁹ He also tantalizingly notes that Ezekiel's activity by the Nār Kabari (Kabar Canal) near Nippur is not too far from Al-Yahudu. Indeed, in an attempt to more precisely determine the locus of transmission between material culture and biblical scribes, Caroline Waerzeggers traces the "path" of these actors to map what contact Judeans may have had with scribal centers.²⁷⁰

Nevertheless, if we recall our discussion at the beginning of this chapter, religion is not a sphere divorced from other social institutions. Likely even less so in the ancient Near East where cultic obligations reflected in the Levitical sacrificial system and prophetic ire repeatedly reflect on the economic situation of Israelite penitents as signs of (un)faithfulness. The economic and social lives of deportees must have undoubtedly had an impact on their understanding of religion and vice-versa. This is not to say that the archival evidence or the biblical witnesses provide the

²⁶⁸ Jonathan Stökl. "Schoolboy Ezekiel: Remarks on the Transmission of Learning." *Die Welt Des Orients* 45, no. 1 (2015): 50–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43697618>.

²⁶⁹ Abraham Winitzer, "Assyriology and Jewish Studies in Tel Aviv: Ezekiel among the Babylonian *literati*" in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians, and Babylonians in Antiquity*. Edited by Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

²⁷⁰ Caroline Waerzeggers, "Locating Contact in the Babylonian Exile: Some Reflections on Tracing Judean-Babylonian Encounters in Cuneiform Texts" in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians, and Babylonians in Antiquity*. Edited by Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

real window into the Babylonian exile, but they do agree on certain points and diverge on others. Unsurprisingly, the archival evidence gives multiple perspectives that should destabilize a monolithic reading of biblical texts. The current state of research into the lives of Judean deportees disallows any interpreter to state that the exile was unequivocally negative for all involved. Naturally, deportees would have likely longed for their homeland and such sentiments can be seen from some biblical texts. Yet we have also seen that some Judeans became economically and socially important in their respective communities and acculturating more or less into Babylonian and Persian societies. I have shown that by considering the economic and social situation of at least some Judean deportees, we can return to the book of Jonah and reexamine distinctly non-Hebrew groups.

It is easy to imagine, per Ehud Ben Zvi's point, that Jonah would have been read long beyond its initial composition.²⁷¹ For this reason I have intentionally kept a firm dating for the book quite vague, only noting that it was composed after the monarchy and very likely after the Babylonian exile. And like Ben Zvi, I don't imagine my argument in this chapter, or my other chapters for that matter, depends on its placement in the context of the Persian or Hellenistic periods. In fact, I imagine many of the generic qualities in the book of Jonah found a readership more than willing to think through the ambivalent portrait of the characters in the book alongside the ever-changing social situation they found themselves in.²⁷² By consulting the archival evidence concerning the kind of life deported Judeans lived, we decenter a monolithic understanding of the book of Jonah that seeks to contrast the prophet as an ethnocentric nationalist with the "gentile" groups who are pious and obedient. Instead, we can see that in

²⁷¹ Ben Zvi, *The Signs of Jonah*, 10.

²⁷² I continue to return to Simon's question about how these groups in this narrative achieve universal validity. I offer an alternative answer in my first chapter.

many cases the book of Jonah highlights commonalities in practice and speech rather than utter and irreparable difference. We see that there is actually a surprising degree of cooperation between the prophet and non-Hebrew groups.

In summary, the relatively recent archival evidence destabilizes the notion of a monolithic exile and suggests that we return to exilic texts with a new lens cognizant of the economic diversity and social integration representative of this tumultuous period. This chapter has then returned to the so-called “gentile” characters within Jonah and provided a nuanced portrait that is neither entirely positive, nor negative. Instead, elements such as common Near Eastern ritual practices and a surprising sensitivity to Jonah’s prophetic speech, albeit misguided or ludicrous at times, shows that early readers would have reflected on these characters and their own (post)exilic situation among many different ethnic groups.

Chapter 4: Contextualizing Jonah Scholarship: Narrative Indeterminacy in the Book of Jonah and Its Function in Social Life

Introduction

In 2017, Israeli archaeologists unearthed a mosaic displayed on the floor of an ancient synagogue depicting the prophet Jonah being swallowed by a fish.¹ The mosaic would have been a familiar scene corresponding to the biblical account if it weren't for the fact that the fish swallowing Jonah was followed by two larger fish – a detail that never appears in the biblical text. This brief example suggests that at least some Jewish communities have historically centered the great fish as significant to the book rather than modern scholarly notions of didactic satire and universalism or traditional liturgical themes of repentance emphasized when Jonah is read on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur.² In other words, interest in the strange qualities of this book is not a uniquely modern phenomenon, and we can see that this ancient community did not share the same religious or literary values as modern commentators – a tension underscoring the fact that one's context is inextricably bound up with their reading practices and assumptions about what they expect a sacred text to say.

Yet despite historical and popular interest in many of these strange elements, if there's one thing that modern biblical scholars of Jonah have historically agreed on, it is that the narrative is decidedly *not* about the fish or the many other strange elements within the

¹ Jodi Magness, Shua Kisilevitz, Matthew Grey, Dennis Mizzi, Daniel Schindler, Martin Wells, Karen Britt, et al. "The Huqoq Excavation Project: 2014–2017 Interim Report." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 380, no. 380 (2018): 61–131.

² Robert C. Gregg. *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 329-368.

narrative.³ One commentator reproves the reader, “To some people Jonah is only a hocus-pocus term which conjures up thoughts about bad luck and personal misfortune...a fantastic tale about a man’s being swallowed by a whale and surviving the ordeal.”⁴ Julius Brewer characterizes the narrative as “a story with a moral, a parable, a prose poem like the story of the Good Samaritan” and when discussing the fish, contrasts it with comparative folklore and demythologizes it, signaling its relative insignificance:

And our author took this rather common feature of the swallowing of a man by a fish and his subsequent deliverance, and used it in his own manner. But his story is altogether different from those others. They are mostly mythical stories about the sun, his is a prophetic story, pervaded by the truest spirit of Israel’s religion. To our author the mythical element has entirely disappeared. He uses the fish episode merely in order to bring Jonah back to the land.⁵

James Limburg, writing for the *Old Testament Library* commentary series, concludes that “Jonah be categorized as a *didactic story*. Appropriate interpretive questions will be: What is the instructional aim of the story as a whole? What does this portion of the story intend to teach?”⁶ Indeed, for the most part, modern biblical scholarship has been quick to say that the

³ The antagonism towards the fish exists beyond scholarly commentaries. For example, see a recent blog post on Christianity.com: <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/the-story-and-meaning-of-jonah-and-the-whale-often-mistaken.html>

⁴ James Hardee Kennedy. *Studies in the Book of Jonah*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1956), x.

⁵ Hinckley G. T. Mitchell, J. M. Powis Smith, Julius A. Bewer, J. M. Powis (John Merlin Powis) Smith, and Julius A. (Julius August) Bewer. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 6.

⁶ James Limburg. *Jonah: A Commentary*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 26.

whale, among the other strange elements within Jonah, is superfluous, a distraction from the “real” moral purpose of the story of Jonah achieved through didactic storytelling.

Indeed, informed by their own literary and religious values that emphasize the book’s “real” meaning, modern biblical interpreters have typically emphasized the text’s ethical message achieved by attending to the book’s didacticism at the end over the bizarre scenes they depict as distractions or devices meant to serve a grander purpose. The turn of the 21st century saw, for example, reviews of Jonah scholarship that confidently stated an academic consensus on the message of Jonah.⁷ When biblical scholars have approached these narrative features, they have variously categorized the book of Jonah as satire, parody, farce, or other literary genres that utilize humor to serve its greater moral purpose.⁸ The prophet’s (humorous) unusual silence points to his obtuse disobedience, the great fish serves as a divine disciplinary device, the ostensibly obedient mariners and Ninevites contrast with the prophet, the mourning animals are a humorous reprieve that shows even animals can positively react to the deity’s command, and more.

Despite a near-unanimous consensus in biblical scholarship on the book’s didactic nature, its actual message remains unclear. At the same time that some commentators were

⁷ Edwin M. Good. *Irony in the Old Testament*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 39; Ronald E. Clements. “The Purpose of the Book of Jonah.” In *Congress Volume Edinburgh 1974*, (Brill, 1975), 16-28; Kenneth M. Craig. “Jonah in Recent Research.” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies*, no. 7 (1999): 97–118.

⁸ See David Marcus. *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*. Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1995; Carolyn J. Sharp. “Irony as Emetic: Parody in the Book of Jonah.” In *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*. United States: Indiana University Press, 2008; John C. Holbert, “‘Deliverance Belongs To Yahweh!’: Satire in the Book of Jonah.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 6, no. 21 (1981): 59–81; Arnold J. Band. “Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody.” *Prooftexts* 10, no. 2 (1990): 177–195; Judson Mather. “The Comic Art of the Book of Jonah.” *Soundings* (Nashville, Tenn.) 65, no. 3 (1982): 280–291. For a more complete list on genre and humor, see Amy Erickson. *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 38.

affirming the ostensibly clear message of the book, Uriel Simon identified four central themes that interpreters have suggested such as prophecy: realization versus compliance, atonement versus repentance, universalism versus particularism, and compassion: justice versus mercy.⁹ Simon's identification of universalism as one theme among many suggests that scholarly consensus may be more a product of particular cultural and historical formations conducive to this interpretation rather than a universally persuasive account. Indeed, Yvonne Sherwood and Elias Bickerman note that understanding the book about a universalistic deity contrasting with a nationalistic prophet has its roots in the German Enlightenment largely among Christian interpreters and its influence remains today.¹⁰ Recognizing the difficulty of establishing consensus on the message of the book, David Payne writes "Scholarship has not reached unanimity about Jonah and probably never will... The uniqueness of the book is, I suppose, the chief cause of the difficulty in reaching objective and definitive conclusions about some of the questions it raises."¹¹ Lacking a definitive date, comparative context, and a significant amount of strange narrative features, the book continues to evade a singular purpose.

