

# LIBERATING JONAH

*Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation*

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## Reading the Story of Jonah

ONCE UPON A TIME, around the eighth century before the Common Era, the word of YHWH came to Jonah ben Amittai. This is neither the first time nor the last that YHWH's word has been revealed to humans. In fact, Jonah's call to proclaim the word of the Lord is reminiscent of how YHWH summoned other prophets, such as Elijah (1 Kgs. 21:17, 21), Isaiah (Isa. 38:1), and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:14; 11:2).

Jonah was from the land of Gath-hepher, which is nestled in the Galilean mountains about fifteen miles from the Sea of Galilee in the territory of the tribe of Zebulun. Jonah was a prophet of the Lord during the reign of Jeroboam II (784-743 B.C.E.). Jeroboam II, who did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kgs. 14:24), ruled the northern kingdom of Israel during a long period of peace and prosperity.

The reason for Israel's peace and prosperity during the time of Jonah and the reign of Jeroboam II was the political strife within the dominant power of the region—the Assyrian empire. Assyria's internal discord created a power vacuum, allowing Jeroboam II to expand his borders from the Dead Sea to the “entrance of Hamath” and to reclaim the territory lost during the reign of King Jehu (843-816 B.C.E.) and his son Jehoahaz (816-800 B.C.E.), who had been vassals of the king of Assyria (2 Kgs. 10:32-33; 13:1-9). As a prophet, Jonah successfully served King Jeroboam as a theological counselor on political and military matters, helping to reestablish Israel's boundaries (2 Kgs. 14:25).

Some scholars have claimed that Jonah was the nameless son

of Zarephath's widow (1 Kgs. 17), who was raised from the dead by the prophet Elijah;<sup>1</sup> others have maintained that he was a disciple of Elijah;<sup>2</sup> still others have insisted that after Elijah's ascension to heaven, Jonah became a disciple of Elisha, eventually becoming the unnamed prophet (mentioned in 2 Kgs. 9:1-10) who was sent by Elisha to anoint King Jehu.<sup>3</sup> Only one thing is certain: the word of YHWH came to Jonah, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that impressively large city, the center of empire, and denounce it for their evil which has come up before me."

Nineveh, the capital of Assyria,<sup>4</sup> was located on the east bank of the Tigris River, some five hundred miles to the east of the Israelite territory.<sup>5</sup> Legend has it that the mighty hunter Nimrod, the first potentate on earth, journeyed to the land of Shinar,<sup>6</sup> where he founded Babel. From there he continued to Assyria and built Nineveh (Gen. 10:11-12). Assyria experienced unprecedented growth and prosperity during the reigns of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.E.) and Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.), becoming a powerful empire whose hegemony in the region both shocked and awed the surrounding nations. But by the time of Jonah, Assyria was in a post-golden age. The state was clearly in decline, rocked by internal rebellions, as provincial rulers harnessed greater political power at the expense of the Assyrian crown, even though nominal allegiance to the monarch was still professed. In 745, about a generation after Jonah, Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.E.) would seize the throne and reverse the decline, ushering in a new climactic phase in which almost the entire Near East was brought under Assyria's sway. Tiglath-Pileser III once

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash Shocheh Tov 26:7.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 113a.

<sup>3</sup> PdRE 10. PdRE is the acronym for *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, the midrashic work of the first century that has been attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus.

<sup>4</sup> In reality, during the time of Jonah, Nineveh ceased being Assyria's capital. Although Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.E.) and Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.) held court there in the ninth century, Nineveh would not regain the status of capital until 705 under the rule of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.E.).

<sup>5</sup> The present city of Mosul in Iraq, some 250 miles north of Baghdad, is the site of the once powerful Nineveh.

