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## VOLUME 9, ARTICLE 6

**PHILIPPE GUILLAUME,  
RHETORICAL READING REDUNDANT: A  
RESPONSE TO EHUD BEN ZVI**

## RHETORICAL READING REDUNDANT: A RESPONSE TO EHUD BEN ZVI

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ehud Ben Zvi's contribution to this set marks a significant advance in Jonah studies. While defending the validity of the rhetorical reading of the book's grand finale, he recognizes the soundness of the straightforward reading of the final verse as the affirmation that YHWH will not pity Nineveh. Hence, if the traditional reading of Jonah 4:11 as a question "does not create any grammatical or syntactic difficulty,"<sup>1</sup> it is not the only possible reading, far from it. Ben Zvi insists that the interrogative reading must be considered alongside the assertive reading. Claiming that both readings must be considered together is a major step forward, a first step, the hardest one, in a new direction. If the implied author wished "re-readers to ponder both understandings of the verse, so they may balance and inform each other,"<sup>2</sup> continuing to affirm that the book of Jonah ends with a rhetorical question as does the book of Nahum and that Jonah is all about divine forgiveness is misleading. The argument must be balanced with a serious consideration of the other understanding.<sup>3</sup> I welcome Ben Zvi's demonstration, and I believe that it can be pushed a little further to show that the interrogative reading is eventually redundant.

While posing Jonah 4:11 as a question does not create any grammatical difficulty, it does pose difficulty on the narrative level. The question does *not* flow well with the rest of the text and it is not the book's obvious conclusion. When Jonah feels pity as YHWH strikes the plant, the natural conclusion is that YHWH's killing of the plant foreshadows the overturning of Nineveh. Had

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<sup>1</sup> E. Ben Zvi, "Jonah 4:11 and the Metaphoric Character of the Book of Jonah" in this collection of essays.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Zvi, "Character," p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> S. L. McKenzie, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 11-12 explains that "the question in Jonah is transparently didactic. That is, it is designed to teach a theological lesson—that God cares for all people and indeed all creation." Except for the *qiqayon?*

YHWH resurrected the plant, the sparing of the city would be the obvious conclusion of the book. As the book stands, the last chapter leaves the plant and the prophet in a sorry state, in spite of the salvation of Jonah in chapter 2. Having thanked YHWH for saving his life in the belly of the fish, Jonah then prays for death outside Nineveh. In the same paradoxical relation, to the salvation of YHWH mentioned at the end of the Psalm (Jonah 2:10) corresponds the destruction of the city in Jonah 4:11.<sup>4</sup>

Jonah's pity for the plant is but one issue under discussion in Jonah 4. The plant, the worm, the sun and the east wind introduce the matters of anger and destruction in the discussion. The 'prophet' as much as the other props, the storm, the fish, the plant, the worm, the sun and the scorching wind are all at YHWH's command.<sup>5</sup> Jonah is less docile than the other agents but he gets the job done eventually. During the conference, Ben Zvi made the valuable point that the literati who reread Jonah did not need Nahum to know about Nineveh's destruction, and that the context of the book of Jonah should be extended to the entire Scriptures. Beyond Nahum, Jonah's mention in Kings confirms YHWH's sovereignty over the fate of Israel and Assyria. In 2 Kings 14, YHWH uses Jonah to announce that Israel's name would not be blotted out from under the sun because YHWH saw Israel's great oppression. As rereaders of prophetic literature, the literati who composed Jonah knew that Shalmaneser of Assyria was responsible for the demise of the kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 17.3) and that Nineveh was the capital Assyria (Nah. 1.1 and 3.18). As a follow-up, the book of Jonah adds Niveveh to the list of useful tools in YHWH's hands while stating that YHWH's pity is spent. The sun that kills the plant and nearly kills Jonah illustrates the point in a vivid way. The issue is when Nineveh will be destroyed not whether it will be spared. The destruction of Nineveh is as certain as that of the *qi-qayon*. The plant survived one night. Nineveh was granted a reprieve but YHWH states in no ambiguous terms "I will not spare Nineveh." The divine קל ולא חומר argumentation renders Jonah's pity for the plant irrelevant to the fate of Nineveh. Nineveh, as every wind, fish, plant, worm, prophet is entirely under YHWH's sovereignty. Each agent is pitilessly discarded once it has served its purpose. Jonah, as the plant, becomes irrelevant as soon as he preaches his sermon of doom. Nineveh is likewise redundant after it has chastised Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> See the diptych at pages 3-4 of Klaas Spronk's contribution further in this set of article. The corollary of "Jonah thanks YHWH for giving him life out of the grave / Jonah prefers death over life" is not "YHWH is called a savior / YHWH explains why He saved Nineveh" as Spronk suggests, but "YHWH saves a man / YHWH destroys a city."