If the book's ancient message remains elusive, can we learn something about the way ancient texts function by consulting contemporary contexts? Such a question may rightfully warrant accusations of anachronism, or worse, run the risk of importing modern concepts and notions into cultures far different from our own and passing them off as intrinsic to 'human

⁹ Uriel Simon and Lenn J. Schramm. *Jonah = Yonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), ix-x.

¹⁰ Yvonne Sherwood. *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25-48; Elias Bickerman. *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 25.

¹¹ David F. Payne. "Jonah from the Perspective of Its Audience." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4, no. 13 (1979): 3-12.

nature.’ Despite the risk, foundational to the discipline of religious studies is the notion that religious belief and practice is a thoroughly human endeavor that can be compared cross-culturally. One must balance the fact that cultures are not entirely unique, drawing from a constellation of available resources, while also acknowledging that the particular instantiation of a cultural artifact, for example, is indeed embedded in a particular time and place that may or may not have been arranged in a particular past iteration.

Fortunately, recent scholarship on the ancient world has already increasingly resorted to modern contexts in order to think about how people in the past told and reflected on their own stories. For example, in *The Story of Myth* Sarah Iles Johnston turns to folklore studies in order to explore how the telling of contemporary ghost stories employs similar rhetorical and narrative techniques that parallel those of ancient Greek writers. In order to “cumulatively” prepare audiences for a story that blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, Iles Johnston adopts the sociologist Robin Wooffitt’s “X/Y format of narration.”¹² For narrators to persuasively suggest that the story “really happened,” narrators must preface their account with an account persuading their listeners that the storyteller is a “sane, normal” person “who functions within the familiar world.”¹³ While there are differences, of course, between the modern and ancient, the similarities suggest that contemporary myths and stories, when grounded in performance and the social life of the performer and audience, can help us better understand how these stories of the past functioned.

In a similar fashion, I ask how contemporary retellings and notions of the book of Jonah might help us make sense of some of these strange narrative features that modern biblical

¹² Sarah Iles Johnston. *The Story of Myth*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 98.

¹³ Ibid.

scholarship has historically ignored. If we ground the story of Jonah in its social life, what do people *do* with it and how is it used? What features are they drawn to and what does this tell us, if anything, about the particular text in question? To what extent can this tell us about its ancient readership? Rather than understanding the attraction to some of these strange narrative features as aberrant or malformed readings of a singular message that stresses morality or ethics, I attend to a diverse set of readings that may tell us not only about how everyday readers reflect on sacred texts, but why it is that both ancient and modern readers continually come back to particular, indeterminate narrative features within the book of Jonah even for different reasons. Of course, this is not to say that ancient scholars and modern lay readers form some sort of continuum. What I am saying, however, is that neither ancient nor modern interpreters operate with the same set of literary and religious expectations that modern biblical scholars possess. In this way, we “provincialize” and destabilize biblical scholars as attending to particular historical interests of what it meant to its earliest readers and religious ideas of how stories, myths, and canonical texts function. At the same time, we begin to see, however modestly, how sacred texts, as important and familiar stories, function socially. And perhaps in the uptake, we can then begin to notice narrative features and patterns that modern readers are continually attracted to, signaling to us that an original meaning applied correctly or incorrectly is a misguided attempt at controlling the indeterminate aspects already compositionally baked into the book.

Beyond the particular argument I am making in my dissertation, the ethnographic section of the dissertation serves several additional roles. Contemporary religious communities do not necessarily share the same historical values as academic readers and interact with the text in a way that is not arbitrated by an original meaning accessible only to the astute historian or ancient audience. Moreover, while the history of interpretation of Jonah has been well documented up

until the early modern era, very little has been written on its reception in contemporary contexts including the many ritual settings religious communities engage in like homilies, study groups, funerals/weddings, holy days, devotionals, or rituals.¹⁴ I hope that the modest data pool I have consulted can add to the modest body of scholarly literature on Jonah's reception history in contemporary, popular settings.

Core Questions & Contributions

I began this dissertation by arguing that myths are invoked in order to respond to concrete social contexts and crises. Rather than understand them as stories about timeless truths, etiologies, or cultural values broadly conceived, I followed J.Z. Smith and his students in thinking about them as an attempt to mobilize existing resources that can be enacted by being told and retold. The project's first section produced innovative research on how the ancient author(s) of Jonah rethought traditional, authoritative material within the Hebrew Bible to adapt to their new diasporic status in Babylon and beyond. This second section, through ethnographic research comprised of interviews and site visits, considers how contemporary everyday laypersons continue to draw on this text in an active attempt to reflect on religious commitments and cultural issues. Interviewing religious leaders and laypersons decenters modern scholarly sensibilities about the book of Jonah by pointing to its diverse use in social life, allowing us to rethink previously unquestioned assumptions about the purpose of sacred texts. Through a trans-

¹⁴ See his first chapter reviewing pre-modern and modern interpretations of Jonah in Thomas M. Bolin. *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1997), 13-67; Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings*, 325-456; for a line-by-line reception history of Jonah, see Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer. *Jonah through the Centuries*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2022; for modern literature, see Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer. "Jonah in 20th Century Literature." *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 13, no. 7 (2022): 661.

temporal and cross-cultural comparison of these ancient and modern communities, we learn that retelling this canonical text is related to its dynamic ‘upside-down’ features historically anchored to its ancient community in Babylon, but that continues to engage contemporary imaginations.

Methodology

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of California, Davis in November 2022, I began interviewing religious leaders and congregants in the Greater Sacramento area through April 2023. The religious communities I’ve identified are geographically proximate but highly stratified according to religion, race, and class and consciously draw from different denominations within each religion. For example, among Protestant groups, I was sure to interview participants from the so-called ‘mainline’ denominations like the Presbyterian Church (USA) and United Methodist Church (UMC) in addition to non-denominational and evangelical congregations. Due to the natural boundaries that form within religious congregations, I employed cluster sampling, that is, sampling naturally occurring groups like religious organizations (e.g. synagogues, churches, religious organizations). All possible participants were included in the sample among the chosen research settings. Recruitment largely depended on the research site, but methods relied on personal networks and snowball sampling developed over my time in the area and requesting participants to recommend anyone else related to the congregation that might be interested.

Participants were asked a series of closed- and open-ended questions in a semi-structured one-on-one interview format. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours depending on the participant’s enthusiasm, external commitments, and a range of other factors. Participants consented to be audio-recorded and could exercise their right to add, modify, or excise what was

said post-interview. Shortly after the interview, participants were provided a transcript of the interview and could add to the content if they chose.

The questionnaire was broken into three distinct but related sections. The first section involved asking basic biographical questions. Of particular relevance for this study were questions about education level, their job or career, and eventually leading into their role at their respective religious organization. While I will detail the results below, I was surprised to discover that nearly every participant possessed a high education level, with some even boasting doctorates. The second section focused on the participant's roles at their respective religious organization and engagement with the Bible/Torah. In addition to how frequently they attended, I was also interested in how deeply they felt their engagement to be meaningful. For example, while one participant only seldom engaged at her church on Sunday, she frequently attended small groups throughout the week and felt a sense of ownership over them. In order to better understand what their respective religious text meant to each participant, I began with questions involving how often they came up and in what contexts. Participants were not typically surprised by a focus on sacred texts since they all had read a generic email sent to them that vaguely described the project and what to expect. There was typically a natural progression to defining the role of the sacred text for them, though I did occasionally ask it outright. In the third and final section, I introduced the story of Jonah to the participant. I began by asking what comes to mind when they heard this name which typically, though not always, involved the book of the Bible. For the most part, participants were able to recite most of the story. I asked the participant to recall other times or contexts when they interacted with the story and followed up on elements the participant focused on or found interesting. I typically asked the participant to summarize some of the themes or "takeaways" of the story which almost invariably led to a sort of modern

application connected to elements they found interesting. Depending on the conversation, I also had several possible questions on hand to explore whether the participants found the story, or any of the elements therein, to be humorous.

General Results

The results of the study are organized under three distinct themes. While many of the participants acknowledged another issue or theme, I slotted each according to the theme they spoke on most fully. Many of the participants, if grouped by religious denomination, were attracted to particular readings of Jonah, though not exclusively. For example, I found an interest in the great fish and science among white evangelicals but occasionally found this interest among mainline Protestants as well.

The three primary themes I found among participants were 1) a folkloric, globetrotting prophet possessing universal relevance, 2) the great fish and its relationship to modern science, and 3) an interest in the disobedience of the prophet and the participant's subsequent identification with him. These three themes have all been mentioned, or briefly explored in modern biblical scholarship, but they are typically rallied to serve an ultimate end. In my interviews, participants seemed much more open to conversing about the particular theme or issue they identified rather than arguing for a particular claim. In my view they are interested in the many "indeterminate" elements throughout the narrative such as a runaway prophet, a fish capable of swallowing a person and spewing them out unharmed, and several other features where the narrative does not explain their significance. I am also aware that if my theoretical insight suggests that myths are retold to deal with particular issues, then my hearing implicates me in a relationship whereby participants are dealing with those issues as I interviewed them.

The Globe Trotting Prophet in Mainline Settings

I began meeting with religious leaders and laypersons from mainline denominations – a term that encapsulates some of the more established Protestant denominations within the U.S. and a subset of American Christianity I was perhaps most familiar with. These participants came primarily from Presbyterian Church (USA) and United Methodist (UMC) institutions. And almost invariably, many of them probed the psychological aspects of the prophet. They imagined what it was like to be the prophet and frequently sympathized with him even as they were ambivalent about whether Jonah was in the right or wrong. At least five participants explicitly mentioned Jonah’s cognitive state throughout the narrative and frequently alluded to the story as a sort of global folktale. According to these participants, the narrative elements therein were found to be so common across other cultures that it must hold some sort of relevance for any and all cultures and psychological metaphors were frequently employed in order to consider the mental health and well-being of themselves or others alongside the prophet.