<sup>6</sup> Present-day Iraq.

again centralized royal power and reorganized the military to move beyond conquest purely for the sake of spoils. Through a process of regime change, Assyria created an empire of provinces and vassal states. A new policy of resettlement was adopted according to which, after merciless conquest, the conquered population was deported and conscripted to forced labor on one of the multiple building projects occurring throughout the empire. This would eventually be the fate of the northern kingdom of Israel in 724 B.C.E. (2 Kgs. 17:1-23). Simultaneously, the southern kingdom of Judah would also become a vassal of Assyria. By 680, under Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.E.), the Assyrian empire reached the zenith of its power.

Assyria's lust for power was fostered by its patron god, Assur, who craved supremacy over every other deity in the region. Developing an effective and efficient military organization became the chief occupation of the Assyrian king and state (Grayson 1991, 217). All other interests were subordinate to Assyria's military-industrial complex. In this setting, Nineveh's military establishment was the center of savage and often sadistic power. If enemies resisted surrender during the siege of their city, once defeated, the population would be horribly mutilated and slaughtered. Their houses and towns would be torn down and burned, and the flayed skins of their corpses prominently displayed on stakes: a strong warning to others who might think of resisting (Grayson 1991, 221). Public amusement was provided by leading survivors by a leash attached to a ring inserted through their lip. Vanquished nobles were paraded through the city of Nineveh with the decapitated heads of their princes hanging around their necks while merry tunes were played to entertain the public (Læssøe 1963, 96-114; Olmstead 1951, 124-205; Parrot 1955, 30-75). Is it any wonder that the Hebrews despised the people of the empire?

Assyria was not some nation with which Israelites had religious disagreement; rather, it was an evil empire, the mortal enemy of Israel, whose fundamental purpose was to destroy Jonah's people, the Israelite nation, and its way of life. For the marginalized Israelites, Nineveh came to symbolize violence and cruelty. Radak's commentary on the prophets could summarize

Nineveh's sin in two words: robbery and oppression.<sup>7</sup> The writings of future prophets show that contempt for Nineveh spanned several generations. Zephaniah dreamed of the day when it would be Assyria's turn to fall into ruins, with the city of Nineveh becoming a wasteland (2:13-15). Likewise, the prophet Nahum could not contain his jubilation over his prophecy that Nineveh would be destroyed.<sup>8</sup> He asked if anyone had escaped the unrelenting cruelty of the empire, and compared Nineveh's bloodthirsty lust to the debauchery of a whore. Nahum unapologetically rejoiced that Nineveh would suffer the humiliation of having YHWH lift up her skirt over her face to show her nakedness and shame to all the world while being pelted by YHWH with manure (Nah. 3:4-6, 19).<sup>9</sup>

Paradoxically, as hinted in the Midrash Yonah, the salvation of the Ninevites would usher in Israel's ultimate fall, becoming "a rod of YHWH's wrath."<sup>10</sup> A message to Israel was implicit in YHWH's message to Nineveh. If a wicked pagan nation would heed Jonah's proclamations and repent, thus earning the Almighty's everlasting mercies, an accusatory finger could then be pointed at the recalcitrant nation of Israel—a people who claimed to be followers of YHWH. Nineveh's repentance would become Israel's condemnation. How could Israel's obduracy allow it to remain secure after Nineveh's repentance? Could oppressors be more receptive to YHWH's word than the marginalized? If, indeed Ninevites repented, would YHWH not be justified in pouring YHWH's wrath upon Israel for failing to show a similar spirit? Briefly stated, Israel would be condemned by contrast.

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<sup>7</sup> Radak 3:8. Radak is the acronym for Rav David Kimchi, an early thirteenth-century French grammarian and commentator on the prophets.

<sup>8</sup> The prophecy was fulfilled by 612 B.C.E., when the city was burned to the ground.

<sup>9</sup> The prophecy of Nahum raises an interesting question. If Nahum, who is a contemporary of either King Jotham (756-741 B.C.E.) or King Manasseh (696-642 B.C.E.), postdates Jonah, why then is there a need for a prophecy concerning the destruction of Nineveh if her people had already repented during Jonah's earlier mission to that city?

