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## VOLUME 9, ARTICLE 9

**DANIEL TIMMER,  
THE INTERTEXTUAL ISRAELITE JONAH FACE À  
L'EMPIRE: THE POST-COLONIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF  
THE BOOK'S COTEXTS AND PURPORTED NEO-  
ASSYRIAN CONTEXT**

**THE INTERTEXTUAL ISRAELITE JONAH  
FACE À L'EMPIRE:  
THE POST-COLONIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF  
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**1. POSTCOLONIALISM, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND THE  
ANCIENT NEAR EAST**

Postcolonial studies, in its varied manifestations, is primarily concerned with the relation of the colonizer to the colonized during and after colonialism.<sup>1</sup> The field has focused almost exclusively on the period from the latter half of the nineteenth century until the present, identifying the European West as the colonizer and, of course, the peoples and cultures it appropriated as the colonized.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay “colonizer” is synonymous with “empire,” and “colonized” with “state/province.” See the interweaving of empire-terms in colonial theory across the literature, e.g., Fernando Coronil, “Can Postcoloniality be Decolonized? Imperial Banality and Postcolonial Power,” *Public Culture* 5:1 (Fall 1992), 89–108, Neil Larsen, “Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray; Blackwell Companions in Cultural Studies; London: Routledge, 2000), 23–52, and Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism* (History: Concepts, Theories and Practice; Pearson Longman, 2006). For some incisive reflections on the term postcolonialism, see Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” *Social Text* 31/32 (Spring 1992), 84–97. An earlier form of this essay was presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston, Mass., 22 November 2008. My thanks go to the other panelists and participants, and especially to the designated respondent Uriah Kim, for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Note the chronology and geographical locations of the collected essays that constitute *Postcolonial contraventions: Cultural readings of race, imperialism and transnationalism* (ed. Laura Chrisman; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). Older studies, coming as they did before the postcolonial period, are more likely to range farther in both dimensions,

This selectivity is rather curious, for manifestations of imperialism, which Barbara Bush defines as situations in which “the ‘imperialized’ country forfeits its sovereignty and is incorporated into the state or empire of the imperialist power,” have been in evidence for millennia, and date to the earliest phases of human civilization.<sup>3</sup>

One of the more fertile sources for data on the antiquity of colonialism lies in one of civilization’s cradles, Mesopotamia or (somewhat more broadly) the ancient Near East. Here examples of imperialism and colonialism abound, as does literature produced both by empires and those whom they subjugated. The Hebrew Bible is largely literature of the colonized given the small, frail, and short-lived nature of the united monarchy and the two states which formed upon its dissolution about 930 BCE. Israel was often the stronger of the two, but this is only a relative measure: with an area roughly 1–2% the size of Assyria at the time, it was hardly capable by itself of offering serious resistance to an opposing force. In an effort to understand colonialism in a situation chronologically, geographically, and culturally distant from those normally considered in post-colonialist studies, this paper will explore the history of Israel in the imperialism of the ancient Near East with a view toward illuminating some theoretical and practical aspects of the interface between biblical and postcolonial studies.<sup>4</sup>

Israel’s history testifies to numerous occasions on which she was forced to serve the interests of a more powerful entity. For the entirety of her existence, the Neo-Assyrian empire was certainly the most prominent colonizing presence, emerging near the end of the tenth century and lasting some three hundred years. The Book of Jonah, which most likely presents the interaction of an Israelite (rather than Judahite) prophet with the Assyrian behemoth, affords a unique perspective on the relation of the colonized to the colonizer, which it sets in what is most likely the eighth or seventh century.<sup>5</sup>

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e.g., David E. Owen, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Far East* (Berkshire Studies in World History; London: G. Bell and Sons, 1930). Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, gives four pages to the empire “before modern Europe” (10–13), and does not mention Assyria.

<sup>3</sup> This is well argued by Rhys Jones and Richard Phillips, “Unsettling Geographic Horizons: Exploring Premodern and Non-European Imperialism,” in *Globalization and Violence*, vol. 1, *Globalizing Empires: Old and New* (Central Currents in Globalization; ed. Paul James and Tom Nairn; London: Sage, 2006), 21–56.

<sup>4</sup> In doing so it takes up the challenge issued by Rhys Jones and Richard Phillips, “Unsettling Geographic Horizons,” to “engage with the premodern and the non-European and to explore what lies beyond: to unsettle geographical horizons.”

