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EHUD BEN ZVI, JONAH 4:11 AND THE METAPROPHETIC CHARACTER OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

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The meaning of Jonah 4:11 in general and whether it is correct to state that "readings of Jonah 4:11as a rhetorical question do not create any grammatical or syntactic difficulty" in particular stand at the center of some recent debate.[1] I dedicate the first part of the paper to why I think that there is no serious difficulty in readings of Jonah 4:11 as a rhetorical question. In the second part of the paper, I will discuss the full range of meanings that Jonah 4:11 likely evoked among the late Persian period literati for whom the book of Jonah was intended. In the third and final section, I will address the contribution of Jonah 4:11 to the shaping of the book's metaprophetic character, and place the latter within its (intellectual) historical milieu.

Turning to the first part of this paper, the key issue is not whether asseverative readings of the key statement:

וַאֲנִי לֹא אָחוּס עַל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה

are grammatically possible. They clearly are. There are no *grammatical or syntactical* problems that pre-empt an understanding of the text as carrying a disjunctive, asseverative meaning, that is, "but, as for me, I will not have pity on Nineveh, the great city." [2] But the same

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[1] The quotation is from E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTS 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press/Continuum, 2003), 14 n. 1; for a different position see Ph. Guillaume, "The End of Jonah and the Beginning of Wisdom," *Bib* 87 (2006), 243–50 (243–44) and cf. idem, "Caution: Rhetorical Questions!," *BN* 103 (2000), 11–16 (15–16). A research programme at the EABS recently called for a session to be devoted to a debate on these questions.

[2] Although the phrase in Jonah 4:11 has been widely read as bearing an interrogative meaning, some scholars have recently favored a declarative reading. See Ph. Guillaume, "The End of Jonah," idem, "Caution: Rhetorical Questions!," A. Cooper, "In Praise of Divine Caprice: The Significance of the Book of Jonah," in P. R. Davies and D. J. A. Clines, *Among the Prophets* (JSOTS 144, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 144–63; cf. " T. M. Boling, 'Should I Not Also Pity Nineveh?' Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 67 (1995), 109–20. For critiques of this position, see, for instance, G. M. Landes, "Textual 'Information

holds true for readings of Jonah 4:11 as a question, which in this case and given the context, can only be understood as a rhetorical question.

Rhetorical questions are widely used in both written and verbal communication across many cultures, and they are certainly not limited to European languages.[3] Rhetorical questions "are not asked, and are not understood, as ordinary information-seeking questions but as making some kind of claim, or assertion, an assertion of the opposite polarity to that of the question."[4] In other words, unlike ordinary information-seeking questions, rhetorical questions have the illocutionary force of an assertion; in fact, of a very strong assertion and are likely to carry an affective appeal. Rhetorical questions tend to relate to what precedes them in a communicative interaction and often tend to convey a challenge to the "recipient" of the communication, to a previous statement made in the conversation, or both, on the basis of a presumed shared knowledge. In fact, when those to whom a question is addressed think that the speaker already knows its answer,[5] their preferred or expected response would be to understand the question as rhetorical. These questions tend to establish a hierarchy of claims and therefore, indirectly, of speakers. They have been associated with teaching techniques aimed at inducing self-correction, by asking the recipient of the question to infer corrective knowledge on the basis of her or his existing knowledge.[6]

An important point is that rhetorical questions do *not* differ from ordinary information questions in terms of syntax or gram-

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Gaps' and 'Dissonances' in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," in R. Chazan, W. W. Hallo, and L. H. Schiffman (eds), *Ki Baruch Hu : Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 273–93 (291–92), P. Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism. Context Method and the Book of Jonah* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 215–23 and explicitly in n. 48 and see also E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Jonah* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 3rd ed., 1981), 98.

[3] Cf. Ph. Guillaume, "Caution: Rhetorical Questions!," 11.

[4] Cited from I. Koshik, *Beyond Rhetorical Questions : Assertive Questions in Everyday Interaction* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005), 2. On "rethorical questions" in English use see also D. L. M. Bolinger, *Interrogative Structures of American English: The Direct Question* (Publication of the American Dialect Society, No. 28; Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1957) and R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (New York: Longman, 1985).