<sup>10</sup> Midrash Yonah, Is 10:5.

Additionally, if Nineveh were to repent, Jonah could be accused of false prophecies. After all, does not the Deuteronomist warn that if a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, and the prophecy does not come to pass, then that person is a false prophet (Deut. 18:21-22)? Or worse, would not the wicked conclude that YHWH lacked the power to carry out YHWH's decree, mistaking his mercy for impotence?

## CHAPTER 1: JONAH'S CALL TO GO TO NINEVEH

Jonah contemplated YHWH's call, realizing that, with the exception of Elisha, who also proclaimed YHWH's word to an enemy of Israel (2 Kgs. 8:9-15), he would be the only prophet sent to proclaim the word of YHWH in a foreign land. Most other prophets denounced foreign powers from the safety of their borders. While some other prophets called by YHWH may have initially recoiled from their call, like Moses (Exod. 3:11; 4:10, 13), Gideon (Judg. 6:13), and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6), they protested in words only, for danger existed in disobeying YHWH through actions: "For if the Lord YHWH has spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8). The last prophet to ignore YHWH's call was eaten by a lion (1 Kgs. 13:7-32). Even though YHWH's calling of Jonah implied that YHWH was no tribal deity localized to the land of the Hebrews, but was concerned with holding far-off kingdoms like Nineveh ethically accountable, Jonah chose to be unfaithful to YHWH. But was his unfaithfulness to YHWH a product of his faithfulness to Israel? By fleeing, was he living up to his name, "ben Amittai," which means "son of faithfulness," or failing to live up to it?

Jonah chose Tarshish as his destination, as far away as possible from what he thought was the presence of YHWH, a place that had not yet heard of YHWH's fame nor seen YHWH's glory (Isa. 66:19). Although Jonah was well aware that YHWH was able to reach the remotest parts of the earth, he hoped at least to flee from YHWH's prophetic calling. The trading city of Tarshish was believed to be

situated at the other end of the known world, the geographical antipode of Nineveh. Tarshish, or Tartessos, was a former Greek colony at the estuary of the river Guadalquivir, beyond Gibraltar, located on the southwest coast of modern-day Spain.<sup>11</sup> According to the Mishnah,<sup>12</sup> it took a full year of sea travel to arrive at Tarshish. To get there, Jonah had first to descend to the seaport of Joppa<sup>13</sup> where he found a ship preparing to depart for Tarshish. There are those who claim that Jonah was so impatient to get under way that he paid the fare for the entire passenger load, even the empty berths.<sup>14</sup> His anxiety to set sail was so great that he paid the price for passage in advance, rather than afterward as was the custom of the day (Lacocque and Lacocque 1981, 40). Once the travel arrangements were made, Jonah boarded the ship for Tarshish, sailing west rather than riding east.

The ship Jonah boarded was a sturdy vessel designed for long journeys. It was probably constructed of fir planks, with a mast of cedar, linen sails, and a pine deck, and was powered by oars made of oak (Ezek. 27:5-12). Although it was a sturdy ship, YHWH hurled an impressively great and furious wind onto the sea, causing a storm that could destroy such a vessel. The mariners were afraid and cried out to their own gods. They hurled their cargo overboard, as if trying to appease the sea with the sacrifice of their goods. Some have claimed that they also threw their useless, unresponsive idols into the sea.<sup>15</sup> In reality, they hoped to lighten their load to make the ship more manageable. Jonah was unaware of the turmoil occurring on the deck

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<sup>11</sup> Although some scholars locate Tarshish on the southwest coast of Spain, others associate Tarshish with Tarsus, located on the southeastern coast of Asia Minor to the west of Cyprus and Greece. Still others insist that it remains an unknown location referred to in the biblical text for its association with sea commerce (see 1 Kgs. 10:22; 2 Chr. 9:21; Isa. 23:1, 14, 60:9; and Ezek. 27:25).