<sup>5</sup> The view that Jonah was a polemic against exclusivist groups in post-exilic Yehud remains the majority position in HB/OT scholarship, but Ehud Ben Zvi properly admits that “this position does not have any sup-

By the beginning of the eighth century, Assyrian imperialism had already marked the relationship between the two nations.<sup>6</sup> After Ahab's successful resistance as part of the anti-Assyrian coalition in the Battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C.E.,<sup>7</sup> Jehu (841–814) was compelled to pay tribute to Shalmaneser III in 841.<sup>8</sup> Though the campaigns of Shalmaneser III against Damascus in 838–836 were followed by several decades of Assyrian inactivity in the west, this soon changed and J(eh)oash (798–782) was obliged to pay tribute to Adad-Nirari III in 796.<sup>9</sup> Beginning just before the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel (782–753) and for a few decades more, Assyria entered a period of decline, allowing the Israelite kings J(eh)oash and Jeroboam after him to develop a small-scale empire in southern Syria-Palestine.<sup>10</sup> This changed suddenly with the accession (in

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port from the narrative itself" and suggests a post-exilic setting for the book on other grounds; *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTSup 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 101. It is interesting to consider the possibility that the book's author was the prophet who spoke during the reign of Jeroboam II (782–753 B.C.E), not least since the only Israelite named in the book bears the same name, prophetic function, and interest in national Israel; see John Stek, "The Message of the Book of Jonah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 4 (1969), 23–50, esp. 23–35, for a good presentation of the relevance and coherence of an eighth-century setting for Jonah. Be that as it may, even if Jonah was written in the Persian period, when the colonizing Persia acted more humanely with respect to its subjects, the absence of clear parallels to Persian history or ideology as well as the much stronger antipathy that Israelites would have for the empire that had exiled them and ravaged their land provide sufficient grounds for approaching Jonah in a Neo-Assyrian setting.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Neo-Assyrian imperialism's development as a replacement for the practice of concluding treaties with other states, see A. K. Grayson, "Studies in Neo-Assyrian History II: The Eighth Century BC," in *Corolla Torontonensis: Studies in Honour of Roland Morton Smith* (ed. Emmet Robbins and Stella Sandahl; Toronto: TSAR, 1994), 73–84.

<sup>7</sup> Although the Kurkh Monolith of Shalmaneser III (COS 2.113A) claims an Assyrian victory at Qarqar, the subsequent campaigns in the same area in 849, 848, 845 BCE during the reign of J(eh)oram (see *RIMA* 3#6) and in 841 BCE during the reign of J(eh)oram or Jehu (see *RIMA* 3#8) demonstrate that this was not the case; see A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions. Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II: (858-745 BC)* (RIMA 3; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), hereafter *RIMA* 3.

<sup>8</sup> The Black Obelisk epigraphs state (*RIMA* 3#88, cf. also the Calah Bulls): "I received tribute from Jehu (Iaua) of Omri (Humri): silver, gold, a gold bowl, a gold tureen, golden vessels, gold pails, tin, the staffs of the king's hand, (and) spears."

<sup>9</sup> See K. Lawson Younger, Jr. on Adad-Nirari's "Tell Al Rimah Stela," COS 2.114F.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to dominating her kinfolk in Judah, Israel subjugated Moab to her east; J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 275. On Moab, see 2 Kgs

744) of Tiglath-Pileser III, who campaigned aggressively and successfully in the West. Consequently, Menahem (752–742) and Hoshea (732–722) paid tribute to him.<sup>11</sup> Tiglath-Pileser III's imperialist success reduced Israel to a rump state through repeated annexations of its territory and deportations of its population in the 730s,<sup>12</sup> something Shalmaneser V (726–722) may have continued and that his successor Sargon II (721–705) brought to completion and of which he left detailed records (the HB telescopes the process into one event, 2 Kgs 17:6; 18:11).<sup>13</sup> When the dust finally settled near the end of Sargon's reign, Samaria had been fully absorbed into the Assyrian empire and Israel's inhabitants deported to the far reaches of the colonizing empire.<sup>14</sup>

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3:4–27 and the Mesha Inscription = Moabite Stone (COS 2.23), dating to the second half of the ninth century, which states that “Omri was king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab for many days. . . . And his son followed him, and he also said: ‘I will oppress Moab!’” On Judah, note what is likely an (unsuccessful) attempt by Amaziah of Judah to break free of Israelite domination (2 Kings 14:8–14). Israel may even have dominated Hamath and Damascus intermittently (2 Kgs 14:28), though that text poses interpretative difficulties; cf. Isa 8:23.

