

Jonah: A Literary and Rhetorical Analysis

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The book of Jonah is a fascinating tale of a prophet, his God, and those deemed outsiders, and literary studies of this text provide amazing insights into the layers of meaning woven throughout the story. This paper is an attempt to walk within that tradition in order to determine the original intent of the text, relying upon two presumptions. First, Jonah employs many literary and rhetorical techniques, including but not limited to those of satirical and parodic nature, as illuminated by the work of many scholars, such as M. Burrows, J. Miles, and R. Friedman.<sup>1</sup> Second, Jonah is a post-exilic text, most likely dated to sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, as is most often suggested.<sup>2</sup>

Through time, scholars have drawn many meanings from the book of Jonah: recounting historical events, mocking certain strains of prophetic traditions, parodying other stories and texts from the Hebrew Bible, etc. While some or all of these meanings may be present to varying extents within the text, one idea rises above the rest. YHWH, in spite of the nationalistic ideologies of some Ancient Israelites, works with other nations. In this paper, I argue that the structure of the text, the characterization of the groups and individuals within the narrative, and the intertextual evidence all support this fact.

First, while some scholars, such as J. Magonet, attempt to reveal other structures and divisions within Jonah, the most definitive structure of the text remains the division and parallel between chapters 1-2 and 3-4.<sup>3</sup> This trait appears most plainly through the formulaic statement in 1:1, *wayhî debar-YHWH 'el-yônâ*, “and the word of YHWH came to Jonah,” which repeats with

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold J. Band, “Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody.” *Prooftexts* 10, no. 2 (1990): 179, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689271>; the historicity of Jonah is a subject neither directly relevant to nor within the purview of this study.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Magonet, “Jonah, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Commentary*, vol. III, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 941.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 55.

slight variation in 3:1, *wayhî debar-YHWH 'el-yônâ šēnît*, “and the word of YHWH came to Jonah a second time.”

This structure of Jonah appears strongly through the parallel between the sailors and their captain in chapters one and two and the Ninevites and their king in chapters three and four.<sup>4</sup> When their ship faced certain destruction, the sailors responded *wayyizē'ăqû 'iš 'el 'ēlohāyw*, “and each man called out to his god.” The most straightforward reading of this pericope indicates that each man worshipped a different god, but their cries remain unanswered until 1:9ff when Jonah reveals to them that the storm was from YHWH and they pray to YHWH and seemingly convert to YHWHism, as supported by the Jewish interpretive tradition.<sup>5</sup> Compare this repentance with the Ninevites, who repent after hearing of the certain destruction of their city. The increased certainty of their destruction is illuminated by Jonah’s five-word prophecy in 3:4, *'ôd'arbā 'îm yôm wēnînēwēh nehēppāket*, “Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned,” which lacks any option for salvation. This leaves the king to declare *mî-yôdē'a yāšûb wēniham hā'ēlohîm...*, “who knows? Maybe God will repent and relent...”, in 3:9. Thus, readers discover with two scenes depicting non-Israelite people, first miscellaneous pagans, then specifically Assyrian, facing certain destruction at the hands of YHWH, repenting/praying to God, and then averting the destruction.

This twofold narration style reflects the parallelisms found in Hebrew poetry. Parallelism, typically defined as the repetition of the similar semantic or grammatical structures in

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<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 109.

<sup>5</sup> Magonet, “Jonah, Book of,” 937.

consecutive lines or verses, appears frequently throughout books like Psalms.<sup>6</sup> Kugel and Alter correctly took the study of these parallelisms further by rejecting the notion of synonymity between parallel lines and presented the idea of parallel continuity, communicating ideas in an “A, what is more, B” fashion.<sup>7</sup> This pattern is observable in many passages, even the first verse of the book of Psalms. Psalms 1:1 states, “Happy is the man who does not *walk* after the guilty, and in the path of the sinners does not *stand*, and in the dwelling of scoffers does not *dwell*.” The idea increases from *hālak*, “walk,” to *‘āmād*, “stand,” finally to *yāšāb*, “dwell,” increasing in association with the wicked (cf. Ps 18:8; 2 Sam 22:9).

In the same way, the parallel between the two halves of the book of Jonah, both climaxing in YHWH accepting the repentance/prayer of pagans, strives to make an increasingly provoking point. The repentance of the miscellaneous sailors declares, “The mercy of YHWH is for *all* nations,” while the repentance of Ninevites follows with, “Yes, even Assyria.” This is an intensification through specification. The first step is the inclusion of all general people, but the second step points directly to Assyria, one of the most brutal and feared enemies of Ancient Israel.