[5] Or that no one knows the answer. See, for instance, G. M. Green, *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding* (2nd edition; Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 160. In either case, the matter of whether the question is rhetorical or not can be decided only by its pragmatic context, not by any formal grammatical or syntactical marker.

[6] From its use in Socratic dialogues, and earlier ancient Near Eastern material (see below) to this day. On the latter see I. Koshik, *Beyond Rhetorical Question*s, chapter 5.

mar. In fact, the very same string of words may communicate a rhetorical or information-seeking question, under different extra-linguistic circumstances (e.g., depending on whether the partners in the conversation know the answer). The key to differentiate among them is the illocutionary force, which is shaped by the intention of the speaker,[7] and from the perspective of the recipient, the way in which the latter constructs that intention, which is related to her/his evaluation of the world of knowledge (and character) of the speaker.[8]

Readers of texts construe the purpose of a speaker in a reported conversation embedded in a larger written text on the basis of their knowledge of the text itself, of the world portrayed in the text and its assumptions, and of the book's characters and their interactions. Those like us who attempt to reconstruct historical readings produced in a particular reading community cannot but reconstruct the likely way in which the relevant readers of the text understood a question (that is, as an information-seeking or rhetorical question) on the basis of their reconstruction of these readers' assumptions about the purpose of the personage to whom the text attributes the question. In other words, in all these cases, we are dealing with pragmatic—not semantic—competence; neither grammar nor syntax is likely to offer much help. It is worth stressing at this point that unlike cases of actual conversations, reported conversations in literary texts may construe speakers who do not fully reveal their intentions to their conversation partners. One has also to take into account that the main goal of reported conversations in prophetic books is not necessarily to communicate information from speaker to listener, but from implied author to intended readers who overhear the reported conversation as it were. The point in these cases is not whether the literary character of the reported listener has all the required knowledge to decode the message of the speaker in the text, but whether the intended reader has it. Morevoer, rhetorical questions in sophisticated literary texts may play on multiple layers of meanings and lack of certainty, and they may be used as both assertions and interrogatives at the same time.[9]

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[7] Cf. G.M. Green, Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding, 144.

[8] Of course, miscommunication occurs when the self-constructions of the intention of the speaker and that of the recipients failed to converge. (One may say that in this case, the illocutionary act was not performed.) This type of situation is usually avoided because partners in a conversation, knowingly or unknowingly, tend to rely on shared assumptions, knowledge and extra-linguistic markers to ensure that their intentions are correctly decoded by their conversation partners. This collaboration is essential for effective communication, if the latter is understood as usual as a cooperative enterprise in which partners wish to disclose their ideas, positions, knowledge and the like to each other.

[9] Cf. 2 Kgs 19:11//Isa 37:11 and on the rhetorical question stated

There is no doubt that later readers of the relevant phrase in Jonah 4:11, namely וַאֲנִי לֹא אָחוּס עַל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה did understand it as a rhetorical question.[10] The issue is whether, as far as we can reconstruct, the same holds true for the intended and primary rereaders of the book of Jonah, likely in the late Persian period. To approach this matter, one must deal with three related issues: (a) Were the literati among whom and for whom the book was written well aware of the device of rhetorical question; (b) could they have understood Jonah 4:11 as a question; and if (a) and (b) are answered in a positive way, (c) are there clues in the text that may have led these literati to understand Jonah 4:11 as a rhetorical question?

The first question is easily answered. These literati were well versed in the use of rhetorical questions. There is nothing out of the ordinary in this regard. Rhetorical questions are well attested in other and earlier ancient Near Eastern cultures.[11] Within the HB rhetorical questions are quite a legion.[12] Moreover, there is clear

there see below.