<sup>12</sup> Baba Batra 3:2.

<sup>13</sup> Present-day Jaffa, a suburb of Tel Aviv.

<sup>14</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim* 38a.

<sup>15</sup> Radal on PdRE 10; 31. Radal is the acronym for Rav David Luria, the nineteenth-century Lithuanian scholar of the Torah and commentator on PdRE.

above, for he had descended to the recesses of the ship. There he fell into a deep sleep as secure as a fetus in a mother's womb.<sup>16</sup>

When the ship's captain discovered Jonah sleeping, he awoke him by yelling, "What is it with you? Arise, O sound sleeper! Cry out to your god! Perhaps the god in whom you believe will take notice of us and not leave us to perish!" But as the captain pleaded with Jonah to pray, the spokesperson for YHWH uttered not one word. Even though a prayer of repentance could have stopped the implacable tempest and saved his life and those of his fellow passengers, Jonah remained silent.

Making no headway against the squalling storm, the mariners spoke among themselves, and decided to cast lots to discover who had caused the evil that had befallen them. The casting of lots was a time-honored process for outing guilty parties, whether it was Achan, who knowingly violated YHWH's ban on obtaining booty (Josh. 7), or Jonathan, who inadvertently violated the oath made by his father, King Saul, during the Michmash campaign (1 Sam. 14:24-46). When the mariners cast the lots, Jonah was indicated.

Immediately they questioned Jonah. "Please tell us why this evil has occurred to us? What is your mission? Where do you come from? What is your country? Who are your people?" Jonah replied by saying, "I am a Hebrew, and YHWH, the God of the heavens is the God I fear. For YHWH made both the sea and the dry land and has power over them." Thus, Jonah confessed the very God from whom he was fleeing. Upon hearing this, the mariners were filled with fear. They asked, "What have you done? And more important, what are we to do with you so as to return calm to the sea?" for the storm was growing stronger. Jonah replied, "Lift me up and hurl me into the sea. Then will the

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<sup>16</sup> Psychologist Erich Fromm interprets the prophet's finding refuge in the inner parts of the ship while others struggled for their lives as Jonah's inability to communicate properly with others. To be sound asleep in the midst of chaos symbolizes a "safe" withdrawal from the presence of others, like a fetus in a mother's womb. According to Fromm, Jonah's experience of seeking protection and isolation becomes a recurring motif of the story—repeated also in the great fish's belly (1951, 21-23).

sea be calmed for you, for I know that it is on my account that this storm rages against you.” Even now, when repentance could have brought an end to the storm, Jonah chose death rather than obedience to the call of YHWH.

Perhaps Jonah thought that death by drowning—a form of asphyxiation—was a proper penalty, for custom dictated asphyxiation by the hands of heaven for those who withheld knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Either way, the mariners at first refused to grant Jonah’s death wish. Instead, they dug into the waters with their oars in the vain hope of bringing the ship to dry land. But they were unable to, for the sea grew even worse. Finally, they did what Jonah, until now, had refused to do: they called upon YHWH. How pathetic: the pagan mariners’ submissiveness before YHWH was exceeded only by the anointed prophet’s stubbornness. Nevertheless, the Hebrew prophet of YHWH, who fled from YHWH’s call to proclaim good news to the pagans, was still able, against his will, to bring non-Israelites to call on the name of the living God. The mariners cried out, “O YHWH, please do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. And do not hold us guilty of innocent blood. For you, O YHWH, have done as it pleased you.” With that, they lifted up the recalcitrant prophet and hurled him into the sea in hope that through the death of this one person, all might be saved. At that moment, the sea stood still and ceased raging. And fearing a great fear of YHWH, the mariners sacrificed sacrifices, and they vowed vows.<sup>18</sup>

## CHAPTER 2: JONAH IN THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

Unbeknownst to the mariners who sailed away on calm waters, YHWH had already designated an impressively great fish to swallow Jonah—not to punish him but to save him. Although condemned to drown for fleeing from YHWH’s presence, Jonah

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<sup>17</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 89a; *Sukkah* 53b.