<sup>5</sup> Y. Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), pp. 127-28.

## 2. IS JONAH A VALID MODEL FOR YHWH?

If one were to accept the notion that the book of Jonah ends with a question, it would entail that Jonah's behavior in the final chapter supplies a valid model for YHWH's dealings with Nineveh. Ben Zvi advocates that YHWH and Jonah share a teacher/student relationship. The *קל וחומר* argumentation finally wins Jonah over to YHWH's line of reasoning.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that Ben Zvi's analogy would turn the teacher/student relationship upside-down. In this case, YHWH's destruction of the plant entails that YHWH has used the student's pity as a example to reverse his initial oracle of doom (Jonah 1:2; 3:2). Or as Phyllis Tribble states, "Jonah's showing of pity becomes a valid premise from which to argue for YHWH's showing of pity."<sup>7</sup> But Tribble seems unsatisfied with the notion that the pupil's can prevail over his divine master. She adds that, "Ironically, Jonah becomes the model for YHWH free of self-interest, free even of the requirement for repentance."<sup>8</sup> I cannot see where Jonah displayed any lack of self-interest, but the implications of the irony are clear. Irony prevails in YHWH's ruthless treatment of Jonah (Jonah 4: 4–10. This irony completely discredits the notion that Jonah's pity is the model for the divine pity towards Nineveh. YHWH has no more misgivings about causing a plant to grow only to destroy it the next day than he has over his ruthless treatment of Jonah. The double divine question "Is your anger good" invites Jonah to "leave the circle of anger."<sup>9</sup> The meaning from the lesson of the *qiqayon* is that Jonah is wrong to be angry. Then, verse 10 shifts to Jonah's pity, which can hardly be a model for YHWH's dealings with Nineveh either. Contrary to the angry and pitiful Jonah, YHWH displays neither anger nor pity. In fact, YHWH's coolness throughout the book of Jonah is striking. The only mention of divine wrath comes from the mouth of the king of Nineveh. A good reader of Israelite prophecy, the king quotes the question from Nah 1:6 "Who can endure the heat of his anger" (note *מחרון אפו*; and cf. Jonah 3:9). Jonah's Psalm answers that Jonah can withstand his wrath since Jonah can still sing praises in the belly of the fish. Even the sailors and the Ninevites can withstand YHWH's anger. From this, we can conclude that the book of Jonah erases divine anger. YHWH is no angrier against Jonah than YHWH is against Nineveh. Therefore, Jonah is wrong to be angry and his pity fares no better. So then, how could Jonah be a model for YHWH's dealings with Nineveh?

## 3. YHWH WITHOUT PASSIONS

The reiteration of Nineveh's impending fate at verse 11 severs the causal link Jonah had established between Nineveh's destruction

<sup>6</sup> Ben Zvi, "Character," p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ph. Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> Tribble, *Criticism*, p. 223.

<sup>9</sup> Tribble, *Criticism*, p. 205.

and divine anger. Jonah was wrong to imagine that a merciful God could not destroy Nineveh. Nineveh will be destroyed as decreed, but the lesson of the *qiqayon* teaches that the destruction of Nineveh does not turn YHWH into a wrathful god *à la* Deuteronomy. The disappearance of divine anger in no way curtails God's sovereignty. In spite of Nineveh's repentance from its evil ways, in spite of the repentance of the *Elohim* from the evil he planned to do (Jonah 3:10 compare Nah 1:8–9), Nineveh will not be spared. Like Qohelet, the narrator of Jonah is flirting with the Stoic notion of determinism.<sup>10</sup> YHWH dons the robes of fate as the one who determines in advance what takes place in the world and when it happens. The consequences of this evolution are clearly displayed. Jonah's escape does not foil God's plan which is duly accomplished by the unwilling agent. In chapter 2, Jonah is rescued and sings a new Psalm for YHWH in the most unpromising surroundings. By this device, the narrator uses Jonah to demonstrate the positive implications of determinism. Nothing bad can possibly happen to Jonah and by extension to the sailors since they all are tools in the hand of fate. YHWH does not hold their transgressions against them. The sailors' fear of spilling innocent blood is rendered irrelevant by their confession that YHWH does whatever he wants (Jonah 1:14). Divine will overruns individual accountability. In spite of being guilty of disobedience, Jonah is saved from drowning and discovers that the fish's guts, which he takes for the netherworld, are under YHWH's jurisdiction and are an extension of the palace of his sanctity (Jonah 2:5, 8).<sup>11</sup> With a single fish, the narrator kills two birds, YHWH's territoriality and human moral accountability. Instead of striking Jonah with fire, YHWH will strike the repentant Nineveh. YHWH knows those he spares (Nah 1:7), but no one else knows. The king of Nineveh's "who knows?" (Jonah 3:9) is clearly answered by the bleak characterization of the population of Nineveh, as incapable of distinguishing between its right and its left. Such ignorance, however, is not off the mark. Right or left, there is hardly any right or wrong since YHWH has determined everything in advance and that no one can foil his decrees. Human actions, sinful or repentant, are of little consequence. YHWH strikes Jonah with sun and scorching wind, but this is a dispassionate ploy to show the inadequacy of the *sukkot* humans make to protect themselves against divine decrees (Jonah 4:4). Jonah's hut is as ineffective as Nineveh's repentance. This is the philosophical lesson of the book of Jonah. Contrary to the sage depicted in the Wisdom of Solomon, Jonah is saved by determinism rather than by wisdom (Wisdom 9:18). The narrator has sketched Jonah as a fool seriously lacking in self-control, intelligence, justice and courage which Wisdom 8:7 presents as cardinal virtues. In contrast, YHWH metes out