[10] There is a very long and unusually univocal history of interpretation in this regard. The LXX likely reflects an understanding of Jonah 4:11 as an interrogative, but the question remains open. See the inconclusive position of G. E. Howard, "The Twelve Prophets," A. Pietersma and B. G. Wright, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (NETS; New York/Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 805, available at http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/32-twelve-nets.pdf. The change from forty to three days in LXX Jonah 3:4 (cf. MT) has no direct bearing on the question of how to understand Jonah 4:11 and in fact, may reflect an attempt to solve the temporal tension between the reference to forty days in 3:4 and Jonah's waiting to see what would happen to the city, and to his proclamation, in Jonah 4:5. Incidentally, the Jonah's actions here represent his response to the rhetorical question of Jonah 4:4. This is another non-verbal response to YHWH by Jonah that involves spatial change (cf. Jonah 1:2–3). For a different position on these matters, see Ph. Guillaume, "The End of Jonah."

[11] For instance, there are multiple attestations of rhetorical questions in Epic of Gilgameš, even in tablet X alone, in Akkadian-dialogue texts, in Atrahasis, Ugaritic and Egyptian literature (e.g., the Admonitions of Ipuwer). See W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry. A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTS, 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, rep. with corrections 1995), 338–39; M. Held, "Rhetorical Questions in Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew," *W.F. Albright Volume - Eretz-Israel 9* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Exploration Society, 1969) 71–79; S. Denning – Bolle, *Wisdom in Akkadian Literature. Expression, Instruction, Dialogue* (Mededelingen en verhandelingen van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap "Ex Oriente Lux, 28;" Leiden: Ex Oriente Lux, 1992); R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems* 1940 – 1640 BC (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[12] E.g., Gen 18:14, 25; 20:5; 37:8; Exod 15:11; Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 7:5; 2 Kgs 8:13; Isa 53:1; 66:8; Jer 18:14; Joel 1:2; Am 3:3–8; 6:12; Mic 7:18; Hag 2:19; Ps 88:11–12; Job 38:28–29; Prov 6:27–28; 1 Chr 11:19.

For scholarly works dealing with rhetorical questions in the HB, see,

evidence that the literati's sophisticated, literary craftsmanship in-cluded mastery of rhetorical questions. To illustrate, these ques-tions appear in a very substantial number of instances in complex sequential patterns;[13] they happen to serve various purposes,[14] and most significantly, in a few cases, one cannot but notice the de-familiarizing effect of turning widely held expectations upside down. It is a typical, transcultural feature of negative rhetorical questions that they have the illocutionary force of a positive asser-tion, and of positive rhetorical questions to carry a negative asser-tion.[15] This feature is widely attested in the HB.[16] It should be mentioned, however, that the HB contains examples in which this widely held rule of expectation is turned upside down creating a reversal that strongly draws the attention of the recipients of the question to the meaning conveyed by the text (see 1 Sam 2:27 and Jer 31:20).[17] In other words, the literati depended on their world of knowledge, not grammatical or syntactic considerations, to decide when a question is rhetorical or not, and to ensure that they cor-rectly understood the pragmatic meaning of the rhetorical ques-tions they encountered, even if at times the meaning might run against what was expected according to the general rules governing rhetorical questions. This world of knowledge included, of course,

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for instance, L. J. de Regt, "Discourse Implications of Rhetorical Ques-tions in Job, Deuteronomy and the Minor Prophets," in L. J. de Regt, J. de Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman (eds), *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strate-gies in the Hebrew Bible* (Assen/Winona Lake, Ind.: Van Gor-cum/Eisenbrauns, 1996), 51–78; idem, "Implications of Rhetorical Ques-tions in Strophes in Job 11 and 15," in W. A. M. Beuken (ed.), *The Book of Job* (BETL, 114; Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1994), 321–28; B. Kedar, "The Interpretation of Rhetorical Questions in the Bible," in M. A. Fishbane, E. Tov and W. W. Fields (eds), "Sha'arei Talmon" Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 145*–53* (in Hebrew); W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, esp. 338–42; and W. Bruegge-mann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions," *JBL* 92 (1973), 358–74.