Jeff, a United Methodist clergyperson and I decided to meet on Zoom. I tended to prefer meeting in person to establish a sense of trust, but he and I have known each other for a few years already.¹⁵ The interview was light and a sense of trust and curiosity pervaded the more than an hour-long exchange. He is highly educated and well-read, having finished three degrees in Psychology and one in theology. I ask him about his congregation and, having pastored there for over 8 years, he cares deeply about their well-being and frequently draws on his educational

¹⁵ All names and locations mentioned in the study have been swapped out for others to retain the privacy of the individuals and conform to IRB standards.

background in psychology to tend to his congregants. Jeff deals with typical problems most religious leaders have:

J: I'd say the biggest challenge of ministry, apart from, you know, personalities and dynamics like that is just the continual planning of sermons. That's a big, big challenge trying to plan not just the content, but to get enough of it planned in advance. So that I can pass off that information for the AV tech folks, the choir so they can pick pieces in advance enough to practice and to get, you know, if the children are gonna be involved, to make sure that they have enough lead time to do that.

Despite these challenges, he is typically very organized and plans sermons several weeks in advance that touch on particular interests for his community. He is planning on retiring in the next few years.

When asked to describe some of the characteristics of the church, he relayed a message that the former pastor had said to him when he took the job, "He called to congratulate me and then he said, you know, I've always wondered how the church lasted this long because I thought they never could decide whether they want to be a church or not." I inquired further and he suggested that the church is made up of self-identified liberal progressives who do not want to be identified with Christianity so much as engage in social justice and find a community. Not only do they shy away from Christian nomenclature and theological claims, but there are other (non)-religious traditions present in the congregation. He says, "And so folks who get a little spooked by using the word Christian there, there in Davis, in that congregation. And some wanna be Buddhist." Indeed, many of the congregants are highly educated, come from the hard sciences, and "are agnostic, at least possibly even atheistic, uh, as well, but really come down, clear about wanting to do, um, good for the common good."

Jeff, then, is dealing with a religiously diverse congregation located in a university town. How does he rally some of the narrative elements of Jonah to deal with this immediate issue? Over the course of the interview, he mentioned the title of a book that he often gives out to parishioners. Mentioned explicitly at least eight times, Jeff recommended *Dark Nights of the Soul* (not to be confused with the 16th-century work written by St. John of the Cross). Written by the psychotherapist and Catholic monk Thomas Moore, it is a popular book, and as the subtitle suggests, is meant to serve as “A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life’s Ordeals.”¹⁶ Indeed, he explicitly ties the themes and purpose of this book with Jonah:

J: It’s called *Dark Nights of the Soul*, and he talks about - it’s the Jonah Experience.

A: Mm.

J: And, uh, how you take that ride. You don’t know how long you’ll be in the whale, but when you come out, you will have a different take on life.

Jeff finds significance in the hardships Jonah experiences throughout the narrative, though the fish figures most prominently, and ties it to Moore’s book which suggests the book is a metaphor for points of contention and transition from one “life stage” to the next. And cognizant of the narrative that depicts Jonah as unchanged following his experience in the digestive tract of the great fish, Jeff extends the metaphor to a broader spiritual journey:

J: Although Jonah took a little longer than the belly ride, um, for it to really take hold.

Uh, but the whole idea about, uh, whining by the tree and, you know, poor, poor me suffering when it shrivels and all of that, I, I just really, uh, that just summarizes so well the idea of, uh, the spiritual journey.

¹⁶ Thomas Moore. *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way through Life's Ordeals*. Piatkus, 2012.

The connection between Thomas Moore's psychoanalytic approach and Jeff's training as a clinical therapist is an easy one to make, but I want to suggest a broader hermeneutical framework Jeff takes up in order to attend to his religiously diverse congregation and the narrative features of Jonah. In an early section of the interview, he discusses how he moved away "from a more literalist understanding of scripture" from his childhood to a different type of reading:

J: You know, more *mythical* um, uh, narrative. Uh, being able to play with it more and to see how I think the gospel writers, uh, were able to weave, uh, *formulaic narratives* all the way *from the creation story to even the nativity, uh, announcement of a royal birth.* Uh, being able to use things from their own culture to communicate the *core of their message, the gospel.* So, uh, over time, I've spent more time, not as a conservative, much more time as a, uh, open-minded, uh, theologian I think. [italics added]

If we follow Jeff's biblical hermeneutic, we see that the essence, or "core" message of the Gospel is written in a "mythical" fashion one can uncover through playing with and examining cultural elements as a vehicle for an underlying message. As an "open-minded theologian," Jeff finds a "richness" in scripture and does not get "stuck on proof-texting or anything like that."

It should come as no surprise, then, that when I introduce the third section of the interview on Jonah Jeff references broad cross-cultural themes that tell us something about the "mythical" aspect of the biblical text:

J: Yeah, it has something of, uh, kind of a, a Greek fable, uh, texture to it. It's, uh, because in, Greek culture too, studying this in English, well in literature class about, if something was going wrong in the town, you find the person that's responsible for bringing the plague or whatever the child's suffering from, and you kick 'em out. And

then things are supposed to get better. So Jonah, you know, carries that with him and in the boat.

Paired with Moore's psychological journey through the life-stages, Jeff understands the story of Jonah to point towards a more fundamental, universal message readily applicable to anybody who goes through the "Jonah Experience." The story of Jonah is a testament to a broader, cross-cultural theme found in the psyche and experience of all individuals called "The Dark Nights of the Soul" where Jonah is a "stand-in for whoever, um, the writer is trying to reach or speak...and so it has to do with intercultural elements, uh, with humanity and nature."

By understanding Jonah as a story fundamentally about a more universal spiritual experience, I suggest he is attending to his specific (non-)religiously diverse congregation averse to theological claims. For example, the interpretive link between Jonah and Jesus would likely not hold much sway in the congregation, but framing the story as applicable to humanity more broadly has been effective. Jeff has stated that he has handed out copies of the book when discussing Jonah to several congregants and received positive feedback. Indeed, my interviews with congregants of his have occasionally brought up, either directly or indirectly, the psychological and cross-cultural frame Jeff submitted.

I met Annabelle, a congregant of Jeff at the United Methodist Church, at a local coffee shop for just over an hour. We sipped coffee and made our way through the interview as somewhat atypical café music buttressed our discussion about her family, her approach to the Bible, and Jonah. As "Ain't No Rest for the Wicked" by *Cage the Elephant* blared over the speakers directly above us, she spoke extensively about her recent promotion to Director of Children's Ministry at the church. She credits her success at her job, in part, to her degree in Speech Communication, Theater Arts, and English Literature with the skills she developed from

her education. She grew up in upstate New York and came to view the old Dutch Reformed Church her family attended as a place of community and the perfect place to play hide-and-seek in “because it had so many nooks and crannies.” Like Jeff, she deals with typical issues a Director of Children’s Ministry struggles with after the pandemic, but sincerely enjoys teaching children and connecting families together in common purpose.

When asked about Jonah, she upheld a similar interpretive dichotomy Jeff had proposed between a literal and allegorical reading:

A: So Jonah and the whale, um, Jonah, do I think he was literally swallowed by a fish? That’s a matter of faith for some *chuckles* Do I think that perhaps it could be an allegory for being, still feeling so lost and alone and really wrestling with what you’re called to do and not really wanting to acknowledge what you’re supposed to do? That could be what the story tells us.

When asked to recount portions of the narrative, she typically selects those elements that highlight the prophet’s introspection and repentance. For example, she narrates Jonah’s psalm as an honest source of repentance and an assent to the deity’s will. And as the Director of Children’s Ministry, she connects feelings of loneliness to Jonah’s experience in the whale. I was fortunate to have interviewed her relatively recently after she had taught Jonah in her curriculum. In addition, it was taught at the same time as a “faith decision” like confirmation or baptism:

A: When I told the story, it wasn’t so much, and I, I had older kids that day, and so I was like, do I literally think that this is, you know, he’s been swallowed by a whale scientifically? No. We know that’s not possible. But what if we were to think of the whale as being something that you’re completely like surrounded and you’re lost, and you can’t see which direction you’re going in? And so, the kids latch onto it and they’re

like, ‘Yeah, I’ve been in situations like that.’ Where it’s like I have decisions to make in my own life and I don’t know what to do.

Indeed, she is cognizant of the fact that the older kids she is teaching are starting to make more decisions for themselves as they enter middle school, decide what classes to take and what activities to do after school or whether to go to summer camp. In this telling, Annabelle narrates the wayward prophet’s resistance and his experience in the whale as a relatable story applicable to everyone, including the children she works with. The moral or ethical message that biblical scholars typically propose for Jonah may be acceptable for Annabelle, but what is pressed into service and used in social life is the obstinate prophet Annabelle and children can relate.

Again, tying Annabelle’s reading to her occupation is a clear example of retelling myths to solve a particular social issue, but I want to also consider her incorporation of other folktales like Disney’s Pinocchio and Jewish children’s literature she receives in the mail. Annabelle briefly narrates the story of Pinocchio, drawing parallels between Jonah and Pinocchio, and describing the relationship between the two:

A: I know also with Jonah and the whale, there’s also allegory back to the modern fairytale, Pinocchio. And how Pinocchio is repeatedly messing up...his father has clearly told him what to do. He refuses, he keeps getting sidetracked, and all these other temptations and horrible things happen.

She describes both characters as going “through a series of mess ups,” but at the end he’s turned into a real boy. In other words, she sees a narrative arc in both stories where both characters recognize what they ought to be doing. Rather than an explicitly theological claim or message, Annabelle suggests that the book/story is an attempt to reflect on the choices we make as

individuals to make us “to be, you know human, and how to be a better human” and Pinocchio is a modern retelling of an ancient story still relevant today.

With a conception of Jonah as an applicable narrative about how to be a better human and cope with the difficult choices everyone must make, she actively draws on Jewish children’s literature she receives in the mail through a North American Jewish non-profit organization called PJ Library. Designed for children ages 0-10, the organization mails books to families interested in holidays and other aspects of Jewish life. She spoke at length about the admirable work the organization does, especially in relation to her own family and has amassed a small library of these texts. But beyond her own personal collection, she uses these in Sunday school as well:

A: So one of the things that I do in Sunday school is I will actually use some of those books because they still relate. And I might not say the word Jewish in there, but you know, the story still works. It’s true.