Next, the characterization of Jonah throughout the text only serves to further the point. An unengaged reader may easily conclude that this text depicts Jonah as a lazy prophet, or a prophet with a strictly territorial view of their deity. However, the narrative paints a much different picture of Jonah. The text reveals him neither as lazy nor in possession of a territorial

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<sup>6</sup> Adele Berlin, “Parallelism,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. V, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 155.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

view of YHWH; he is simply devout to his tradition and theology, which is deeply rooted in nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

While Jonah's initial flee to Tarshish could appear as his attempt to escape the reach of YHWH, whom a territorial view would keep within the borders of the Promise Land, this suggestion fails on two major points. First, Jonah, himself, when confronted by the sailors, confesses *wě'et-YHWH 'ēlohê hašāmyim 'ānī yārē' 'āšer- 'āsāh 'et-hayyām wě'et-hayyabbāšā*, "and I fear YHWH, the God of heaven who created the sea and the dry land." Such a profession of YHWH's sovereignty refutes Jonah's supposed territorial views, unless the reader assume a drastic lapse in characterization on part of the author. Secondly, within a territorial mindset, the fleeing to Tarshish hardly appears necessary in the first place, as Nineveh would be far outside Israel's territory, and thus beyond YHWH's jurisdiction, as well. Surely, a misunderstanding of the sovereignty of YHWH is not Jonah's issue.

Instead, the story reveals Jonah's motivations as purely nationalistic. While the audience stays oblivious to Jonah's motivation for fleeing in the first chapter, Jonah voices his grievance later in 4:2. Jonah, after the repentance and forgiveness of Nineveh, declares, "O Lord, is not this my word when I was in my own land? Thus, before I was to flee to Tarshish for I knew for you are a gracious and merciful god, slow to anger and abounding in loving faithfulness and repenting of evil." Jonah states his motivation as clearly as possible. He did not want to prophecy to Nineveh because he knew they would repent and that YHWH, according to YHWH's character, would forgive them, and he did not want them to be forgiven.

Jonah's motivations also are revealed in less explicit ways in this story, his attempted sabotage of YHWH's message in chapters 1 and 3. In his first attempt at sabotage, Jonah flees to

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<sup>8</sup> Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Jonah Read Intertextually," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3 (2007): 509, doi:10.2307/27638450.

Tarshish. Though some have debated the issue, it does not matter if Jonah was fleeing to Tartessos or another place; Jonah's departure West from Joppa communicates the point well enough, which is that he intends to travel geographically in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh in the East.<sup>9</sup> This example is straightforward and well-known enough to leave at that. However, Jonah's second failed sabotage in chapter 3 requires more attention.

Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, expertly illustrates how declarations and modifications on later reiterations of those declarations serve as narrative tools, which can be used to reveal traits of different characters. Often in the Hebrew Bible, statements are repeated with small but important changes introduced by the new speaker of the statement.<sup>10</sup> In regards to this literary technique, Alter states, "It conveys, without the need for explicit commentary, aspects of the distinctive character of each of the personages involved in the scene, and it becomes as well a convincingly effective means of bringing about a change in the course of events--for here as elsewhere in the Bible, language manifestly makes things happen." With this tool, characters reshape language to fit their own intentions to either deceptive or revelatory ends.<sup>11</sup> While Alter provides multiple examples in his book, he never turns this lens of literary study toward Jonah. However, Jonah's five word sermon in 3:4 provides an excellent, though ultimately futile, attempt at exactly this technique.

Though the reader is never privy to the exact message of YHWH for Nineveh, Jonah's protest, as previously discussed, and the resulting forgiveness of the city reveal that it is a message that ultimately provides a means of repentance and hope. However, Jonah conveniently

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<sup>9</sup> John A. Miles, "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 65, no. 3 (1975): 171, doi:10.2307/1454356.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

leaves much of what is expected of a prophetic proclamation out of his message. This prophetic message, much like many other moments in the book of Jonah, serves to subvert the expectations of the reader.<sup>12</sup> After the build of Jonah's entire journey, the reader expects a *gādôl*, "great," message in correspondence with Nineveh, the *gādôl* city, their *gādôl* evil, the sailors' *gādôl* fear of YHWH, and God's appointed *gādôl* fish. However, he simply declares, "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned."