[13] E.g., Am 3:3–8; Job 28:28–29 and Job 40:44–31, which contains a sequence of sixteen rhetorical questions. See W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 339–40.

[14] See works mentioned in note 14 and their bibliography.

[15] For this reason, Koshik calls them "Reversed Polarity Questions" or RPQ. See I. Koshik, *Beyond Rhetorical Question*s, passim.

[16] For an unequivocal case see 1 Sam 7:5 and cf. 1 Chr 17:4.

[17] Cf. B. Kedar, "Interpretation of Rhetorical Questions in the Bible." The relevant portion of the verses reads הֲנִגְלֹה נִגְלֵיתִי אֶל־בֵּית אָבִיךָ בִּהְיוֹתָם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְבֵית פַּרְעֹה (1 Sam 2:27; notice common ET such as NRSV, NAB, NJPSV) and הֲבֵן יַקִּיר לִי אֶפְרַיִם אִם יֶלֶד שַׁעֲשֻׁעִים (Jer 31:20; see NAB, NJPSV). It is likely that a similar inversion was connoted also in הַזְּבָחִים וּמִנְחָה הִגַּשְׁתֶּם־לִי בַמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל (Am 5:25) at least from the perspective of Persian period readers who were aware of much of the traditions of the Pentateuch, if not the Pentateuch in more or less its present form.

potential cotexts in the relevant section of the book, but also their general background knowledge and their discursive/ideological tendencies. As expected, the readers' previous knowledge and out-look governs the construction of pragmatic meaning in case of potential rhetorical questions.

Turning to the second issue, could the literati have under-stood Jonah 4:11 as a question? Or to phrase it differently, did such a reading present them with grammatical or syntactic difficulties? The answer to the last question is negative and, consequently that to the first question is positive.

To be sure, most of the well over a thousand interrogative phrases in the HB are marked by either the interrogative ה or interrogative pronouns/particles (e.g., מדוע, מתי, מי, מה).[18] But the literati were well aware that questions did not have to be marked by these markers or by means of any grammatical markers or particu-lar syntactic structures. A few examples will suffice. In Song 3:3 אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי רְאִיתֶם is unequivocally marked as a question, but by context alone. The same holds true for אַתָּה זֶה בְּנִי עֵשָׂו in Gen 27:24. These examples can easily be multiplied.[19] Their collective evidence cannot be explained away in terms of textual corruptions. To be sure, on the basis of comparative linguistics, it is widely as-sumed that these questions were marked by intonation in oral speech, but what about written texts? How to read them, with what intonation? The answer, of course, depends on what the readers think the text is saying and, to decide that, they depend on both the text before and the world of knowledge that informs and shapes their readings.

To be sure, this situation leads to less fixed readings, possible ambiguities or multi-valence, but the ancient literati in Yehud rel-ished them in general, and certainly did so those who were respon-sible for the prophetic books. For them, this was another literary device in their arsenal.[20]

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[18] For lists of interrogative phrases in the HB and of the "particles" that precede them see T. E. Pratt Sr., "The Meaning of the Interrogative in the Old Testament" (PhD thesis, Baylor University, 1972; available through University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan) 66–73. Pratt counts 48 different particles.

[19] E.g., וַאֲנִי אָבוֹא אֶל־בֵּיתִי לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִשְׁכַּב עִם־אִשְׁתִּי חַיֶּךָ וְחֵי נַפְשֶׁךָ אִם־אֶעֱשֶׂה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה in 2 Sam 11:11 (and see NRSV, NAB, NJSPV); וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁלוֹם לַנַּעַר לְאַבְשָׁלוֹם in 2 Sam 18:29 (and see NRSV, NAB, NJSPV); וְאַתָּה תִּירָשֶׁנּוּ in Judg 11:23 (and see NRSV, NAB, NJSPV). For many more examples see GKC 150.1; cf. also B. Kedar, "Interpretation of Rhetorical Questions."