<sup>18</sup> The last verse of the first chapter is one of the only places in scripture where a threefold *figura etymologica* is employed (Golka 1988:87).

was saved by a miracle. Still, Jonah found himself in the belly of a gender-confused fish<sup>19</sup> for three days and three nights—three days and three nights, according to Near Eastern mythology, was the time required to journey to the underworld (Landes 1967, 446-50). While rescued from drowning, Jonah began to realize, with the passing of each day, that he was trapped in a limbo where the doors of escape—to death or to life—were locked and could be opened only with the key of prayer. So, finally, from the entrails of the fish, Jonah was forced to do what the ship's captain originally asked him to do—to call upon his god. But rather than offering a prayer of entreaty that would encompass regret, repentance, and hopefully reconciliation, Jonah offered up a psalm of thanksgiving and avoided dealing with the reason for his predicament.

Jonah prayed to YHWH his God by saying, "I cried out to YHWH from my distress, and YHWH answered me. From the belly of Hell I cried for help and you, O Lord, heard my voice. For you hurled me into the abyss, into the heart of the seas, as currents engulfed me and all your waves and billows washed over me." In reality, the mariners were the ones who hurled Jonah into the sea in obedience to his request. But such facts are conveniently forgotten as Jonah placed the blame for his predicament upon YHWH, whom he accused of being the agent that hurled him from the ship. Jonah continued his prayer by alleging "I am cast out from your sight! However, I will again gaze upon your holy Temple." Again Jonah blamed YHWH, this time for his banishment. In reality, YHWH did not cast him out—Jonah fled. Jonah resumed, "Water encompassed me, the deep surrounded me, seaweed was wrapped around my head. I descended to the bases of the mountains, the earth with her bars closed upon me forever. But you

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<sup>19</sup> In vv. 1 and 11, the noun *dāg*, the masculine form for fish, is used to describe the beast that swallowed Jonah. However, in v. 2, the noun employed is *dāgā*, the feminine form for fish. The Midrash Yonah attempts to reconcile the gender discrepancy by stating that the first fish to swallow Jonah was male. For three days Jonah was in his spacious belly refusing to pray. God then had the male fish spit Jonah into a female fish, one who was pregnant with 365,000 fry. The pain of close quarters finally led Jonah to his knees.

brought my life up from the pit, O YHWH my God. When my body and soul fainted within me, I remembered YHWH and my prayer came to you, into your holy Temple.”

Even though the pagan mariners who hurled him into the sea proved to be more attuned to YHWH, and even though Jonah found himself in the entrails of the fish because he refused to bring YHWH’s message to the pagan nation of Assyria, he could not help himself from using religious jargon to justify his actions. “Those who pay heed to the vanities of idolatry,” he continued, “forsake their grace.” But indeed, YHWH is offering grace to the idolaters of Nineveh, in spite of the fact that they bow their knees to Assur and follow sinful ways. After all, in the knowledge that they were sinners, YHWH sent to them his prophet Jonah, so that they might be saved. If the people of Nineveh are lost from YHWH’s grace, it is not because they are sinners but because those who live on the margins of empire refused to reach out to them with YHWH’s good news.

The next step for Jonah is to try to appease YHWH by offering to perform religious acts. He continues, “But I, with a loud voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; I will fulfill that which I have vowed.” Throughout his pious-sounding prayer, Jonah never repents or states why he fled from YHWH. Even though no mention is made of Nineveh or of Jonah’s desertion of YHWH’s calling, YHWH still delivers him. In the end, Jonah is forced to acknowledge the truth about the mercy of YHWH by closing his psalm with the recognition, “Salvation comes from YHWH!” And YHWH commanded the fish, who, either out of obedience to YHWH or simply nauseated by Jonah’s saccharine speech, vomited Jonah onto dry land.