<sup>11</sup> For Menahem's tribute, see 2 Kgs 15:14–22 and the Calah Annals (COS 2.117A) as well as the Iran Stela (COS 2.117B), which he probably set up after the campaigns of 737 (so Younger, “The Iran Stela,” *ibid.*), though the two Assyrian records probably do not describe the same payment. For Hoshea, see 2 Kgs 15:30; 17:1–6 and Summary Inscription 4 of Tiglath-Pileser III (COS 2.117C). The date of Menahem's tribute is debated; see further J. K. Kuan, *Neo-Assyrian Historical Inscriptions and Syria-Palestine* (Jian Dao Dissertation Series 1; Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1995), 143–44, 187–88, and Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Study* (SHANE 2; Leiden: Brill, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Thus he states that “the wide [land of Bit]-Haza'ili (Aram-Damascus) in its entirety, from Mount [Leb]anon as far as the city of Gilead, Abel . . . [on the border of Bit-Hurmia (Israel) [he] annexed to Assyria” and that he “spared only Samaria.” See the opening lines of Summary Inscription 9–10 and lines 17'–18' of Summary Inscription 13, respectively. This period is helpfully analyzed by K. Lawson Younger, Jr., “The Deportations of the Israelites,” *JBL* 117 (1998), 201–27. The population of the Lower Galilee was decimated by Assyrian activity, dropping from about 30,000 to nearly zero from the mid-eighth into the seventh centuries; Z. Gal, “The Lower Galilee in the Iron Age II: Analysis of Survey Material and Its Historical Implications,” *Tel Aviv* 15/16:1 (1988–89), 56–64. See also the summary in Seymour Gitin, “The Neo-Assyrian Empire and Its Western Periphery: The Levant, with a Focus on Philistine Ekron,” in *Assyria 1995* (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 77–103, esp. 82–84.

<sup>13</sup> See Sargon's Great “Summary” Inscription and the Nimrud Prism, COS 2.118D and 2.118E.

<sup>14</sup> Beyond the few texts cited here there is a wealth of primary sources with which readers of Jonah can come to understand the ideology of the Assyrian empire around this time, including prophetic texts. See David

Military action, threatened or enacted, was indispensable to the growth of the Assyrian empire. Intimidation, facilitated by Assyria's well-earned reputation as a brutal and merciless military opponent, was often successful in convincing states to assume vassal status.<sup>15</sup> This strategy, which avoided the military expenditure necessary for a full conquest and enabled the subjugated entity to become a contributor to the empire without needing to rebuild, was masterfully developed by Ashur-nasir-apli II (883–859). This monarch's royal inscriptions also illustrate the religious element that, together with the financial benefits that attended conquest, motivated Assyria's imperialism.<sup>16</sup> One such inscription opens in typical fashion by describing him as "king of the universe, unrivaled king, king of all the four quarters, sun(god) of the people, chosen of the gods Enlil and Ninurta, beloved of the gods An and Dagan, destructive weapon of the great gods."<sup>17</sup> The subsequent accounts of his battles all follow a standard form, tying his exploits to divine obligations and recounting his brutal tactics:

By the command of Ashur (and) the goddess Ishtar, the great gods my lords, I moved out of the city Nineveh. . . . I approached the city Suru. . . . Awe of the radiance of Ashur my lord overwhelmed them. The nobles (and) elders of the city came out to me to save their lives. . . . I erected a pile in front of his gate; I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me (and) draped their skins over the pile; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile, (and) some I placed on stakes around about the pile. I flayed many right through my land (and) draped their skins over the walls. I *slashed the flesh* of the eunuchs (and) of the royal eunuchs who were guilty. I brought Ahi-yababa [the ruler of Suru] to Nine-

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Aberbach, *Imperialism and Biblical Prophecy 750-500 BCE* (London: Routledge, 1993). For reasons of brevity prophetic materials cannot be considered here, but those extant (which date to the seventh century) reinforce the regime's authority; see Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 228. Indeed, failure to support the regime was the hallmark of 'false prophecy' in Assyria; see M. Nissinen, "Falsche Prophetie in neuassyrischer und deuteronomistischer Darstellung," in *Das Deuteronomium und seine Querbeziehungen* (ed. T. Veijola; Helsinki: Finnische Exegetische Gesellschaft, 1996), 172–95.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Bedford, "Empire and Exploitation: The Neo-Assyrian Empire," paper presented at the Social Science History Institute, Stanford University, on May 21–22, 2001, p. 18. The paper is available online at <http://sshi.stanford.edu/Conferences/2000-2001/empires2/bedford.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> See B. Oded, *War, Peace and Empire: Justifications for War in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Kirk A. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (vol. 2: *From Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II*; Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), hereafter *RIMA 2*, 119 (from the Ninurta temple at Kalach, i 9).

veh, flayed him, (and) draped his skin over the wall of Nineveh.<sup>18</sup>

The colonial violence that these texts relish is replicated in the narrative art of the period that adorned, if that is the proper term, the palaces of the Assyrian monarchs. Most of the characters and scenes verbalized in the inscription just cited are faithfully represented in the *bas reliefs* of Assyrian royal architecture, which typically presents as humorous “the problems, contortions and maltreatment of dead or doomed enemies.”<sup>19</sup>