[20] A good example is הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יֶחֱטָא וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה תִּקְצֹף in Num 16:22, which has been disambiguated as an assertion among the masoretes and in the Samaritan Pentateuch, but as a question in some ancient and most modern translations. The original unvocalized phrase allowed and was likely to convey both meanings; cf. B. Kedar, "Interpretation of Rhe-torical Questions."

In sum, if context suggested to late Persian period literati, who were well aware of, and read and reread most biblical texts,[21] that there were good reasons to read or to consider reading a seemingly asseverative clause as a question—whether rhetorical or not— they most likely did it. Whether or not interrogative clauses that begin with a ו that connects them to the preceding sentence are more frequent than other interrogative clauses that are not marked as such by any interrogative particle/pronoun (as suggested in GKC 150.1 and by many scholars since then), the fact remains that the literati could write and read interrogative clauses even if they were devoid any of these markers if the context suggested them to do so.[22] But did the context suggest them that Jonah 4:11 might be read as a question?

The answer to this question is also positive. The crucial point is not that there is a long history of readings of Jonah 4:11 as an interrogative, but that it is reasonable to assume that the intended rereadership of the book, which is the best approximate that we may have to its primary readership, was asked to at least consider this reading by textually inscribed markers. To begin with, any reading of the book of Jonah informed by chapter three would have raised that possibility. Any reading informed by a theological outlook in which repentance plays an important role would have raised at the very least the possibility of a reading of the book of Jonah in which the city is not destroyed. Such an approach to the text is reinforced by the precise text of the divine speech in Jonah 4:11 which is clearly marked to evoke in the readership three sets of pairs:

(a) "you" (i.e., Jonah) in contrast to "I" (YHWH);

(b) "positive qtl form of חוס in the qal" in contrast to "negative yqtl form of חוס in the qal;" and

(c)עַל־הַקִּיקָיוֹן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָמַלְתָּ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדַּלְתּוֹ שֶׁבִּן־לַיְלָה הָיָה וּבִן־לַיְלָה אָבָד

in contrast to

עַל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֶשׁ־בָּהּ הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתֵּים־עֶשְׂרֵה רִבּוֹ
אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינוֹ לִשְׂמֹאלוֹ וּבְהֵמָה רַבָּה

The first pair contrasts the subjects, the second the verbal form and the third two עַל clauses. The third pair in itself builds around the contrast between (a) the main noun phrases, namely נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה and הַקִּיקָיוֹן and (b) the two אֲשֶׁר clauses. The textual space allocated to the third pair and its own subdivision likely suggested to the intended rereaders that they are encouraged to see this contrast as salient and at least potentially a key interpretative factor. Such an approach is substantially strengthened by the

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[21] As is the likely case with the authorship and primary rereadership of the book of Jonah.

[22] It is worth stressing that even Cooper, who is among the very few scholars who prefer a declarative reading in Jonah 4:11, maintains that there are no grammatical or syntactic impediments for reading Jonah 4:11 as a question. A. Cooper, "In Praise," 158. On his position see below.

fact that the second אשר clause was assigned the concluding words of the section and the book as a whole. In which way does the first אשר clause set a contrast between the plant and the large city and how does it relate to the other contrasts? Why YHWH is construed as emphatically stating that Jonah neither worked nor caused it to grow? The structure of the text and the emphatically disjunctive characterization of the pairs Jonah and YHWH on the one hand and הַקִּיקָיוֹן and Nineveh on the other at the very least encourage a reading which the statement evokes an implied characterization of Nineveh as a city for which YHWH did labor and caused it grow. Such a reading is fully consistent with the general theological outlook of the literati.

By the same logic, the second part of the first אשר clause, which stresses that the plant came into being in a night and perished in a night would at least evoke an implied characterization of Nineveh as a city that neither came into being nor will perish in a day, at least from the perspective of Jonah to whom the divine speech is addressed. The first part of this characterization reflects common knowledge and the second is consistent with and in fact to a large extent *required* by reading of the character Jonah that associated it in any manner with Jonah, the son of Amitay from 2 Kgs 14:25. Certainly the literati were aware that such a Jonah would not have been able to watch the destruction of Nineveh while sitting in his shelter (4:5) or at any point in his life.