### CHAPTER 3: JONAH’S MISSION IN NINEVEH

After Jonah was belched up by the great fish onto dry ground and stripped of all dignity, the word of YHWH came to him a second time: “Get up, go at once to Nineveh, that impressively great city, the center of empire, and proclaim to [not against] them the

proclamation as I told you to do.”<sup>20</sup> So Jonah rose up and went to Nineveh, in obedience to the word of YHWH.

Nineveh was an impressively great city that required a journey of three days to traverse.<sup>21</sup> For three days Jonah walked up and down the streets of Nineveh proclaiming YHWH’s proclamation. For the first and only time in biblical history, a prophet of YHWH walked down the streets of a non-Jewish city proclaiming a message from the Lord. In a language foreign to the inhabitants, he cried out, “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” Consisting of only five Hebrew words, this was, no doubt, the shortest prophetic message recorded in the biblical text. Jonah’s message was neither an ultimatum nor a warning, but simply a declaration of doom (Sasson 1990, 267). He could have worn a sandwich board as he made his way through the imperial capital. Written on the front would be “Repent! The End Is Near!” And on the back possibly “Forty Days and Counting.” Even though Jonah’s message did not contain a call to believe, the Ninevites understood the intent. It was not Jonah whom they believed but the God who sent Jonah. They proclaimed a fast and, from the greatest even to the least, they put on sackcloth.

The message was accepted in spite of the messenger. Some have claimed that the Ninevites were quick to repent because the

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<sup>20</sup> “Proclaim the proclamation” is another instance of the author using a *figura etymologica* (Golka 1988, 101).

<sup>21</sup> Attempts have been made by scholars to reconcile the size of Nineveh as depicted by the author of Jonah with the archaeological evidence, which suggests a much smaller city. If the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.E.) enlarged the city from a circumference of about three miles to about seven, as modern archaeological surveys confirm, then it would not take three days to traverse the city; this would be a gross exaggeration (Madhloum 1967, 77). Attempting to explain this discrepancy, some scholars have developed a “Greater Nineveh” or “Assyrian Triangle” hypothesis, which states that when Jonah mentioned Nineveh, he was really referring to an area that encompassed surrounding cities, including Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad) and Calah (Nimrud). However, Dur Sharrukin was not built, nor was Nineveh the capital of Assyria for at least a quarter of a century after Jonah’s supposed lifetime (Bolin 1997, 35). Thus, it can be argued that Jonah proclaimed God’s message *while* walking up and down all the streets and alleys of Nineveh. But even then, would this process have taken three full days?

sailors who endured the storm with Jonah went on to Nineveh and told how they had cast him into the sea only to see him miraculously rescued.<sup>22</sup> Or maybe the receptiveness of the Ninevites was primed by the severe earthquakes that occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II (Amos 1:1), or the full solar eclipse that astronomical calculations indicated occurred in the year 763 B.C.E. (Simon 1999, xvii-xviii). Either way, events such as these must have appeared to be heavenly signs that reinforced Jonah's warning.<sup>23</sup>

The word proclaimed by Jonah touched even the king of Nineveh. Unlike King Jeroboam of Israel, the pagan Ninevite king arose from his throne, removed his robes, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Sackcloth was usually woven from goats' hair to create a thick coarse cloth; wearing sackcloth symbolized the rejection of all earthly comforts and pleasure. The king then proclaimed to Nineveh, "By decree of the king and his nobles: No humans or beast, herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not be allowed to feed, nor allowed to drink water. But let humans and beasts be covered with sackcloth."<sup>24</sup> And let them call to God with strength. And let each person turn from their evil way, and from the violence that is in their palms. Who knows, perhaps God may repent and turn away from God's fierce anger, so that we might not perish." And all did as the king commanded. From old men to infant girls, all wore sackcloth, with none partaking of food or drink. Even the cows in pastures wore sackcloth, as did the chickens in the coop. It seemed that even the animals of Nineveh had a clearer understanding of repentance and obedience to YHWH's words than the humans who resided in Israel on the margins of empire.