As the inscription of Ashur-nasir-apli II shows, Assyrian ideology set its conquests in the context of Ashur’s absolute superiority and so allowed for no limits to the empire’s extension.<sup>20</sup> This link between god and king is at the center of Assyrian kingship, as expressed by a royal hymn from the Neo-Assyrian period for Assurnasirpal which begins with the exclamation “Ashur is king! Ashur is king!”<sup>21</sup> From the middle of the ninth century onward, this commitment to complete supremacy saw the inferior powers around Assyria become either provinces or client states, with the latter retaining vestiges of independence such as indigenous rulers and their own political institutions. While this relationship also entailed Assyria’s protection of the client state, the end result, from any perspective, was the subordination of the lesser power for the good of the dominant power. Not only that, but the identity of the colonized was overwritten: *all* people dominated by the Assyrian em-

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<sup>18</sup> Grayson, *RIMA* 2, 123–24 (from the Ninurta temple at Kalach, i 69).

<sup>19</sup> Jilian Reade, “Religious Ritual in Assyrian Sculpture,” in *Ritual and Politics in Ancient Mesopotamia* (ed. Barbara Nevling Porter; AOS 88; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2005), 7–61 (20); see further I. J. Winter, “Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology,” in *Assyria 1995* (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 359–81; Stephen Lumsden, “Narrative Art and Empire: The Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II,” in *Assyria and Beyond: Studies Presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen* (ed. J. G. Dercksen; UNINOL 100), 359–85.

<sup>20</sup> “Assyrian texts expound an imperial ideology claiming that Ashur was the pre-eminent deity who ruled over all the gods and, as a corollary, the political reality on earth should therefore be that all peoples acknowledged the sovereignty of Ashur’s representative, the Assyrian king. To that end the king was charged at his coronation to ‘extend the borders’ of Assyria.” Bedford, “Empire and Exploitation,” 21.

<sup>21</sup> A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (SAA 3; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), no. 11; see on the circumstances of its use P. Garelli, “Les temples et le pouvoir royal en Assyrie du X<sup>IV</sup>e au X<sup>VIII</sup>e siècle,” in *Le temple et le culte. X<sup>xe</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Leiden, 3-7 juillet 1972* (ed. F. R. Kraus et al.; UNHAI 37; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut, 1975), 116–17.

pire, in client states and provinces alike, were termed “Assyrians” by the colonizer.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. INTERTEXTUALITY AS CO-CREATOR OF IDENTITY

Given that postcolonial criticism “is essentially a style of inquiry, an insight or perspective,” it is easily applicable to an almost limitless variety of human cultural expression that is “reactive resistance discourse of the colonized.”<sup>23</sup> This paper proposes that it can therefore be profitably applied to ancient as well as modern literature, and seeks to demonstrate this by looking closely at the Book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.<sup>24</sup> Though among the shortest of the writing prophets, Jonah is nonetheless highly intertextual with reference to antecedent HB material, and several of the book’s characteristics make it unusually interesting for post-colonial studies.<sup>25</sup>

First, postcolonial studies are deeply concerned with identity, whether the identity that the colonizer projects onto the colonized or the various means the colonized use to preserve their identity

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<sup>22</sup> Bedford, “Empire and Exploitation,” 30–31; in Assyrian texts “Subjugated peoples and their rulers who were submissive and continued to be obedient were applauded for their moral virtues and for acting ‘like Assyrians’” (idem, 36).

<sup>23</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Charting the Aftermath,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (London: Blackwell, 2006), 7–32 (8–9).

<sup>24</sup> “One of the most challenging and exciting aspects of postcolonial criticism has been its rereading of ancient documents and literary texts.” Sugirtharajah, “Charting the Aftermath,” 27. See M. A. de la Torre, *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethic of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007), for a monograph that seeks to do likewise, and Bradle L. Crowell, “Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 7.2 (2009), 217–44, for an overview of interdisciplinary work to date.

<sup>25</sup> See most recently H. C. P. Kim, “Jonah Read Intertextually,” *JBL* 126 (2007), 497–528. Within biblical studies, intertextuality has several meanings. It may denote an understanding of the Bible as intentionally self-referencing, self-focused, and self-contained, e.g., M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). It is more commonly connected with the approach pioneered by Julia Kristeva, and is “less a name for a work’s relation to prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture” (J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], 103). Here I use the term to denote something between the two, including both canonical (cotextual) and historically relevant (contextual) material in the definition. Extra-biblical texts, since they are not part of the biblical corpus, have an inherent literary, cultural, and geographic distance to overcome; see especially W. W. Hallo, “Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis,” in W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger, Jr. (eds.), *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, vol. 1 of *The Context of Scripture* (3 vol.; Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002), xxiii–xxviii.

and freedom.<sup>26</sup> This paper will argue that the primary function of many of Jonah's intertextual connections to the Hebrew canon is to create identities for the book's main characters, and through these characters to formulate a Hebrew response to Neo-Assyrian colonialism.