The second אשר clause states another set of differences between a plant and a city. The city is jam-packed with אדם and בהמה. Here the text seems to evoke a widely accepted hierarchy of being in which people and then animals stand well above plants. To destroy a plant was not considered the same as to kill animals and certainly human beings. Of course, the implied author seems to have anticipated the claim that plants do not sin, but humans do; the reference to humans who "do not know their right hand from their left" responded to such a potential argument.

This type of (at the very least evoked) reading of the emphatic, key third pair of oppositions explains the other two and the didactic rhetoric employed by YHWH. The deity raises before Jonah a clear case קל וחומר and a resulting rhetorical question. The goal of both, within this reading, was to induce self-correction in Jonah. If YHWH is successful as teacher and consequently Jonah accepts YHWH's viewpoint then not only that the seemingly contradictory verbal forms of חוס partially converge (both Jonah and YHWH should have pity of Nineveh), but also the two main characters partially converge as Jonah's thought would begin to partially converge with that of his teacher, YHWH.[23]

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[23] This Jonah would not be upset with YHWH's lack of action against Nineveh and see the rhetorical question posed to Jonah by YHWH in 4:4.

In sum, readings of verse 11 as an interrogative[24] created no grammatical problems, are coherent with the expectations evoked by the lack of destruction of Nineveh envisaged in chapter 3, Jonah's response at the beginning of chapter 4, and the literati's knowledge that Nineveh was not destroyed during the time of Jeroboam II. Such views were also consistent with the literati's worldview in terms of the importance of repentance and ritual,[25] which is also stressed on Jonah 1–3, as well as with some of the attributes they used to describe YHWH (e.g., merciful). Interrogative readings were also supported by significant textually inscribed markers in vv 10–11. In addition, a rhetorical question here would be consistent with some common attributes of these questions. For instance, these questions tend to tend to establish a hierarchy of claims and, indirectly of speakers, and have been associated with teaching techniques aimed at inducing self-correction, by asking the recipient of the question to infer corrective knowledge on the basis of her or his existing knowledge. Likewise, because of their poignancy, rhetorical questions may be used to conclude a literary unit (or subunit) with a high note. When they do so, the question remains answered in the mind of the readers and the addressees within the world of the book, but with no explicit answer written into the text since such a response would have deprived the rhetorical question from its emphatic, final position.[26]

Does this mean that interrogative readings of Jonah 4:10–11 were the only readings possible among Yehudite literati? Surely not. First, as mentioned above, there is no doubt that grammatically the text was phrased in such a way that allows readings of it as an assertion. This is an important consideration already since these books were written to be reread time and again. Second, the literati were fully aware of the destruction of Nineveh and of Jerusalem. Third, a declarative reading would be consonant with several theological positions that existed in the discourse of the literati (e.g., about the eventual fulfillment of YHWH's word, including its potential postponement, though not cancellation due to pious actions; the human inability to predict YHWH's actions and even construe the deity's motives). This frame of thought would have likely gen-

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[24] Cf. the previous reading of vv 10–11 with those advanced in, for instance, G. M. Landes, "Textual 'Information Gaps,' J. M. Sasson, *Jonah* (AB, 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 306–15; P. Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 215–23; U. Simon, *Jonah* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1999), 44–48.

[25] See R. P. Carroll, "Jonah as a Book of Ritual Responses," K.-D. Schunck and M. Augustin (eds) *Lasset uns Brücken bauen…*" (BEATAJ 42; Frankfut am Main: P. Lang, 1998), 261–68.