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<sup>22</sup> Radak; Ibn Ezra. Rav Avraham Ibn Ezra was a great biblical commentator (as well as poet, philosopher, grammarian, and astronomer) of the early twelfth century from Toledo, Spain.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that no connection exists in the biblical text between these events and Jonah's proclamation in Nineveh.

<sup>24</sup> The custom of issuing a decree in the name of both the king and his nobles requiring everyone, including the animals, to wear sackcloth as sign of mourning was developed much later, during Persian period (Bickerman 1965, 250n67).

When God saw how the Ninevites had turned from their evil ways,<sup>25</sup> God repented of the evil that would destroy the Ninevites and did not unleash it. For has YHWH not declared, “The instant I speak about plucking up, breaking down, or destroying a nation or a kingdom, I will repent of the evil that I thought of doing to it if that nation, against whom I have spoken, would turn from their evil” (Jer. 18:7-8). Would not YHWH have spared the wicked city of Sodom from being overthrown if only ten righteous individuals had been found within her borders (Gen. 18:22-32)? For YHWH is indeed a gracious and compassionate God who does not enjoy seeking death for the wicked, but rather provides them with life if only they repudiate their evil ways (Ezek. 18:23). God’s ultimate hope is that the prophet’s message makes punishment unnecessary. For God does not want any to perish, but rather wants all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Thus, in a very real sense, the city was overturned—not with the destruction that was once visited upon Sodom and Gomorrah, but with repentance.<sup>26</sup> But although the city’s inhabitants repented, there is no evidence that their repentance was long-lasting, nor does evidence exist of a conversion to Yahwism. Still, at this point in time, repentance was enough.

#### CHAPTER 4: JONAH’S ANGER OVER NINEVEH’S SALVATION

Jonah was indignant with the turn of events and fell into a rage. He was repelled by a God who “cheapened” mercy in order to spare oppressors. Thus, as YHWH’s wrath ended, Jonah’s wrath began. Jonah prayed to YHWH, saying, “Please, O YHWH, was this not what I said would happen when I was still in my own land?” Finally the truth came out. Jonah continued, “For this rea-

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<sup>25</sup> No records exist in the Assyrian archives, or any other records of the empire, that describe the events recorded in the Book of Jonah of Nineveh’s repentance before the God of Israel. Nor does any future prophet of God who prophesied against Assyria seem to know of these events; none speaks of Jonah’s adventures.

<sup>26</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 89b.

son, I at first fled to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God who is slow to anger and possessing great amounts of grace. You are one who repents from punishing.” Jonah abhorred YHWH’s divine mercy when it is extended to Israel’s archenemy, yet liberally bestowed upon him while in the belly of the fish. How dare YHWH not punish the oppressors in the way in which they deserved? How dare God upset the divine plan of retributive justice by making grace universally available? Does YHWH not stand in solidarity with the marginalized over against those of the empire whose privilege comes at the expense of the oppressed? Should not the marginalized expect their God to punish such evildoers?

If God refuses to punish Nineveh as they deserve to be punished, what hope exists that the universe is based on any type of “moral” principles? Who can live in a universe where evildoers can be redeemed? Does any justice exist within God? Who would want to live in a world where the God of justice refuses to mete out retributive justice? It is not a surprise, then, that Jonah wanted no part of a world without what he perceived to be a just God. “And now, O YHWH,” he cries out, “please take my life from me. For better is my death than my life.” It is ironic that, like the prophet Elijah, Jonah prayed for death. But while Elijah’s death wish was due to his failure as a prophet to lead a king to repentance (1 Kgs. 19:4), Jonah’s was based on his success.