Second, postcolonial studies is fully receptive to the interaction that various "texts" have with one another, be they written or not. Here too the book of Jonah is an appealing subject of study, for not only is it peppered with connections to the then-extant corpus of Hebrew literature, but its purported historical setting offers readers the Neo-Assyrian corpus, especially the elements that deal with imperialism, as a context.

This paper will explore a resistant postcolonial reading of the book of Jonah, since the prophet himself is not Assyrian in terms of ethnicity or political affiliation, writes in Hebrew for Israelites, but yet does not explicitly repudiate Assyrian rule.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.1 Israelite Identity

The Book of Jonah addresses the issue of Israelite identity very selectively: Jonah is the only character of Israelite origin, and also the only one to bear the title "Hebrew."<sup>28</sup> The absence of any mention of other Israelites is striking, not least because the book is written in Hebrew to Israelites. But by gapping Israelite identity apart from that of Jonah, the book gains an incisive rhetorical edge that puts one question squarely before its (Israelite) readers: is their identity that of Jonah, or is it other?

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<sup>26</sup> "The question of identity traverses post-colonial thinking." Peter Childs, Jean Jacques Weber, and Patrick Williams, *Post-Colonial Theory and Literatures: African, Caribbean and South Asian* (WVT-Handbücher zum literaturwissenschaftlichen Studium 7; Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006), 13.

<sup>27</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52. "While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic or subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people." Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington; New York: Grove Press, 1968), 240.

<sup>28</sup> Ethnicity and religion were the most common elements in ancient Near Eastern identity-creation. See Gary Knoppers, "Identity, Ethnicity, and Inter-Dependency: The Judean Communities of Babylon and Jerusalem in the Story of Ezra," paper presented at the CSBS, 28 May 2007, Saskatoon, SK, Canada. This study will approach the issue inductively in order to minimize the danger of reading the text (a colonized voice) against its grain (i.e., imposing, imperialistically, a hermeneutical grid on the text).

The first chapter identifies Jonah in no fewer than four ways: the narrator makes reference to his family and prophetic function (1:1), and Jonah himself makes reference to his ethnicity and religion. It is possible to prioritize some of these elements hermeneutically. The reference to Jonah's family plays no further role in the work, and Jonah's role as prophet, though necessary to the plot, is likewise a peripheral element. Jonah first avoids the role entirely (chs. 1–2), then performs it perfunctorily (chs. 3–4), and the book as a whole portrays him as a prophet who delivers Yahweh's words while himself being fundamentally in conflict with Yahweh.

Jonah's own words confirm that his prophetic identity is subordinate to his ethnic and religious identity. With the declaration that he is a Hebrew he sets himself off from the non-Israelites around him.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, the following phrase in which he professes to revere Yahweh "who made the sea and the dry land" traces all humanity back to the divine act of creation and so articulates its fundamental equality before God.<sup>30</sup> Jonah's religious self-description complicates the task of interpretation, since the prophet whose actions reveal infidelity to his calling nonetheless claims that he reveres Yahweh. This is more than paradoxical. Wolff notes that fearing/revering God "describes a living relationship of obedience and trust; cf. Gen. 22:12; Ex. 20:20; Prov. 1:7; Ps. 111:10,"<sup>31</sup> but neither of these elements is evident in Jonah's behavior. Tentatively adopting a negative view of Jonah's sincerity, we see in him a colonized individual identifying himself first ethnically, and then religiously. There is no question as to the veracity of the first means of identification, but did all Hebrews revere Yahweh? The first half of chapter 1 leads us to conclude in the negative.

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<sup>29</sup> On why the concept of ethnicity rather than that of racial identity is to be used see Rodney Steven Sadler Jr., *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (LHBOTS 425; New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 1–16, and Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998). On the permeability and overlap that can characterize ethnic identity in an ancient Near Eastern context, see S. T. Smith, *Wretched Kush: Ethnic Identity in Egypt's Nubian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> The term עברי "Hebrew," frequently distinguishes Israelites from ethnic non-Israelites (Abram, Gen 14:13; the Israelites vis-à-vis Egyptians throughout the first half of Exodus) and sharply contrasts Jonah and the sailors. Rüdiger Lux, *Jona Prophet zwischen "Verweigerung" und "Geborsam": Eine erzählanalytische Studie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 109–11, notes the ethnically leveling function of the reference to Yahweh as creator.

<sup>31</sup> Hans Wolter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), *Obadiah and Jonah*, 121. Roland E. Murphy similarly describes the content of the phrase as "the equivalent of biblical religion and piety" (*The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* [3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 16).