[26] Cf., among others, 1 Sam 19:24; 21:6; 27:5; 29:5; Isa 43:13; Joel 2:11; Ps 11:3; 89:49; Job 24:25; Qoh 7:13. See also the well-known הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי in Gen 4:9, which from the perspective of Cain represented an attempt to end his conversation with YHWH. Cf. also L. J. de Regt, "Implications of Rhetorical Questions."

erated at least some wondering about the exact significance of the text. Fourth, a declarative reading finds support in some textually inscribed markers. For instance, such a reading would contrast Jonah, a human who felt "pity" to a destroyer deity to YHWH, a hero who does not show "pity" and who unlike Jonah/human beings does not benefit from, but just uses as temporary tools plants, animals, and myriads of human beings, including Jonah, the sailors and people of Nineveh.

Most scholars support interrogative readings of 4:11. Cooper maintains that "[t]he Book of Jonah itself gives no grounds for choosing between the interrogative and declarative renderings of 4.11," [27] but unlike the implied author of the book, he feels compelled to choose and does so on the basis of the Book of Nahum.[28] Guillaume maintains that interrogative readings are at best 'temporary' and favors the declarative understanding of the question.[29] I think that the best way to approach the way in which the book was read (that is its meaning for its primary rereaderships) is to focus on what one can infer about such a meaning on the grounds of the implied author of the book of Jonah that this rereaderships construed. For one, it is clear that such an implied author did not pick one reading and rejected the other.[30] To the contrary, the open ended conclusion and the lack of an explicit interrogative ה are consistent with an image of an implied author that wishes the rereaders to ponder both understandings of the verse, so they may

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[27] A. Cooper, "In Praise," 158.

[28] It is worth noting that there are many scholars who read Jonah intertextually and stress its intertextual connections with the book of Nahum in particular but clearly understand Jonah 4:11 as a rhetorical question. See, for instance, H. C. P. Kim, "Jonah Read Intertextually," *JBL* 126 (2007) 497–528 (507–12).

[29] See Ph. Guillaume, "The End of Jonah," and "Caution! Rhetorical Questions." He also seems to consider the declarative meaning to be "straightforward." There is no clear "straightforward" meaning in sophisticated texts meant to be reread continually and which time and again use double meaning and de-familiarizing techniques.

[30] Cf. "the lesson of Jonah clearly favours an inclusive approach but does not provide a model of how such integration is to be accomplished in individual cases. It suggests, however, that a failure to grapple with the multivalent nature of many prophetic utterances found within the prophetic books, a failure to integrate conflicting views into a larger picture that allows both to be included, and a decision to read prophetic texts only as predictions for God's future action in history, insisting on their fulfilment in reality and not acknowledging their function as illustrations of the divine nature and will, are all pitfalls to be avoided" (D. Edelman, "Jonah Among the Twelve in the MT: The Triumph of Torah over Prophecy," in D. Edelman and E. Ben Zvi [eds], *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* [London: Equinox, forthcoming, 2008]). See also T.A. Perry, *The Honeymoon is Over. Jonah's Argument with God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 166–72. See also E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, passim.

inform and balance each other.[31] One may compare this case with
וְאַתָּה תִּנָּצֵל in 2 Kgs 19:11//Isa 37:11, which from the perspective
of the Rabshakeh and readers attempting to understand his words
is clearly a rhetorical question,[32] but because of the lack of the
interrogative ה is written in such a way that readers aware of the
end result of Sennacherib's campaign in the biblical narratives may
see in it of Rashakeh's proclaiming a true future, without ever
knowing it. One may compare this with Jonah's statement that the
city will be overturned in Jonah 3:4, which is exactly what he and
the Ninevites thought he was stating as any reader following the
plot of the story would understand Jonah 3:4, but which from the
perspective the readers aware of the events described later in Jonah
3 may be understood also as "Nineveh is to turn over" (i.e., reform
itself).[33]