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<sup>10</sup> D. Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTS, 316; Sheffield: SAP, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Nothing to do with the temple of Jerusalem!

judgment and destruction dispassionately and the assertive reading of the end of Jonah challenges the reader to consider the rise and fall of civilizations with the same detachment.

For Jonah as for Boethius, there is consolation in philosophy. The book of Jonah states in no veiled fashion that all tyrants meet their end. This could have been a welcome conclusion for the tyrannized throngs of all times, had the meaning of the text not been controlled by a literate elite who perceived the dangers of such a reading. It is bad enough that among the 120,000 witless Ninevites and their countless beasts (counting is beyond their ability), Jonah 4:11 includes the king and his great ones who decreed repentance *after* the population had donned sackcloth from great to small ones (Jonah 3:5). Elites prefer a tame book of Jonah, a herald of endless divine forgiveness.

#### 4. WHERE JONAH WAS RIGHT AFTER ALL

Using the same word (נָרַח) to describe Nineveh's evil (Jonah 1:2; 3:10), Jonah's sin (Jonah 1:7, 8), Jonah's anger (Jonah 4:1, 4, 9) and the *Elohim's* planned destruction (Jonah 3:10), the book lumps human evil and divine retribution under the same dubious category. This could be taken as supporting the rhetorical ending since if he destroyed Nineveh, YHWH would accomplish the evil the *Elohim* repented from. Evil, however, is not situated in the fact of destruction but in its motivation. Jonah 4 negates prophetic texts that present destructions as the consequence of divine anger. The rise and fall of kingdoms has nothing to do with their moral value. They fall when YHWH has decreed them ripe to fall, whatever oracle raving prophets may have called upon them and however numerous the bleating sheep and the obtuse humans within them. Jonah was wrong to imagine he could escape from YHWH's universal rule by fleeing to Tarshish, wrong to get all worked up over the sparing of Nineveh, but the 'whether if' of Nineveh's destruction is not questioned. In Jonah 4:11, YHWH comforts Jonah that Nineveh will not be spared although YHWH is indeed a merciful god.<sup>12</sup> It is only a question of time before Nineveh's day of reckoning comes. This is in line with the differences between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint which disagree over the timing of Nineveh's destruction (three or forty days in Jonah 3:4), while both traditions agree over the lack of interrogative marker at the end. Before the turn of the era, the book was understood as discussing the timing of the destruction, not its eventuality. The rejection of the link between the morality of a people and the fate of their city is what makes the book of Jonah metaphoric.

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<sup>12</sup> See the following contribution by J. Wöhrle, "A Prophetic Reflection on Divine Forgiveness."