Annabelle finds that the PJ Library books mesh well with her own conception of how the biblical text functions because she sets in a pragmatic framework applicable to her setting as the Director of Children’s Ministry, but also as a text applicable beyond Christian tradition:

A: And that’s how I got Jonah and the Whale. I incorporated Pinocchio because it needed to be something that, yeah, it’s an old story, but it was just like, there’s lots of other stories in the modern world that you can kind of pull back to because, you know, every story built upon, is just a retelling that somebody may have just retold.

For Annabelle, it is clear that Jonah, and possibly other biblical texts, “still relate” to themes of feeling lost and making difficult choices. It is unclear to me whether she envisions other folktales as a simple retelling of the Jonah story or how exactly these sources relate, but what is clear is

that by setting Jonah alongside modern folktales like Pinocchio and Jewish children's literature, she attests to a less particular, theological claim about Jonah that serves children (and their families) with practical guidance.

The "global profile" of Jonah does not solely reside within this particular Methodist congregation and I have found that it is part of a broader trend within mainline congregations. I met Moon, a faculty member in political science at a local university, at a dog park. The hour-long interview, interspersed with the playful barks and growls of rowdy canines, touched on her own Korean background and transition to North American mainline churches. She ultimately began attending a United Methodist Church soon after moving to the area and occasionally contrasts the church she grew up in South Korea to the one she attends now. She frequently attends on Sunday in addition to a weekly small group. Her small group, composed of roughly six highly educated women, is meant to build community and stimulate conversation related to the week's biblical text and Sunday sermon. She enjoys the time to connect with others and throughout her week frequently reflects on what events she will relate to her small group.

When asked about Jonah, she immediately exclaimed "The fish!" and related it to Pinocchio, though she initially confused it with a traditional Korean fairytale. She recalled broad details of the narrative, noting that "God told Jonah to do something or go somewhere and Jonah didn't want to. So he was trying to escape from God, and then I think he was on kind of some ship, and there was this big wave and then he was thrown into a big fish's belly." Yet in similar fashion to Jeff and Annabelle, she set it alongside broader cultural themes:

M: I mean like specific manifestations can be different, but I think that kind of theme of we are trying to escape from something you're supposed to do, and then you're thrown into a, you know, like challenging situation and then you change your mind and then, you

know, you escape. You know, I think that place can be sometimes a fish belly, sometimes you go to an under-the-sea kingdom or you're abducted by some kind of, you know, devils or something like that. So think there are a lot of variations, but you know, this kind of, there's this kind of motive that you try to escape.

Moon's broad narration of Jonah fits her conception of how the story functions. She imagines Jonah is but one manifestation of a broader cross-cultural folktale of escaping from what you are supposed to ultimately do. The details and particularities are more-or-less interchangeable, for example, the "place can be sometimes a fish belly, sometimes you go to an under-the-sea kingdom" and the challenges can vary from story to story, but at its core, Moon identifies a motive to escape these challenges as a common feature among other stories. Elsewhere, she states it in a concise way, that "Those themes in the book are not very unique to Jonah. I think there are other variations, other, other cultures kind of a similar theme."

For Moon, she attributes the real message of Jonah in conjunction with stories found in other cultures as well. When asked to summarize some of the themes or messages Jonah, she submitted two:

M: There is this punishment element, right? If you don't do what I say...if you don't do the things I say you need to do, then you'll be in trouble. You know, *you'll learn a lesson*. So I think there's than punishment and also an element of *destiny*. However you try to avoid or try to defy, there's a certain like set of path or the ultimate goal...And then no matter what, eventually you're going to do what you're supposed to do. [italics added]

The elements of punishment and destiny working in conjunction with one another make up the driving purpose of the book. Readers are intended to learn and sympathize with Jonah, Pinocchio, and other "human" characters that need not conform to a historical or theological

account as some interpreters have suggested. In fact, reading Jonah through the lens of “destiny” allows one to draw in other story elements and themes from global folktales

What is particularly interesting about Moon is that she noted not ever discussing Jonah at her small group or hearing it from the pulpit. When recalling the details of Jonah, she says, “I think my memory, however incorrect that is, I think that was shaped when I learned and read the Bible in Korea.” Indeed, when I interviewed Moon’s pastor, he had a difficult time remembering the details of the book of Jonah and narrated elements of Job instead. At the end of the interview, he and I went through the archives of sermons posted online over the past several years and discovered that Jonah had never been preached from the pulpit. Two points might be surmised from this phenomenon. First, Moon may be importing interpretive notions of Jonah from her previous church context in Korea. She emphasized the role of disobedience and destiny when describing the message of Jonah and this aligns quite well with how she characterized her church in Korea. Second, despite Moon’s pastor knowing little to nothing about the story of Jonah without reviewing or preparing beforehand, his identification of Job with Jonah is quite interesting. While at first, I thought it was a linguistic mix-up, many participants connected Jonah with Job as a suffering figure.

I do not mean to say that the mainline folks above created this hermeneutical framework whole cloth. After all, many folktales around the world involve a fish swallowing someone. Drawing on Stith-Thompson’s folk motif index, Susan Niditch shows that the fish swallowing man does indeed appear frequently in diverse cultures around the world.¹⁷ She ultimately

¹⁷ Susan Niditch. “Fish Swallows Man: The Tale of Jonah and Its Reception History in Folkloristic Perspective.” In *Ve-’Ed Ya’aleh (Gen 2:6): Volume 2: Essays in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Edward L. Greenstein*, edited by Peter Machinist, Robert A. Harris, Joshua A. Berman, Nili Samet, and Noga Ayali-Darshan, 1079–96. The

suggests its prevalence can, in part, be attributed to its “implicit universal, humanistic concerns” which include “fears of the unknown and of being swallowed up; hopes for survival and revival against all odds; the desire to maintain one’s routine even in the most challenging of circumstances; the appeal of imagery that captures the serendipitous and the unlikely.”¹⁸ Of course, beyond the broad psychoanalytic themes Niditch identifies, there are distinct aspects that draw from each participant’s background and congregational context.

I suggest that each of the participants is also drawing from the effects of the missionary movement in mainline Christianity. In what David Hollinger calls “The Missionary Boomerang” of the early-to-mid 20th century, predominantly Protestant missionaries went abroad to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, bringing back “unexpected baggage” that did not always conform to a typical narrative of religious and cultural colonization.¹⁹ As Hollinger notes, “The rest of humanity was more than a needy expanse, awaiting the benevolence and supervision of American Protestants. Many returning missionaries became informal ambassadors from foreign peoples to Americans and vocal advocates of tolerance and inclusion.”²⁰ Indeed, missionaries returned to the U.S. as highly influential figures, oftentimes possessing prestigious university degrees from Yale, Princeton, Amherst, and others, but additionally rubbing shoulders with presidents and political figures like Taft, Coolidge, and Wilson and businessman like Rockefeller. These mainline Protestant missionaries differed significantly from evangelicals and could be described as a universalizing tendency where other cultures and religions were

Society of Biblical Literature, 2021. Niditch’s folkloric approach will also likely appear in her forthcoming *Hermeneia* commentary.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ David A. Hollinger. *Christianity’s American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 46-47.

²⁰ Hollinger, *Christianity’s American Fate*, 47.

understood to possess their own valid values and truth claims. From this perspective, the mainline Protestant missionary ought to engage in education and philanthropy rather than preaching, and working alongside populations rather than dominating them.²¹ A provincialized Christianity stemming from globalization necessarily comes with a provincialized understanding of its sacred text – the Bible. In an ethnographic project of progressive Christians, Rebekka King asks Deborah, “Do you think there is anything special in Christian stories or the Bible?”²² Deborah does not exactly say that there is *nothing* special about these stories, but suggests one must “mine” the text to find something of value, and more importantly, that “other books of wisdom might be useful in the twenty-first century.”²³ Set alongside other texts capable of providing “wisdom,” the Bible is seen as one authoritative source among many.

Naturally, the hermeneutical framework above is not strictly found among mainline Protestants. I interviewed Rabbi Horowitz, a Conservative rabbi who had just recently moved to the area within the year, at a local coffee shop. Drawing from his “Neo-Hasidic” training at the Institute of Jewish Spirituality in New York, he states that Jonah tells the reader that “Each of us has a unique mission to follow. Jonah has a mission to follow – he strays from his mission. If you stray from your mission, you will get back there.” But Rabbi Horowitz does not see this message as a uniquely Jewish or Hasidic idea. Soon after, he tells me that he had a “former client who’s a spiritualist, was a medium” but similarly articulated a notion of individual missions.

²¹ Ibid, 62. The sentiment of cooperation rather than colonial domination remains an influential approach in mainline missionizing. See the recently published Bennett Hunter Farrell and Shankur Balajiedlang Khylllep. *Freeing Congregational Mission: A Practical Vision for Companionship, Cultural Humility, and Co-Development*. Downers Grove, IL: Academic, An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2022.

²² Rebekka King. *The New Heretics: Skepticism, Secularism, and Progressive Christianity*. (Cambridge: New York University Press, 2023), 106.

²³ King, *The New Heretics*, 106.

Elsewhere, he draws on the rabbinic tradition that Jonah was not Jewish, and like Balaam, it “doesn’t matter if you’re Jewish or not. Certain people merit to have the word of, uh, God, uh, through them.” For Rabbi Horowitz, parts of Jonah transcend its historical context and have broader currency among other cultures.

Swallowing & Vomiting Oppositional Epistemologies: Jonah’s Whale in Social Life

Few narrative features in the Hebrew Bible have drawn as much attention as the whale (or rather, great fish). It has served an important plot element in books like *Moby Dick* and continues to inspire modern imaginations in recently published books like *The Book of Jonah: A Novel* by Joshua Max Feldman and *Then the Fish Swallowed Him* by Amir Ahmadi Arian.²⁴ Indeed, interest in the fish is not a purely modern phenomenon. This chapter began by highlighting an ancient synagogue with a mosaic depicting Jonah being swallowed by several fish. The 8th-9th century midrashic rabbinic work *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* explains in great detail the role of the fish in Jonah and only gestures towards some of the themes that modern scholars have proposed.²⁵ For whatever reason, the great fish has drawn the attention of artists, writers, and interpreters for quite some time and found it a flexible literary device to express sentiments of isolation and abandonment as in Ahmadi Arian’s account or as a main course in the apocalyptic feast described in *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer*.