Though making use of some of the most powerful and profound language in the HB, Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 does not stand in tension with this sketch of the insincere prophet. Rather, the psalm is *Jonah's* description of himself and of the sailors, and the narrator controls its contribution to the book by means of the surrounding narrative. As in chapter 1, Jonah's self-identification is extremely positive, and it is noteworthy that here religious attachment is the only brush with which the prophet paints his character. While his trial, brief though it was, is portrayed in the language of nearly complete abandonment by God (2:4 [Eng 3] echoes Ps 88:8 [Eng 7] and Ps 42:8 [Eng 7], among other texts), Jonah sees his faith as unbreakable. Although he describes his prayer in terms used for the repentant prayers of Israelite exiles (prayer [with פלל or metaphors] towards Yahweh's בית [1 Kgs 8:38 // 2Chr 6:38] or שיש היכל [as here]), no element of confession or repentance enters his monologue. Echoes of Psalms 3, 5, and 31 figure largely in many of the song's phrases, and all three psalms establish and depend on the speaker's integrity while they contrast him with his enemies who have no reverence for God and openly oppress the speaker.<sup>32</sup>

The final intertextual element that contributes to the book's identification of Jonah is again found on the lips of Jonah himself. In 4:1 the prophet reveals the position that he has held, since the beginning of the book, regarding his prophetic commission and the possibility of Nineveh's deliverance. Jonah's use of Yahweh's self-revelation in Exodus 34, rich with connotations of his undeserved mercy to sinful Israel as well as his freedom in choosing the objects of his grace, is fortified by reference to the deliverance Jonah has just seen, in which Yahweh "relented concerning the threat" he had made (נחם על-הרעה).

It is precisely the exercise of these glorious, life-giving attributes of God toward Nineveh that has a killing effect on Jonah (Jonah 4:3).<sup>33</sup> As Simon puts it, here "he is praying for death because the Lord's attributes—so frequently stated to praise him—are loathsome to the prophet, and his unwilling participation in their application has deprived his life of meaning."<sup>34</sup> The fact that

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<sup>32</sup> Psalm 3 is especially interesting intertextually: note the ישועה that comes from God (3:3, 9; cf. Jonah 2:10), the peaceful sleep that the one who trusts in Yahweh enjoys (3:6; cf. Jonah 1:5), and the identification of the people of God as those who, like the psalm's author, depend on God (3:9; cf. the frictional relationship Jonah has with Yahweh).

<sup>33</sup> Ironically, Yahweh had just heard Jonah's own prayer for (unmerited) deliverance and saved him from death in chapter two (Jonathan Magonet notes the semantic overlap of the two passages, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* [BBET 2; Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976], 52).

<sup>34</sup> Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm, adapted by Uriel Simon; Philadelphia: JPS, 1999), 34.

Jonah had felt this way since the word of the Yahweh came to him creates a sort of Jonah-based intertextuality, in that the prophet's prior "text" is given later expression once it has worked itself out in his character. By exploiting this diachronic self-interpretation, the book portrays with immense power the deviant nature of Jonah's attitudes and beliefs. He is utterly and profoundly opposed not only to Yahweh's spreading his grace beyond Israel's borders, but to Yahweh's character itself. For Jonah, a happy life is not possible with such a God.

The Book of Jonah thus depicts the prophet whose name it bears as a mass of nonsensical contradictions. The prophet whose nation has known the ravages of imperialistic power and been the victim of an empire engorged with violence and self-interest has no interest in seeing them spared what he must think to be a horrible fate. Indeed, the only altruistic moment in his career seems to be his offering himself in an effort to spare the sailors in chapter 1, but even that action is tarnished by his evident disinterest in their later deliverance by Yahweh (2:9). The colonized is fundamentally a colonizer, though the political and military weakness of Israel has not afforded him the opportunity to enact his ideology. This paradox is reflected in the shifting identities of the two non-Israelite groups, to which we now turn.

## 2.2 Non-Israelite Identity

There are two distinct groups of non-Israelites in the Book of Jonah, though neither is identified on that ethnic basis. Since the two groups are located in different narrative settings and have different identities, each will be examined individually. Their identities will, together with that of the Israelites, then be brought into relation with the identity of Yahweh, which drives the whole narrative.

### 2.2.1 *The Ninevites' Identity*

The book opens by identifying the Ninevites toponymically and morally (1:2).<sup>35</sup> The Ninevites' identity by virtue of their residence in that city is, however, only incidental. Yahweh's message to them hinges not at all on their ethnic or national identity, but exclusively on their evil behavior (רעה). Jonah likely includes them in the class

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<sup>35</sup> Nineveh became the capitol city during the reign of Sennacherib (704–681), and remained so until the end of the empire. It was quite significant before that time as well, being the ancient and revered site of a temple to Ishtar and earlier royal palaces located an important river crossing and natural road junction. Sennacherib augmented the city's agricultural output and added royal infrastructure as well as perimeter defenses; cf. David Oates, *Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq* (with a preface by Joan Oates; London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2005), esp. 42–58; David Stronach, "Notes on the Fall of Nineveh," in *Assyria 1995* (ed. Parpola and Whiting), 307–24.