Jonah does not give Nineveh a chance to repent, reveal who is going to overturn the city, or even tell them why it will happen. Jonah attempts to sabotage his own message from YHWH by only communicating the bare minimum of the message.<sup>13</sup> While some have suggested that this five-word sermon is just meant to be a summary of his more in depth message containing all of those elements, as previously noted, the king's response refutes such a claim. Were this a summarization and the actual message included those key details, then the king would not be left to wonder, "Who knows? Maybe God will repent and relent...." Thus, he knows nothing of a chance for repentance from Jonah's message. Additionally, the fact that the king only seeks forgiveness from *hā'ēlohîm*, as opposed to the sailors who turn specifically to *YHWH*, may further reveal Jonah's failure to mention key points in his message, such as who is doing the overturning. However, in spite of all of Jonah's efforts to keep YHWH's mercy from the Assyrians, fleeing to Tarshish, and barely communicating God's message, the Ninevites still repent, and YHWH still shows them mercy.

Jonah's character and nationalistic tendencies are further called into question when compared to the pagans in this narrative. While initially the evil of Nineveh is great enough to draw YHWH's attention, overall, the pagan world is painted in a surprisingly positive light when

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<sup>12</sup> Band, "Swallowing Jonah," 185.

<sup>13</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 107.

compared to Jonah.<sup>14</sup> When initially called by YHWH, Jonah flees in the opposite direction and brings calamity upon the sailors. While they commit to a pious response, immediately praying to their gods, Jonah is fast asleep; the LXX even dramatizes the scene by saying the captain could hear Jonah snore, *kai erregchen*, over the sound of the storm (Jonah 1:5).<sup>15</sup> The irony appears thickest when the pagan captain must command the prophet of YHWH, *qûm qērā' 'el- 'ēloheykā*, “arise, call out to your god” (Jonah 1:6).

Additionally, while it initially may appear that Jonah’s command for them to throw him overboard is uncharacteristically selfless, it is in fact much more in line with his character, as shown so far. Instead of jumping out of the boat himself, Jonah tells them to throw him off the ship, which would incur a blood debt upon them. This is an explicit and pious concern for these pagans, as they pray to YHWH in 1:14, ... *wě'al-tittēn 'ālênû dām nāqî'*..., “... and do not put upon us innocent blood...” Furthermore, given his nationalistic ideology, it is likely that Jonah would simply rather die and place his blood upon the innocent pagan sailors than bring YHWH’s mercy to the Ninevites.<sup>16</sup>

Jonah looks no better when compared against the king of Nineveh. Upon hearing of the ensuing destruction of Nineveh, the king seeks forms of repentance that serve to increase his discomfort. While the king sits, *yšb*, in ashes, he adorns himself in sackcloth, and fasts in order to appease god, Jonah sits in comfort by building a booth for shade, he relishes in the shade of the plant YHWH appoints over him, grows infuriated when YHWH takes his comfort away, and

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<sup>14</sup> Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, “Jonah Read Intertextually,” 503.

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Pelli, “The Literary Art of Jonah,” *Hebrew Studies* 20/21 (1979): 20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27908645>.



holds fast to his resistance of YHWH's will to the very end of the book.<sup>17</sup> In regards to the pagan world presented in Jonah, Magonet notes that, "it is pious; it has an intuitive grasp of God's wishes; it tries desperately to preserve the life of a fellow man, even a stranger, however guilty he may be and into whatsoever danger it may lead them; it is close to repentance and given the chance does so in a most spectacular fashion; it is ultimately innocent, not knowing left from right."<sup>18</sup>

When checking this reading of Jonah against the rest of the Hebrew Bible, readers find that Jonah, the son of Amittai, is only mentioned in one other place, 2 Kings 14:23-29. In this pericope, Jonah is named a prophet of YHWH and delivers a prophecy that Jeroboam, who was wicked in the eyes of YHWH, would restore the land of Israel all the way to the Sea of Arabah. This passage, while small, provides the only extant background the original audience of Jonah had going into his book. Just like the book, this description presents the reader with an interesting view of the prophet. He is a prophet of YHWH, but a prophet to a notably wicked king, Jeroboam. His prophecy does come true, thus he is a true prophet, but it is oddly enough a positive prophecy for a wicked king.

Compare that prophecy to the one recounted in the book of Jonah, which in it he declares that in forty days Nineveh would be *nehēppāket*. From context, Jonah intends the primary definition of this work, from the root *hpk*, meaning "overturn" or "overthrow."<sup>19</sup> This is the same word used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:25). However, Nineveh is not overturned, rather Jonah's prophecy is fulfilled through the secondary definition of *hpk*,

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<sup>17</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> Kiel Seybold, "Hāpak," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. III, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 423.

which is “change” or “transform [into its opposite].”<sup>20</sup> The people change and transform from their wickedness, which results in YHWH showing them mercy. Thus, while Jonah intends their destruction, YHWH intended and achieves their repentance. His prophecy comes true, just not in the way he intended.