²⁴ Amīr Aḥmadī Āriyān. *Then the Fish Swallowed Him: A Novel*. New York, NY: HarperVia, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2020; Joshua Max Feldman. *The Book of Jonah: A Novel*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014.

²⁵ On the inclusion of the apocalyptic role of Jonah, see Rachel Adelman. *The Return of the Repressed: Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha*. Leiden: Brill, 2009; Steven Daniel Sacks. *Midrash and Multiplicity: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Renewal of Rabbinic Interpretive Culture*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.

Yet modern biblical scholars have largely ignored or actively dissuaded readers from focusing on the great fish. And in some ways their concern is justified. If we judge the importance of a theme solely according to how much time the book dedicates to it, the importance of the fish is minor at best. The book devotes only two verses to the fish that bookend Jonah's fairly generic song. The fish never appears again and doesn't ostensibly appear to connect to the major themes in Jonah that modern biblical scholars have suggested. The literary values of scholars that prioritize a cohesive, unified message anchored in patterned textual features finds difficulty in assigning much importance to the fish at all. For biblical scholars then, the fish distracts readers from the real ethical and/or moral messages the book puts forth at the end of the book in the dialogue between the deity and prophet.

I want to suggest that interacting with myths and stories like Jonah's in social life produces a different portrait of the great fish. If my central point, building on Smith, is that myths are produced and retold to deal with immediate social and political issues, then what might be the purpose of focusing on the fish? What immediate social issue does it help resolve or reflect on and how can interviewing clergy and laypersons reveal something not just about myth or stories, but Jonah and how religious texts function?

I met Jonathan, the pastor of a roughly 200-person congregational church²⁶ at one of his favorite coffee shops for about an hour. He is white, middle-aged, and able to communicate in a warm and concise fashion while also being somewhat introverted. Jonathan attended a conservative, evangelical seminary and enjoyed the time spent there, although he is also quick to

²⁶ From an emic perspective, when asked whether he would characterize his congregation as evangelical or non-denominational, he preferred the term "post-denominational." From an etic perspective, he attended an evangelical seminary and many of his congregants adhere to typically evangelical beliefs, ideas, and practices.

point out that seminary was more a springboard for ministry that equipped him with basic tools rather than a comprehensive education. He has been at his congregation for about 4 years and it is made up of community members as well as a significant undergraduate and graduate population who appreciate the inquisitive nature of the church that talks “a lot about questions over answers.” According to both Jonathan and his congregants I interviewed, the church has had a great deal of turnover after “It blew up pretty significantly and ugly in 2016 and 2017” due to issues in leadership. The congregation largely consisted of “pretty traditionally evangelical” congregants when it was planted about 20 years ago and many of them left during the transition. However, what remains in the church are those traditional evangelicals and those who may identify socially and politically as progressive evangelicals. This distinction is seen in his description of how his congregants approach the biblical text:

J: We have people have a background in like, I mean, they come with like their bricks, their bible bricks...these like gnarly study bibles with notes and everything and, you know, if it's not, you know, if we don't spend an hour going through two verses, like it wasn't deep enough...On the other extreme we have people who, you know, it's much more of the like flop it open and like, oh, this is what God wants to speak to me today.

Jonathan pastors a congregation with perhaps a similar age range and stage of life, but very different approaches to the Bible, emblemized by how different congregants treat the Bible as a textual artifact.

When asked about the plot of Jonah, he is able to relate nearly every detail of the book back to me and picks up on some of the more inconspicuous literary features. Yet his first inclination was to delineate how two types of congregants understood the story – a historical narrative that actually happened or a folktale. He says, “So when we taught on Jonah, one of the

ways we got into it was to say that there is this debate about like, did this really happen or not?”

Who is asking this question and what it means for the question is clear to Jonathan. The traditional evangelical congregant is seeking to explain how it is possible that a historical prophet named Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and spit back up on shore. He voices their concerns:

J: For some of us, we live in a world where if we question the validity of this story, you know, and if we say, like, people don't get swallowed by whales and spit out three days later, like this is ridiculous. Our whole faith falls apart, right?

The sentiment Jonathan is voicing through his congregants often comes with particular doctrinal views on the inerrancy characteristic of the evangelical right. If we ascribe metaphorical language to the Bible in one area, then the argument goes that other portions of the biblical text that are especially important, like the resurrection, might be as well. Such a view can be traced, at the very least, from the rise of American fundamentalism in the early 20th century and the arrival of European biblical criticism, and can still be read in theologically conservative commentaries on Jonah today.²⁷ On the other hand, he responds to those in his congregation who might say the story is a fairytale,

J: If you live in a world that's purely rational, um, and, you know, and...again, whales don't eat people and spit 'em back out, you know, this is, this is a fairy tale or whatever.

Like I would also submit that we live in a very weird universe.

Jonathan also attempts to counter notions that the narrative is purely fiction and occasionally references historical details pertinent to the story's composition. He holds open the possibility

²⁷ See, for example, Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page. *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*. (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 217-219; David W Baker, (David Weston), T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke. *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 51-55.

that truly strange events do occur and thus suggests that, perhaps, the events in the story really did happen.

J: What's beautiful about this story is that it pushes on it, it, it's gonna push on all of us...if we are like very tight-fisted around a hyper-literal interpretation of Scripture, this story's gonna mess with us a little bit...It [also] pushes on the rational, well, you know, science says blah, blah, blah, blah.

The tension between what is probable and impossible becomes a source of reflection concerning the relationship between science and faith represented by the two different groups within his congregation. He suggests it is a story that prompts reflection on our own position and ultimately allowing one to come to some deeper sense of knowledge about the book, but also God's activity in the world.

Beyond reflection, how does reflecting on the relationship between science and religion in this particular congregation help solve social issues or problems? I suggest Jonathan pragmatically uses this discussion to reconcile two competing hermeneutical models. He invokes a third conclusion that assents to neither what he calls the "pre-rational" position of arguing that the whale swallowed Jonah, nor the "rational" position of claiming the story is a fairytale. In fact, he believes the story is compositionally designed to "mess with us" and push us beyond our own ideas of the sensible. He says,

J: And again, it kind of pushes us in a third direction, which is there's, there's some deep truths in this story that we need to sit with. So, while those are important questions and things to wrestle with. Like, let's, let's sort of hold those open handedly and then let's get to like, what is the story really trying to tell us?

What the story is “really trying to tell us” is that “there are people that we don’t like that God loves and that really messes with us.” He submits a position that aligns quite well with traditional biblical scholarship, but it is crucial to set his argument within the context of his congregation. For Jonathan, the “people that we don’t like” shift according to the reader’s political and social position. He suggests, “We live in a divided country, right? So, you know, these fricking anti-vaxxers are, I mean, pick, pick your thing, right? Or, you know, these Black Lives Matter protestors.”²⁸ In other words, what the story is “really trying to tell us” maps superbly well on to the contrasting hermeneutical assumptions his congregants possess. What follows, then, is an accounting, first, for the historicity of the fish and its relationship to science. After these fundamental disagreements that appear within the congregation, Jonathan pivots to the “real” message of the book that pragmatically functions to maintain cohesion and solve the problem of hermeneutical difference within the congregation.

For the most part, participants cast the role of the fish in the book in scientific terms and waver on whether such a thing is possible or not, but some take the opportunity to explore the relationship more explicitly in our interview. Dean and I met in the office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) he attends for roughly an hour and a half. He is older, having attended the church for almost 20 years, and speaks vividly about growing up in Korea and how it shaped his religious life. He converted to Christianity in his late teens as a Korean refugee and connects deeply with themes of exile and departure, frequently referencing Abram’s flight and “how he left his Haran with his parents, and then without any notion other than that God told him to.” He resonates with a message about a “personal God...not the familial or not the inheritance God, but

²⁸ My interviews with two of his congregants demonstrate these political and social problems are live issues at the moment.

personal conviction, personal God that resonated with me.” Dean recently retired from being a Child Psychologist, having been active in the American Psychiatric Association and the Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and is adjusting to having more free time.

Dean expressed his interest in the relationship between religion and science early on in the interview and without prompting. He becomes almost giddy at discussing this relationship and it is clear it means a great deal to him. He loves to “look at the universe” and the “black holes” and finds it “very exciting to have a merge of science and faith. It is not contradictory. It works very well.” In fact, he has woven his scientific curiosity into his own religious life and tells me, “That’s how I operationalize, you know, and the church has, uh, rules and traditions, people comfortable how they grew up with Christmas and Easter. I’m not opposed to it, but it is, my personal journey.” Not quite an iconoclast, Dean prefers to find religious significance through scientific inquiry rather than the traditional Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter. He provides an example that connects his scientific interest with the biblical text, “Somewhere on the line there’s a God that I cannot put in a hall and that’s consistently true in the Bible, there’s a ‘don’t call me names cause you cannot define me.’ That kind of resonates with me.” It is unsurprising that he enjoys discussing Jonah and latches on to the whale episode to further reflect on the relationship between religion and science.

As opposed to the moral or ethical message some modern biblical scholars espouse, Dean instantly attends to the fish and its relationship to science, “That brings the science and then at the same time the faith... The miracle is a part that is beyond your comprehension, that’s what a miracle is.” I ask, “So what miracle are you talking about right now?” He responds, “He just, uh, the whole body is in the whale’s belly. And three days later or whatever, they spew out and then came out. And that is a miracle.” He is, of course, aware of the many narrative elements within

Jonah and occasionally alludes to them, but the brief two verses take up Dean's imagination more than any other.