of “those who regard vain idols” (2:9 [Eng 8]), and his message of imminent destruction identifies them as the intended objects of Yahweh’s wrath (3:4).<sup>36</sup>

The identification of the Ninevites by means of their relationship (or lack thereof) to Yahweh is reinforced in chapter 3 by their *self*-identification as those who have indeed violated Yahweh’s moral standards and so stand exposed to his judgment. In a remarkable presentation of Neo-Assyrian corrigibility, the whole city responds to Jonah’s grudgingly-delivered message and escapes the threatened punishment. This reaction involves a disintegration of Neo-Assyrian imperialism and the attendant political structure: imperialism is excluded by the fact that the recognized superior deity is *opposed to* the political entity, and the exalted position of the king is undone of his own accord as he arises from his throne to sit down in ashes, and lays aside his royal regalia to dress himself in sack-cloth. Putting off his royal identity, the king recognizes God’s evaluation of Neo-Assyrian morals as valid and takes seriously the threatened judgment as well as the possibility of God’s clemency, without presuming upon it (cf. 3:9 with Joel 2:14).<sup>37</sup> The royal decree, by including the city’s cattle, may be seen as putting humans and animals on similar footing as Yahweh’s creatures or as demonstrating the sincerity of the city’s response.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In so far as it goes, this is a fair characterization of the Assyrians given their iconic religion, but quite ironically Sargon II’s records testify that upon the destruction of Israel he carried away as spoil “the gods in whom they trusted.” Cf. Nimrud Prism 4 and its discussion in Bob Becking, “Assyrian Evidence for Iconic Polytheism in Ancient Israel?” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. K. van der Toorn; CBET 21; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 157–71. On icons in Assyrian religion, see Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian mis pi Ritual* (SAALT 1; Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project; Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2001), Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” in P. D. Miller, Jr. et al. (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32.

<sup>37</sup> See Job 16:17; Isa 59:6 for the collocation of חמס with כף as denoting a fundamentally violent character and pattern of behavior. The king calls for a fast in words also used of Jehoshaphat, 2 Chron 20:3, and may echo Joel 2:15.

<sup>38</sup> The strange practice of involving animals in fasts and displays of repentance is occasionally attested, as Thomas M. Bolin notes, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness. The Book of Jonah Re-Examined* (Copenhagen International Seminar 3; JSOTSup 236; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 128. Judith 4:10 is a better analogue than Herodotus, *Histories*, 9.24, as John Day has pointed out (“Problems in the Interpretation of Jonah,” in A. van der Woude [ed.], *In Quest of the Past: Studies on Israelite Religion, Literature and Prophecy* [OtSt 26; Leiden: Brill, 1990] 32–47 [34]), but Judith is in all likelihood drawing on Jonah. Be that as it may, the search for a

These voids in (previously colonial) Nineveh's identity are filled with content that is devoid of imperialism and political hegemony. Even the most restrictive understanding of its "believing in God" (3:5) establishes that Nineveh responded to Jonah's message in such a way that she thoroughly repented from her sin.<sup>39</sup> This is another instance of identifying the Ninevites religiously: the end of chapter 3 sees them move from one extreme to the other in their relationship to Yahweh the Creator. Originally a city who did not know its left hand from its right in religious matters, Nineveh is now one that has responded to, and been spared by, the God who "had pity" on her (לחוס על, 4:11).

### 2.2.2 *The Sailors' Identity*

The sailors in Jonah are almost completely without identity. The only exception consists of religious information, and here the text is comparatively generous. In the beginning, the sailors are theistic, as was normal in the ancient Near East. When the ship is threatened by the storm, their distress reveals the belief or hope that their gods are capable of doing something to save them from a watery grave (1:5), and this same disposition motivates the captain's order that Jonah call upon his god (1:6).<sup>40</sup>

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literary precedent for Jonah 3:8 is somewhat deceptive, as religious thought in the ANE was fertile enough that "it was not absurd to invoke the notion of the totality of the populace of a city by including the animals in [its] religious activities;" Lowell K. Handy, *Jonah's World: Social Science and the Reading of Prophetic Story* (BibleWorld; London: Equinox, 2007), 92, *pace* E. J. Bickerman, "Les deux erreurs du prophète Jonas," *RHPR* 45 (1965), 232–64. This need not rule out the possibility of hyperbole or humor in the description, however; cf. R. W. L. Moberly, "Preaching for a Response? Jonah's Message to the Ninevites Reconsidered," *V/T* 53 (2003) 156–68, especially 156 n. 4.