Jonah’s character and position as a prophet is further complicated in light of the book of Nahum. Jonah and Nahum are both part of the book of the Twelve, within which Jonah is placed before Nahum according to both the MT and LXX traditions.<sup>21</sup> This is done in order to make sense of the contrast found between the two books. Nineveh repents and receives mercy in Jonah, but their repentance was only temporary, which results in their ultimate destruction at the hands of Babylon in Nahum.<sup>22</sup> While this destruction might initially seem like a fulfillment of Jonah’s prophecy from his own book, Nahum’s account falls outside of the forty day window of Jonah’s prophecy, practically the only explicit thing he proclaims.

Thus, within the book of Jonah itself, Jonah’s prophecy only comes true by means of a play on his own words; his prophecy in 2 Kings 14 comes true, but it is a positive prophecy for a wicked king, with which he has no issue; and his prophecy in his own book eventually is overturned by Nahum. As I have argued, according to the text of Jonah, the author depicts the prophet as incredibly nationalistic, and this depiction of Jonah makes sense in light of his appearance in 2 Kings. He prophecies positively and truthfully for the wicked king, Jeroboam, but this prophecy serves the betterment of the Israelite nation. The morality of the king makes little difference to Jonah. Therefore, the intertextual evidence supports the notion that Jonah, though a true prophet, is nationalistic and morally questionable.

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<sup>20</sup> Band, “Swallowing Jonah,” 189; Seybold, “*Hāpak*,” 423.

<sup>21</sup> Kim, “Jonah Read Intertextually,” 518.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 507-510.

The final piece of intertextual evidence moves the focus off of the character of Jonah and onto that of YHWH. Both Joel and Jonah borrow the description of YHWH from Exod 34:6-7 for their own purposes (Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13). In the Exodus passage, God describes Godself as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving faithfulness, in regards to forgiving the Hebrews for the golden calf incident. On top of this description of God, both prophets add the same phrase to the end, *wəṣniḥām* ‘*al-hārā’ā*, “and repenting on account of evil.”<sup>23</sup> While the rest of this divine description appears throughout the Hebrew Bible, Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17, “and repenting on account of evil” is unique to Jonah and Joel.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, both use this term in the same context: the last chance to repent before assured destruction.<sup>25</sup> However, while Joel follows the Exodus tradition, appealing to these characteristics in the context of YHWH’s relationship with Israel, Jonah alone extends them to another nation, Assyria. This further solidifies the author’s concern for YHWH’s relationship with other nations in the book of Jonah.

While Jonah may represent the only prophetic text whose primary purpose is to depict YHWH’s work with other nations against nationalistic Israelite ideologies, the concern is not wholly unique within the prophetic corpus. Walter Brueggemann's work in *Exodus in the Plural* (*Amos 9:7*) fantastically reveals that both Amos and Isaiah conceptualized YHWH as having relationships with other nations (*Amos 9:7*; *Isa 19:24-25*).<sup>26</sup> Jonah simply follows this vein in the prophetic tradition, which wishes to subvert Israel’s “self-confident mono-faith.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The source critical question of whether Jonah borrowed this phrase from Joel, Joel from Jonah, or both from Exodus is not directly pertinent to the argument of this study.

<sup>24</sup> Kim, “Jonah Read Intertextually,” 513-514.

<sup>25</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Bruggamann, “Exodus in the Plural (*Amos 9:7*),” in *Texts That Linger Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 89-104.

Lastly, this primary emphasis from Jonah fits well within the presumed general *Sitz im Leben* of the post-exilic era. In such a transitional time, full of outside rule and extra-tribal marriage, many Israelites understandably would question their own identity as well as the identity of their God. While some biblical authors address the Israelite half of the question-- Daniel, Esther, and Ezra-Nehemiah, seemingly wrestling with what it means to be a faithful Jew in the exilic/post-exilic era-- Jonah turns to the other side of the coin, answering the question of what YHWH looks like in such an era.

In summary, while the author of Jonah may have multiple points, one rises above all others. The parallel structure of the text, the characterization of Jonah and YHWH, the intertextual evidence, and the *Sitz im Leben* all point towards the same conclusion. The author of Jonah demonstrates that YHWH's work could not be constrained by the nationalistic wishes of even the most adamant Israelite. God's mercy is for all nations; yes, even Assyria.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 93.

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