And yet, Dean never quite makes up his mind about whether the fish incident is a real, historic event, or whether it should be taken as a symbol. On the one hand, he states with clarity that the event "is like a fairytale. It's not necessarily the real, real event, like a historical account of somebody and Jonah was swallowed up and it came back and, uh, yeah, that's a good imagination." The message, then, becomes symbolic of resurrection and an appreciation for a deity who surprisingly intervenes in our lives:

D: I got that much as... a kind of symbolic story of God has a kind of an unusual way of, uh, you know, intervening. Even for one soul who is strolling with his argument within himself, God tells him, "Do this" and then you go in the opposite direction! *chuckling* And so that's where, uh, God can intervene.

This interpretation of the fish experience aligns well with his own interest in the Bible and a deity who deeply cares for the person on an individual level. For Dean, the fish shows that the deity cares for the prophet and actively intervenes on his behalf.

In contrast to his symbolic interpretation of the fish, he also considers whether the story possesses any scientific or historical veracity. He returns to his definition of a miracle that suggests the event may have indeed been a historical occurrence:

D: It's not a calculated conclusion. It's not science. It's beyond science. And yet I'm so amazed about the science too. It's, it is not doing away with it, but there are the things that limit my science could, after all the fantastic stories of a million, uh, that's beyond my comprehension.

Dean paves the way for the possibility that miracles, by their very definition, are beyond the instruments of science and cannot be considered in such a way. He provides a more concrete example involving the fish from his own observations:

D: Must be a huge, you know, I've been to Hawaii. I've seen the one now close up, one now the whales can be pretty big. I don't know at that time, just as big as it is now. But it can swallow up in the belly and it can be done, uh, without being more chewed up before the process of it, just whole fish going in. And then it, it may happen.

And beyond the moral or ethical message biblical scholars suggest, the fish and its meaning stand at the center for Dean. When asked about one of the central themes of Jonah, he simply states, "God does things beyond our comprehension, beyond our common sense." It is worth noting that he grounds his evidence in personal experience in a place like Hawaii and his own observation. His reflection concerning the verifiable is grounded in the imagination of the biblical text and actively worked out through scientific inquiry and observation.

This section has shown that rather than conform to modern, biblical literary values about what Jonah ought to say, clergy and laypersons use indeterminate narrative elements as a springboard to speak about broader social and cultural issues. In this case, it is the relationship between religion and science that finds its base in a brief text narrating the feat of a large fish/whale swallowing a human for three days and spitting them back on shore unharmed. As a religious leader of an evangelical congregation, Jonathan used this episode pragmatically – to set up two different poles of expectations represented in his congregation and ultimately point toward a third, "middle" way that sought to reconcile the two positions. Meanwhile, Dean used the narrative as an opportunity to reflect on the (im)possibility of the event and how his deity works in the world. As a clinical psychologist trained in the sciences, he reflected on the story

through a sense of wonder and observation seen elsewhere, but also more broadly about the nature of miracles and the features of God. I suggest that these interpretations are not lesser, or “malformations” of modern scholarly readings, but a feature of myths and storytelling more broadly.

*Debasement and Identification with a Prophetic False Start*²⁹

To debase Jonah has been part and parcel of the interpretive enterprise stretching back at least to the German Enlightenment. As Elias Bickerman suggests, the universalist deity and nationalist Jonah were born out of the German Enlightenment when the purpose of Scripture was to promote a “natural” system of morality. And so, Jonah became a sort of bridge between the Old and New Testaments and a representative of Judaism more broadly.³⁰ According to Bickerman, these German Protestant interpreters believed that “Jonah was a narrow-minded sectarian but the author of his story spoke for universal morality.”³¹ To chastise Jonah, then, was to take the side of the universal ethic the deity and narrator espouse. In a more systematic fashion, Yvonne Sherwood notes that Martin Luther opened this dialectic between character and narrator, but it has been taken up with vigor during the Enlightenment by Christian interpreters.³²

²⁹ I want to note that the category “Debasement and Identification” is not so much a social or political issue, but rather an interpretive mode that allows readers to address these issues. I have included this as a category because it appeared so frequently and powerfully in my data. While there are patterns that I identify below, there were also several examples so particular to someone’s situation that they couldn’t be faithfully represented under a heading like those above.

³⁰ Of course, there are examples before the German Enlightenment, but they seem particular to an individual’s agenda rather than a broad intellectual current. For example, Amy Erickson notes that rather than minimize Jonah’s sin, he exaggerates it “for our own comfort.” (*Luther’s Works* 19:6) See Erickson, *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary*, 186.

³¹ Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, 25.

³² Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 25-48.

Ethnographic data demonstrates that debasing the prophet occurs among people who possess different religious traditions or racial identities, but I suggest they do so to ultimately identify with him. Whereas biblical scholarship frequently excoriates Jonah as a negative example, lay readers typically do so only to empathize with his situation and their own. As Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer notes, “Jonah often becomes a representative of humanity: haunted by God, persecuted, and exiled. Jonah is turned into our alter ego as he embodies our own struggles with God.”³³ The direct, strange relationship between prophet and deity provides space for readers to take on this particular type of structure. In addition, readers do so to often (though not always) address social and political issues that transcend the individual such as systemic racism and colonialism.

Margaret graciously invited me into her home to conduct our 2-hour interview. She prepared tea for us as we sat at her dining table over light classical music. I’ve known Margaret for about five years, but she has been a part of the town and Methodist congregation she has attended since the 70s. Jeff is her pastor, but due to the United Methodist’s system of appointing clergy, she has seen many pastors before him.³⁴ She is highly educated, possessing a doctorate in Special Education, and chuckles as she tells me that she only reveals this information when others don’t take her seriously. Margaret provides a short history of her time in the UMC and her experience as a black woman in predominantly white congregations, describing herself as a spokesperson and confidant of several pastors over the years. She is active in this particular congregation, attending and leading bible studies and taking care of the property on occasion, in

³³ Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer. *Jonah through the Centuries*. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2022), 8.

³⁴ In the United Methodist Church (UMC), clergy are appointed by the Bishop annually and, thus, potentially move after a number of years. This tradition reflects the itineracy of early Methodist preachers.

addition to being a part of the broader denominational group known as United Methodist Women (now United Women in Faith as of 2022). Significantly, we met during the high-profile trial of the police officers who murdered Tyre Nichols in Memphis, Tennessee and she was eager to watch the news about it following our interview.

When I introduced Jonah into our conversation, asking her how familiar she was with the story, she unequivocally states, “He was an idiot.” There is no doubt she meant it – her 3-second pause following the statement left no doubt in my mind. But what follows suggests to me that her statement did not serve to solely denigrate him. She begins to narrate the story from the perspective of the deity:

M: I want you to do something for me, I want you to, I want you to go to Nineveh. Now the people there haven't been doing...living the way I want them to live. I want you to go there and I think, no, if I'm getting it right, Jonah wanted to turn around and go back. He didn't wanna do it. And then the whale swallowed him, metaphorically, um, no, you can't do what I ask you to do. So this is what you have to suffer first. And I'm gonna leave you in that tight grip...I'm gonna leave you in that tight grip because you don't wanna follow what I asked you to do.

Her narration continues from the perspective of the deity for several more lines, extensively utilizing first- and second-person pronouns and emphasizing the personal relationship between the deity and Jonah. But in contrast to some modern biblical interpreters who follow the deity's argument to chastise the prophet, Margaret shifts her perspective from the deity's to Jonah – and it is here that she develops the story most fully. When narrating the point in the story when the Ninevites ultimately repent, Margaret takes on Jonah's perspective:

M: I didn't get the credit for it. I wanted the credit or I didn't want you to be better. I wanted to see, I told you what those people were like. I told you they weren't gonna change. See, you didn't believe me, God, I told you. And they changed and he was upset. I left God out of the picture. Instead of being happy about it. [5-second pause] You gave me a second chance, but I didn't take it as you were there to relieve me, to give me that second chance.

Margaret portrays Jonah as somewhat selfish, stubborn, and leaving "God out of the picture," but it's clear she also empathizes with him as well. He is "an idiot," but Margaret finds his reasoning plausible – and almost justified – as Jonah questions the divine command. She continues, referring to the function of the fish:

M: He had to stay in that. He had to do a lot of thinking in the deep, dark hours for being in the belly. That's our lives. We're in the, he's like, why? Why am I in this deep, dark belly? Why isn't God listening to me? Why did you put me in the first place?

Notice the shift of pronouns. She begins to narrate the story from the third-person perspective, telling us why Jonah had to stay in the fish and tying its reason directly into "our lives." She then uses Jonah's predicament to voice a line of questioning to the deity from the first-person perspective. As Greg Urban writes concerning the productive value of pronouns, "But the 'I' of discourse is not only an actual in-the-world subject, indexically referred to by means of the first-person form. The discourse 'I' can also be any being or entity, imaginary or not, capable of being reported as a speaker."³⁵ Indeed, she collapses the distance between Jonah and herself by voicing him in the first-person, taking on the narrative frame between Jonah and deity. She transitions

³⁵ Greg Urban. "The 'I' of Discourse" in *Semiotics, Self, and Society*. Eds. Benjamin Lee and Greg Urban. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), 29.

quickly from broad questions above to more specific ones dealing with race and suffering, “I ask God a lot...I’ll ask him sometimes, God, how come black people have to suffer the way they do? Or why do all the women in other races except us or maybe the Fiji, have this kind of hair?” She breaks off to talk about her own mother who was mixed-race and had straight hair. She then returns to her previous line of questioning, “So, I asked God why God doesn’t answer me. My husband says, ‘Just to make you humble. You had to learn the lessons of being humble’ and, um, so you never know. We’ll never know why God does what God does. You never know.” Our conversation meanders and we discuss several topics, but race comes up fairly often with Margaret such as expressing a desire to “help young people to feel good about who they are – especially black kids” to the OJ Simpson trial and artwork she remembers from a seminary student involving portraying Jesus as black. This example demonstrates well Urban’s point that the

True hinge between self and ‘culture,’ the point at which the self becomes a socialized subjectivity, is not to be found in the relationship between indexically referred to ‘I.’ It is to be found in the relationship between the quoted ‘I’ of discourse and the indexical referential ‘I’ of the language code.”³⁶

The significance of shifting from a past, third-person pronoun to the immediacy of the first and second is elsewhere emphasized, for example, in Seth Sanders’ treatment of Absalom’s rebellion. As Absalom challenges the king, David, he invokes a similar shift, “In this particular literary form, it also takes on an edge missing from the boilerplate rhetoric of royal legitimation – not the third-person rhetoric of ‘the king is just’ but the first- and second-person accusation of

³⁶ Urban, “The ‘I’ of Discourse,” 29.