## 5. METAPROPHETIC CHARACTER ENTAILS ASSERTIVE READING

Ben Zvi considers the double ending of the book as essential to its metaphoric character. The declarative reading places the rhetorical interrogative reading in proportion.<sup>13</sup> For Ben Zvi, the burden of Jonah as a metaphoric book is to teach that 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.”<sup>14</sup> I answer that the declarative reading achieves this important aim without the help of the rhetorical reading. The possibility of a rhetorical reading is part of the strategy of the book. It blunts the edge of the argument after a first reading to encourage rereadings. Yet, the rhetorical reading has silenced the assertive reading for the last two millennia and continues to do so. For instance, Tribble begins the concluding chapter of her rhetorical analysis of Jonah by reasserting that “By stopping with a question, the rhetorical analysis of Jonah remains open-ended.”<sup>15</sup> The use of the words ‘question’ and ‘rhetorical’ within the same phrase produces an artful ambiguity. One cannot be certain whether the final question is meant to be rhetorical or not. If Jonah ends with a rhetorical question, the expected answer is that YHWH will obviously spare Nineveh. There is no open-endedness here. Open-endedness is only achieved when the assertive reading is considered together with the non-rhetorical interrogative reading, as Ben Zvi demonstrates. For Jonah’s ending to be open-ended, the answer of YHWH’s possible question must, by definition, be ambiguous. For this reason, the postulated question in Jonah 4:11 cannot be rhetorical since, contrary to “ordinary information-seeking questions, rhetorical questions have the illocutionary force of an assertion: in fact, of a very strong assertion.”<sup>16</sup> A strong assertion eliminates open-endedness and forcefully convinces the reader that the obvious meaning conveyed is that YHWH must have mercy. Rhetorical questions are the enemy of open-endedness as the last two millennia of interpretation of the book of Jonah amply prove. The rhetorical reading leaves no room for the opposite notion conveyed by the assertive reading. The only way to retain the unresolved tension is to keep together the assertive reading and the non-rhetorical interrogative reading. Otherwise, one has to postulate that Jonah closes with an unmarked rhetorical question whose obvious answer is negated by the possibility of reading the verse as an affirmation of the opposite of what the rhetorical question implies. Is such a contorted case necessary?

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Zvi, “Character,” p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Zvi, “Character,” p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Tribble, *Criticism*, p. 221.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Zvi, “Character,” p. 2.

## 6. REDUNDANT INTERROGATIVE READING

The message of the book of Jonah is better appreciated without postulating a question at all. Ockham's razor can be applied to shave off the loose ends of the argumentation. The postulation of an unmarked non-rhetorical question in Jonah 4:11 produces no surplus of meaning compared to the straight-forward reading of the end as it stands. As the affirmation that YHWH will not pity Nineveh, the final verse reverses the reader's expectations better than any question could. As noted by Ben Zvi, "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." As much as Biblical writers used rhetorical questions as de-familiarizing devices to turn widely held expectations upside down, it is the clear and unambiguous affirmation in Jonah 4:11 (after two previous rhetorical questions) that overturns the expectation of mercy that up to this point the book suggested to its intended readership. As mentioned by Ben Zvi, "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."<sup>17</sup> The question is whether or not this possibility turns out to be supported by the text as it stands. Instead of stating a question, the brutal affirmation of the lack of pity on YHWH's part, contrary to Jonah's pity, shifts the interrogation into the mind of the audience. The unexpected divine affirmation initiates the de-familiarization process mentioned by Ben Zvi, and faces readers with a deeper meaning of prophecy. By contrast, the rhetorical reading produces "an awkward surplus, since Jonah has already shown that he *knows* that God is "always merciful, and repents from evil (Jonah 4:2)."<sup>18</sup> It is the assertive reading that opens up the more beefy interpretation required by Jonah 4.<sup>19</sup> The interrogation it produces in the reader's mind is deeper than the blurred effect of an open-ended question. As it stands, the text has the significant advantage of stating unambiguously the sovereignty of YHWH over the entire world besides Nineveh and avoids the unnecessary clash with Nahum and with the audience's knowledge that Nineveh was destroyed. Reading Jonah 4:11 as a question adds nothing to the effect of the affirmative reading in the readers' mind.

Ben Zvi's demonstration that reading a question is possible grammatically does not imply that this is the best way to read the end of the book of Jonah. Readers that are content with the rhetorical reading of the last verse are like people who leave the theater before the last scene. Such readers are happy with chapter 3 which concludes with the repentance of the Elohim but they are unwilling to wait for the finale sung, not by the disgruntled Jonah, but by

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<sup>17</sup> Ben Zvi, "Character," p. 8/15.

<sup>18</sup> Sherwood, *Afterlives*, p. 270.

<sup>19</sup> Sherwood, *Afterlives*, p. 270.



YHWH himself. Time has come to return to a more faithful reading of the text as it is transmitted by the MT and the LXX. The notion of an open-ended conclusion is a superfluous exegetical toy. It is a remnant of the “Christian colonization of the book of Jonah” whereas Jonah prefigures the forgiveness offered through Christ.<sup>20</sup> I maintain that the interrogative reading is mostly redundant, but Ben Zvi’s article marks a turning point in the exegesis of Jonah as it demonstrates the validity of the affirmative reading. It will take time before the paradigm shift initiated by Thomas Bolin and the authors he mentions in the first contribution in this set is fully integrated. Nineveh was eventually destroyed, so there is hope for some real changes in Jonah scholarship. The issue is highly relevant to the contributions that follow.

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<sup>20</sup> See Sherwood, *Afterlives*, pp. 48-87.