YHWH responded to Jonah by asking, “Do you have a right to be angry?” Rather than answering YHWH’s question, Jonah withdrew to a hillside east of the city and made for himself a *sukkâ*.<sup>27</sup> Constructing the booth was a subtle reminder of the covenant YHWH made with God’s chosen people—in effect, those for whom God made a preferential option (Exod. 19:4-5). After all, Nineveh was like Egypt of an earlier time, an empire that sought the annihilation of the Hebrew people. Jonah sat in the shade of his booth, waiting to see what would happen to the city. When the *sukkâ* did not provide shade and protection for Jonah, the

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<sup>27</sup> *Sukkôt* (pl.) are booths, reminiscent of those built in the desert during the exodus (Lev. 23:43).

Lord YHWH appointed a plant to grow.<sup>28</sup> And it grew quickly, rising up over Jonah to shade his head and save him from discomfort. Jonah rejoiced over the plant and was very happy until the next day, when the Lord appointed a worm to attack the plant so that it withered. Later as the sun shone, the Lord appointed an east wind, a scorching sirocco, and the sun beat down so hard on Jonah's head that he fainted. Again he asked for death, saying, "Better is my death than my life."

But the Lord said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry over a plant?" And Jonah replied, "Yes, angry enough to die!" Then YHWH continued, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you it make grow—coming into being in a night and perishing in a night. Should I not have compassion on the impressively great city Nineveh in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know between the right and the left hand, that is, between good and evil?<sup>29</sup> Not to mention the cattle?"

What an unanswerable question! Any response Jonah might make would betray his lack of mercy. After all, he held no right to the shade provided by the plant appointed by YHWH in the first place, for it was a gift freely given by its creator. Likewise, YHWH was free not only to repent of anger, but free also to offer pardon. If Jonah could show concern for a plant, could not YHWH show concern for an entire city?

On the other hand, if Jonah was instead to insist on his right to be angry, then he would have to justify that anger. Surely, if YHWH was expected to act with love toward Jonah, then Jonah

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<sup>28</sup> The plant is referred to as קיקיון, and is usually translated as "gourd." Although its identity is uncertain, biblical scholars have suggested that the plant could be a castor-oil plant or a quick-growing *ricinus*.

<sup>29</sup> A population of 120,000 appears reasonable for an ancient city with a circumference of approximately three to seven miles as described in n. 21 (Simons 1959, 527). Some scholars estimate that during the reign of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.E.), this figure would have increased to 300,000 (Wolff 1977, 175). Still, the 120,000 figure is impressive when compared with Jerusalem, whose own population swelled to 24,000 inhabitants shortly after the fall of Israel (Broshi 1974, 23-24).

could not deny YHWH from acting with love toward others—even the Ninevites. And the account of Jonah ends at this point. We do not know how Jonah responded to YHWH, but it really doesn't matter. Any response Jonah could give would only confirm God's prerogative to act for and show mercy as YHWH chooses.

### RETHINKING THE STORY OF JONAH

Jonah's story is more than a children's fairy tale of a man-swallowing whale. For the inhabitants of the empire, and those who live on the underside of the empire's power, Jonah's story is uncomfortable and disturbing. But this is what makes the story rich, for in the end, God's understanding of justice and mercy overturns preconceived assumptions.

The story of Jonah is a tale of an evil and oppressive empire that has achieved great wealth, power, and privilege at the expense of the surrounding marginalized communities. It is a story of a rebellious prophet from the empire's margins who wants only to see his oppressors utterly destroyed and who is angry with an unjust God who has shown mercy to the enemy. It is the story of a God who is quick to offer redemption and mercy even to those who deserve neither. In short, it is a story of reconciliation that encompasses God, the oppressors, and the disenfranchised. This story had as much relevance in the ancient world as it has in the modern world of today. But what does it say about us today? What can we learn from it? What does it call us to do? It is to these questions that we now turn our attention.