‘you are unjust so I will unseat you.’³⁷ This key feature apparent elsewhere in West Semitic literary cultures gave it both the political legitimacy familiar to distinct cultures beyond “northern” Israel, but also how it maintained a keen audience beyond a single, royal court or scribe.

For Margaret, Jonah is indeed “an idiot,” but I want to suggest that she, among others, debases him for pragmatic reasons that reflect her own questions about religion and race. She ends up, in some fashion, identifying with the prophet through the use of pronouns where she linguistically “becomes” Jonah and asks a string of questions related to race and suffering. Rather than understand Jonah’s rebellion and time in the fish as *simply* a disobedient prophet, Margaret picks up on these strange, indeterminate qualities of the book to voice her concerns. I suggest that there is perhaps something about Jonah specifically that allows for such an identification. If I had asked about other, celebrated biblical characters like Moses or Elijah, would the results be the same? Or is there something unique about the resistant prophet that interpreters are attracted to?

Other participants also identify with Jonah in some capacity, though not necessarily as explicitly and boldly as Margaret. For example, Nicholas is a graduate student who attends Jonathan’s church. He finds Jonah relatable and moves between critique and empathy, “I always like to, feel like we always like to rail on Jonah, but then I’m like, oh, if I rail on Jonah, like how much could God rail on me for like doing a lot of the similar things?” Elsewhere he expresses that “He’s a relatable character, but like, honestly, I don’t think a particularly likable character at the same time.” At the same time, however, he finds Jonah’s resistance to the deity a “universal”

³⁷ Seth L Sanders. “Absalom's Audience (2 Samuel 15–19).” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 3 (2019): 513–536.

quality all people struggle with. When talking about the character of Jonah, “I think that’s a universal thing we all struggle with from time to time. Like, I don’t know, just that willingness to like do what God calls us to do. Like on the surface, I feel like that’s the most immediate like lesson to take from Jonah.” Katherine, also a congregant at Jonathan’s church, makes fun of Jonah like one would “a little brother.” But ultimately, she does so because “Like I think when I see Jonah, like I don’t feel like that different from Jonah.” Patrick, a recently admitted graduate student, identifies with Jonah’s fear of taking on difficult tasks as he has recently moved to a new location and worries about finishing graduate school.

Some participants did not debase the prophet at all, in fact, but found the deity’s commands too burdensome and ultimately identified with the prophet in a similar fashion as those above. I interviewed Naomi, a pastor of a large Presbyterian church in her office for just over an hour. She, too, is highly educated and recently accepted the job during a period of tumultuous leadership change. As a Korean woman, she is keenly aware of the challenges of pastoring a wealthy, predominantly white congregation. Her approach to Jonah is informed by such a context. When asked about Jonah, she is able to narrate nearly every element, but when asked about some of the main themes or points of the story, she relates it to race. She says:

N: I think back then it was a story about how God’s love is, I guess, love your enemies back then...this is how God loves everyone, even people that are different from you and who have been horrible to you. And now I’m like, why would you do that? God you know, like, why go to your oppressor? But I think if I were to preach a sermon on that again, I would really treat the topic of like, you know, you’re asking like a black person to a predominantly white place that has like killed and destroyed your people.

In this case, Naomi is extending the capital, Nineveh, to the Assyrian empire and its historical role as a military force. She finds the message of forgiveness alarming and ultimately unhealthy to preach. She tells me that she could preach this in a Korean American church, but would find it difficult to preach at a predominantly white congregation. Ultimately, she finds Jonah's resistance empowering, "I think Jonah is great. Because Jonah is a, like a very unwilling prophet and I like him." She is not alone in her sentiment on the ambivalence of the characters within Jonah as my third chapter on archives attest. In addition, postcolonial and trauma approaches to the book have often emphasized the political power differentials between Israel and Assyria as one of the driving forces of the book. For example, Chesung Justin Ryu rhetorically asks, "How is it possible that the oppressed could write a book whose theme is to praise God's universal salvation toward their oppressor (a heinous destroyer of their country?)"³⁸ Meanwhile, Juliana Claasens understands Jonah as a "symbolic trauma narrative" that takes seriously the collective psychological effects of the exile.³⁹ While other scholars have noted the apparent absence of the military presence of Nineveh (and by extension Assyria), the book of Jonah allows clergy, laypersons, and scholars to bring to bear their own social and political contexts, for example, as racialized individuals in predominantly-white congregations.

³⁸ Chesung Justin Ryu. "Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 2 (2009): 195–218; Chesung Justin Ryu, 'Divine Rhetoric and Prophetic Silence in the Book of Jonah', in Danna Nolan Fewell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, Oxford Handbooks (2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 3 Feb. 2015), 226-235.

³⁹ Juliana L. Claasens. "Surfing with Jonah: Reading Jonah as a Postcolonial Trauma Narrative." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45, no. 4 (2021): 576–587; 2023a 'Entertaining Contradictions: Continuing the Conversation on Irony in the Book of Jonah.' In *Between Subversion and Innovation: Irony in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament*. (eds. Tobias Häner, Virginia Miller, Carolyn Sharp Brill); 2023b 'Facing the Colonizer that Remains: Jonah as a Symbolic Trauma Narrative.' *CBQ* (forthcoming).

By debasing Jonah, one is able to empathize with the surprisingly laconic prophet – whether it is the anxiety produced by an upcoming task or simply rejecting the deity’s command. But clergy and laypersons do not simply debase Jonah to uphold the ethic of universal salvation at the end of the book like some modern biblical scholars. Instead, they debase him to produce a relatable, “human” prophet and, through the unique relationship between deity and prophet in the book, allows readers to similarly resist and question as they envision Jonah does. Standing in the place of Jonah, they reflect on contemporary social and political issues such as systemic racism, colonialism, and others. The notion of debasement and identification I suggest is not an issue per se, but a mode of interpretation able to flexibly deal with a variety of situations. Finally, while I do not necessarily have comparative data, I want to tentatively suggest that there is something about the resistant, laconic prophet that readers can more easily identify with. Stuart Lasine, for example, argues that the book serves as a mirror prompting a response from reader’s own psychological issues.⁴⁰ In contrast to larger-than-life biblical figures like Moses or Elijah, Jonah is frequently described as “human,” alongside other adjectives like stubborn and selfish. Perhaps these qualities ultimately make Jonah a more meaningful figure – a prophet able to mirror the fears, anxieties, and questions that everyday life brings to everyday people.

Conclusion

The broad patterns I have established above demonstrate that by examining the book of Jonah through its use in social life, we provincialize some biblical scholarship that directs their readers

⁴⁰ Stuart Lasine. “Jonah’s Complexes and Our Own: Psychology and the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 2 (2016): 237–260. See also Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. “Jonah: A Fantasy of Flight.” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 18, no. 3 (2008): 271–299.

to the “real” meaning of the book. Instead, we have seen that the book of Jonah and its indeterminate elements are fertile ground for reevaluating contentious social and political issues. Understood as a myth with several indeterminate elements shifts our focus from a single meaning derived from the past to a story retold in particular contexts capable of continually dealing with these issues. Reading Jonah as a folktale in predominantly mainline Christian denominations allows readers to navigate diverse religious settings by rallying its apparent global capital. It is not a uniquely Christian story and, thus, is more acceptable to congregations who dislike explicit theological claims. Meanwhile, the fish serves as a keystone to consider the relationship between religion and science in predominantly evangelical circles. Pastor Jonathan navigates two groups within his congregation. Ultimately, he uses the conflict over the fish pragmatically – to point to a third way that emphasizes reconciliation and empathy toward other groups that congregants dislike (perhaps solving the rift caused by the discussion about the historicity of the fish). At another congregation, Dean waivers between the possibility of a fish swallowing a person by reflecting on his own education in the sciences. He consults his own travels to Hawaii where he has witnessed massive fish and ties this discussion into the main purpose of the book – that God occasionally intervenes in one’s life in inexplicable ways. And finally, Jonah’s strange relationship with the deity allows some congregants and clergy to voice their own problems toward their deity. Margaret embodies the posture of questioning divine will concerning race, while Naomi identifies with Jonah’s anger at a deity who would forgive an oppressive and colonial power. Interestingly, many of the participants reflected on the ambivalence of political power that aligns quite well with my third chapter on archives.

Each of these interpretations of Jonah is neither a malformation of a true interpretation that biblical scholars possess, nor a fanciful, unsophisticated reading of the story, but constitutes

a serious engagement with a biblical text rooted in a culture dealing with particular social and political issues. In addition, those aspects deemed strange or insignificant to the biblical scholar happen to find deep resonance among its ancient and contemporary readership, ultimately suggesting these “indeterminate” aspects will continue to attract interpreters to reflect on their significance and be mediated by other narrative features within the book of Jonah.

I want to end this chapter by returning to the example of the ancient synagogue I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. The mosaic depicting Jonah swallowed by three fish demonstrates that interest in the fish, among other indeterminate aspects of the narrative, is not solely a modern interest.⁴¹ While I am not suggesting a continuum between ancient rabbinic cultures and modern, popular interpretations, we can account for the continued interest in these features if we treat the book of Jonah less as a story with one message intended to be applied to specific contexts, but as a myth retold and latching onto indeterminate aspects that allow readers to reflect on and solve social issues. As it turns out, the book of Jonah’s ancient readership is not simply burdened by its cultural context and unable to uncover the book’s true, historical meaning, but rather possesses a different set of literary values that may or may not align with modern biblical scholarship. Therefore, I end this chapter, and dissertation project, by calling on biblical scholars today to engage in a reflexive process that interrogates our own notions of what sacred texts ought to say and how they function in social life. By tracing the interpretive history of biblical books and concepts, as several scholars have done, we can not only rethink the assumptions we make about how texts function, but how its ancient authors and later interpreters utilized texts as well.