In fact, within the context of Yehud's literati, the book of Jo-
nah could not but carry a system of two readings informing each
other. The basic expectations raised by the plot of the book as a
whole lead to the expectation of the non-destruction of Nineveh
and reflect and reinforce a construction of a partial image of
YHWH as a compassionate deity that would not destroy a repen-
tant city (cf. Jer 18:7–10), and given chapter four, as one that is
compassionate in general and would not destroy sinners, even if
they deserve so, given that human are not much different from
animals in discerning between good and evil (cf. Joel 2:13; Jonah
4:2; Ps 86:15; 103:8; Neh 9:31). But the literati in the Persian period
knew very well that YHWH is willing and has destroyed large cities
and that both Nineveh and Jerusalem have been destroyed. In fact,
within their discourse, characterization of YHWH in these terms
could not but evoke complementary and balancing images. By
allowing a declarative meaning in 4:11, the text facilitates a second
reading of the book that places the first in proportion, but certainly
does not eliminate it. After all, they could not accept an image of
YHWH only as a punishing, even if just deity either. YHWH could

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[31] The lack of the explicit interrogative ה joins other instances of
carefully chosen wording in the book (e.g., נֶהְפָּכֶת in Jonah 3:4; and the
pair קרא על - קרא אל in Jonah 1:2 and 3:2) and in other prophetic books
(e.g., מִקְטָל in Obad 9 and see E. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of The
Book of Obadiah*, [BZAW, 242; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1996], 124–
28) all of which allow multiplicity of meanings.

[32] Significantly, just as Jonah 4:11 and many other rhetorical questions,
it establishes a hierarchy of claims and, indirectly of speakers and is with
teaching techniques aimed at inducing self-correction, by asking the re-
cipient of the question to infer corrective knowledge on the basis of her
or his existing knowledge.

[33] See J.M. Sasson, *Jonah* , 234–37, 267–68, 295, 345–46, and the bibli-
ography mentioned there. Cf. already Abrabanel. See also E. Ben Zvi,
Signs of Jonah, 22–23.

only be imagined as a deity who is both merciful and merciless, and who forgives and exacts punishment.[34]

The double reading at the end of the book leads not merely to a localized case of multiple meanings, which in itself is a very common feature in the authoritative repertoire of the Yehudite literate (including all prophetic literature), but in this case to a double ending of the book. Since the question of whether YHWH destroys, or does not destroy, Nineveh is central to the plot of the book, this double ending is tantamount to a double reading of the prophetic book, one in which Nineveh is destroyed and another in which it is not. This feature of the book of Jonah joins several others that serve to set the book apart from all other prophetic books, and to draw particular attention to it. In fact, this double reading contributes much to the metaprophetic character, that is, to it provides a key for and reflects an understanding of prophetic literature.[35] For instance, the word of YHWH is fulfilled when it effects a change in attitudes in a particular population rather than in terms of literal fulfillment (see pun on נֶהְפָּכֶת "turns around/is overturned, in Jonah 3:4; cf. Isa 55:10–11[36]), but still carries its full literal force—Nineveh is eventually destroyed, as it must if the prophecies of hope are to have any power (cf. Isa 40:8). YHWH's word in prophetic books may be fulfilled many times; some in the past, some in the future, and are not constrained by the historical time of the particular prophet or by his understanding of them, or even by the seeming context in which they appear in the book. Nineveh is spared as expected by the plot of the book, and is destroyed as announced by YHWH. Literati, just as Jonah, may know of authoritative texts, but they may be mistaken about YHWH, YHWH's actions, and even the long term significance of the mis/adventures and the words they receive. Reading prophetic books cannot lead to certainty about the deity, or to actual predictions; yet even *that* they have to learn by reading prophetic books.

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[34] Cf. יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא רָע אֲנִי יְהֹוָה עֹשֶׂה כָל־אֵלֶּה (Isa 45:7). Cf. also Exod 34:6–7; Num 14:8. Of course, due to rhetorical needs and contextual and genre constraints texts could and *had* to evoke at times partial images of YHWH. For instance, petitional prayers and supplications on one's behalf will tend to dwell, for obvious reasons, on YHWH's mercy (see Joel 2:13; Ps 86:15) and the same holds true for some expressions of thanksgiving (see Ps 103; cf. Neh 9:17). The literati who read, as part of their authoritative repertoire, these texts read also many others which contained references to other aspects of YHWH.

[35] See E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah* and cf. D. Edelman, "Jonah Among the Twelve."

[36] See A. Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 167–70.