⁴¹ In this case, it’s possible that the mosaic is drawing on a rabbinic line of questioning asking why the grammatical gender of the fish changes (גלגל–גל) for no obvious reason.

Conclusion

This dissertation began with the observation that biblical scholars have long understood the book of Jonah as unique or strange in some fashion in relation to the rest of the canonical material. Yet rather than dismissing these features such as a runaway, laconic prophet, the strange use of speech throughout the book, enigmatic places, and more as epiphenomenal to the supposedly “real” message of the book, I asked what they may have meant to its ancient and contemporary readerships. For its ancient audience, what I discovered was a text that was far less didactic than some scholars have suggested, and these features appear to be an attempt to reflect on and solve the many problems facing the Judean exilic community. Indeed, some of these same features continue to serve as rich sites capable of pragmatically solving social issues of its contemporary readership. These indeterminate narrative elements in the book of Jonah, produced by postexilic scribal authorities, continue to resonate with readers today. Thus, rather than suggest that the book of Jonah remains appealing to a diverse set of audiences due to its enduring moral and ethical values or recurring motifs across cultures, I argued the book of Jonah endures because of the pragmatic tools it provides its readers to deal with a wide range of social and political issues.

It is important to note that each of the indeterminate elements I have identified within Jonah are not entirely original or unique. In fact, we see that the book tends to build and play with expectations received from other ancient texts. This should come as no surprise. In order to criticize or affirm a previous tradition, one must invoke it in some capacity. We saw this quite clearly in the “Marrying Yourself” ritual at Burning Man and biblical interpreters have long noted that the book of Jonah alludes to, or even explicitly cites, previous material within its narrative.

But what are the results of this type of play found in Jonah? I have argued that this indeterminacy is what constitutes, in part, the book's continued popularity and that it allows its readers to reflect on pertinent themes found in exilic life. Setting some of the themes in Jonah we have found alongside other exilic and postexilic texts is worth noting. Like Jonah, the exilic book of Ezekiel is deeply concerned with notions of space and the changing roles of leaders like priests, prophets, and kings. Ezekiel's first vision is a case in point as the weeping prophet witnesses a moveable throne and receives instructions. Yet unlike Jonah, Ezekiel offers a new blueprint for these figures as the prophet addresses the loss of each institution intimately connected to the Temple and palace. In my view, Jonah appears to simply unmoor typical pairings we find elsewhere rather than offer a completely new structure. Typical notions of obedience and disobedience are unlinked through the failure of commands and the structure of place throughout the book. Let us briefly review the conclusions of each chapter below and consider further avenues of inquiry.

My first chapter notes the absence of place that Jonah finds himself in at the beginning of the book. Instead, the book provides two distant, exotic places that Jonah flees toward or away from. I suggest that mimetic representations of Tarshish and Nineveh are not as important as how obedience and disobedience are encoded into Jonah's movement toward each place. At the beginning of the book, Tarshish represents disobedience, while strangely, the prophet's movement toward Nineveh represents obedience to the deity. Yet not all is as it seems. Jonah utters a brief prophecy of doom to the Ninevites and they immediately repent. Jonah explodes in anger and reveals that the deity would ultimately change his mind. We come to realize that Jonah's disobedience is not simply insolence, but stems from a deeper knowledge of divine activity that the deity (and reader) is even aware of! Indeed, Jonah's psalm and recitation of the

divine characteristics provide the image of a prophet versed in authoritative, cultic texts.

Ultimately, the book nuances notions of obedience and disobedience in relation to place – undoubtedly a significant theme to reflect on for a displaced postexilic community mustering its available resources to rethink what it means for the population to remain Yahwists in lands far from the temple and palace structures.

The second chapter focused on the relationship between language, specifically commands, and action within Jonah. Biblical interpreters have long noted the failure of Jonah to follow the deity's command. Yet when we broaden our purview to include the other characters throughout the book, we recognized a pattern where commands were rarely followed by their subordinates. By examining the three primary dyads in the book between prophet-deity, mariner-captain, and populace-king, we understand that it is not only Jonah who was disobedient. Moreover, I contrasted the many failures of commands in the book of Jonah with those in Genesis, 1 Samuel, and Zechariah where commands were by and large successfully issued and followed. This demonstrates a break with narrative tradition found among other biblical texts and shows that the book is encoding something more broadly about authoritative speech. Again, problematizing authoritative language, particularly prophetic speech, was likely a significant issue for the exiled population seeking comfort and confirmation in previous prophetic oracles. This chapter might suggest examining how language and prophetic speech changed in the post-exilic period more broadly within canonical and extracanonical literature.

The third and final chapter on Jonah's composition focuses on collections of recently published archival data of relevance to the deported Judean community in Babylon. In order to destabilize the scholarly notion that the Babylonian Exile fostered antagonism toward other ethnic groups and that this antagonism is represented in Jonah's reluctance to travel to Nineveh, I

showed that some Judean deportees maintained a sense of ethnic and religious identity while also successfully integrating into Babylonian social and economic systems. Canonical intertexts such as Ezra and Nehemiah may have had an outsized influence on scholarly conceptions of the postexilic Judean community and this chapter suggests, among other things, stratified and diverse perspectives among returnees. I then returned to examine the non-Hebrew characters within Jonah and found a fairly nuanced portrait of otherwise unnamed characters. I highlighted their sensitivity to divine action through common ancient Near Eastern practices such as casting lots and mourning, while also dramatically responding in a somewhat ludicrous fashion. The generic non-Hebrew characters could easily serve as points of reflection for early readers as they engaged other ethnic groups in their diasporic context.

My fourth chapter moved beyond composition and into contemporary ethnographic data in order to demonstrate the continued significance of the many indeterminate features throughout the book. Rather than chide readers who “miss the point” when they focus on the whale or some other feature, I understand them as part of the warp-and-woof of the power of myth – an indeterminate feature capable of pragmatically reflecting on and solving contemporary social issues. Among mainline Protestants, I found an interest in reading Jonah as a cross-cultural folktale that holds power beyond its particular, canonical “token.” For example, one clergy member, recognizing his religiously diverse congregation, pragmatically used this perception of Jonah to claim that it has broad relevance for humans beyond a particular religious tradition. Meanwhile, some white evangelicals were interested in reflecting on Jonah to explore the sometimes-contentious relationship between religion and science. Could a fish truly swallow a person for three days and spit them out unharmed? And finally, I highlighted a technique among several participants where they debased the prophet only to later identify with him. This allowed

participants to “step into his shoes” and enter the dyadic frame between prophet and deity to question contemporary social issues like systemic racism. It was actually quite uncommon for clergy and laypersons to consider the moral or ethical framework provided by biblical scholars. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that myths continue to be (re)told today and we possess a rich tradition in biblical texts of readers honing in on certain indeterminate elements that help readers solve personal or societal social issues. These interpretations are not aberrations or malformed versions of the scholarly interpretation, but active attempts to reenvision how ancient, sacred texts continue to “fit” today’s world.

Several avenues of research open up following this dissertation project. One significant aspect involves metacritical approaches to scholarly interpretations and how scholars themselves interact with their perceived audience. Several commentaries on Jonah begin by directing their reader toward the “true” message of the book they decode and reveal throughout their book. This type of rhetoric creates a hierarchical structure whereby scholars, typically holding extensive training in their respective disciplines, possess privileged access to not just the historical context of a biblical book, but also its true message. Interrogating this formation endemic to traditional commentaries might reveal something about how scholarship functions, yes, but also perhaps allow us to see something new in our text. In this dissertation, I have attempted to ground the book of Jonah in the social life of its respective contexts – from its composition and early post-exilic readership to modern religious settings in the Greater Sacramento area.

The three chapters on composition have provided new areas of research into the texts and contexts of post-exilic Judah. For example, I am keenly aware that my literary approach in Chapter 1 is reasonable, but novel at the same time and has only recently been considered in modern biblical scholarship. There are likely several factors that biblical scholarship has already

considered, but I wonder if the later historical reception of places like Tarshish and Nineveh beyond the Hellenistic period has something to do with its misrecognition by later interpreters. As the possibility of travel increased and knowledge concerning previously inaccessible and exotic places became available, perhaps these locations garnered other imaginative links beyond those presented in Jonah. Chapter 2 suggests that scholars reexamine notions of language, action, and prophetic speech in the post-exilic period. To what extent are these concepts and institutions retained or reworked in light of the destruction of the temple and the deportation of the Judean elite? Chapter 3 brings new material evidence to provide a new perspective on the Babylonian Exile and its effects on the deported Judean population. Cornelia Wunsch continues to systematize the archival collection related to the Āl-Yāhūdu archive and seeks to publish the remaining finds soon. It will be helpful to peruse the forthcoming volume and determine whether this provides more information on the economic and social status of Judeans in Babylon. And finally, Chapter 4 grounds Jonah in its social life through ethnographic interviews in the Greater Sacramento area. While I have found distinct patterns among my dataset that should hold among similar communities, a more religiously diverse data set could help broaden the scope of the project. My data set largely included those from Protestant Christian backgrounds like mainline traditions and evangelicals with only some inclusion of Roman Catholic clergy and Conservative and Reform Jewish clergy.

Ultimately, I hope this eclectic dissertation makes distinct contributions to the book of Jonah, naturally, but also to the study of religion and religious texts. If myths and their telling fundamentally constitute a pragmatic attempt at solving contemporary social issues, we could theoretically examine the reception history of these biblical “mythic” texts with an eye toward social ills at play in a culture’s imagination. Rather than create a reception history descriptively

documenting a text's appearance in film, literature, or other mediums, this potential project considers the social and political issues of the day. It calls forth a more expansive reception history where religious practitioners dynamically address those challenges mediated by their sacred texts, creatively arguing that myths continue to shape our imaginations today.

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