<sup>39</sup> The use of the Hifil of אָמַן ("believe") with the preposition בְּ ("in") and God as the grammatical object spans a large semantic spectrum, from the response that Israel should have toward God after seeing his miraculous works on her behalf to believing response to Yahweh's word. For אָמַן with the preposition בְּ and God as the grammatical object in response to divine miracles, see Exod 14:31; Num 14:11; 20:12; Deut 1:32; Ps 78:22. For the phrase's description of a response to the divine word, see Gen 15:6; Deut 9:23; 2 Kgs 17:14; 2 Chr 20:20; Ps 106:12. The most general sense for the phrase is required in 2 Chron 20:20, where belief in God has the result that the Judahites would "be established" (Nifal of אָמַן) against the threat posed by a composite force of Moabites, Ammonites, and others. The following, parallel phrase promises that "belief in Yahweh's prophets" (again with the Hifil of אָמַן with בְּ) will see Judah "delivered" (Hifil of צָלַח).

<sup>40</sup> Prayer to deity when in distress at sea is widely attested; see Aaron Jed Brody, "Each Man Cried Out to His God": *The Specialized Religion of Canaanite and Phoenician Seafarers* (HSM 58; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 82–83. There is no clear differences in semantics between the expressions used

Upon hearing of Yahweh, the fear of the sailors increases (וַיִּרְאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה), “and the men feared with a great fear”). Confronted with the reality of Yahweh’s wrath against Jonah, the sailors make every attempt to save his life (1:13). But the growing storm renders this laudable effort unsuccessful, and with no other option they then pray to Yahweh, demonstrating their newfound conviction that he really is as Jonah had described him. Their prayer, cast in words that echo Psalms 115:3 and 135:6, recognizes Yahweh’s sovereignty over them, the sea, and the storm.<sup>41</sup> It is noteworthy that they recognize Yahweh as God before he has in fact shown that he will not hold them guilty for Jonah’s death and before the storm has abated—their religious transformation is evident before they derive any demonstrable benefit from it.<sup>42</sup>

This verbal characterization of the sailors is complemented by a focus on their actions once the storm has ended. First, their reverence for Yahweh is expressed in precisely the same terms as in v 11, וַיִּרְאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה אֶת יְהוָה, “and the men feared YHWH with a great fear (v 16).”<sup>43</sup> This can hardly be something less than whole-hearted conversion to Yahweh: the phrase “to fear/revere God” in the HB consistently describes those who have, and maintain, a healthy relationship with Yahweh. The sailors’ sacrifices and vows in the same verse confirm this interpretation, indicating the permanent commitment to Yahweh that the Hebrew Bible elsewhere associates with these actions and dispositions (Ps 50:14; Isa 19:21).<sup>44</sup> This wealth of identifying information, in addition to es-

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for prayer, זָעַק אֶל (1:5) and קָרָא אֶל (1:6).

<sup>41</sup> The sentence in Psalm 135:6 is explicitly related to Yahweh’s free disposal over the sea. . . . In both psalms, the confession of faith contrasts Yahweh with other, impotent gods (135:5) and idols (115:4–7);” Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 121. This prohibits the conclusion that the sailors were polytheists who simply added Yahweh to their pantheon, *pace* Haim Gevaryahu (“The Universalism of the Book of Jonah,” *Dor le Dor* 10 [1981]: 20–27) and Brody (“*Each Man Cried Out to His God*,” 11, n. 9), who seems to favor the understanding that Jonah’s description of Yahweh as “the God of the heavens” is indebted to Ba’al Samem (following B. Mazar, “The Philistines and the Rise of Israel and Tyre,” in *The Early Biblical Period* [Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986], 80–81).

<sup>42</sup> Yahweh’s deliverance of the sailors was not in the first place saving them from death at sea (that was not their prayer), but from divine condemnation and punishment for murdering Jonah (that *was* their prayer). They were delivered secondarily (and perhaps consequently) from drowning.

<sup>43</sup> On the various meanings of fear in Jonah 1, see Lux, *Jona*, 101 n. 37, 112 n. 88. Magonet has noted polysemy with other lexemes in Jonah in *Form and Meaning*, 22–28.

<sup>44</sup> To note but one practical point, in all likelihood the sacrifices were offered after their voyage ended, since the recently lightened ship would no longer carry the wherewithal for a sacrifice. Ps 50 stresses the propriety of vows and sacrifices provided that the worshiper’s life is likewise in

establishing a damning contrast between Jonah and the sailors, completes the rapid transformation of their identity.<sup>45</sup>

The fact that no further information regarding the sailors follows in the remainder of the book hardly means that they are immaterial to its message. Rather, given their clear change in identity, no more needs to be said, and they function as a critique for Jonah's superciliousness in 2:8–9. While their prior identity included no elements of colonialism or imperialism, it is noteworthy that the clearest instance of changed identity in the Book of Jonah occurs with sailors whose prior identity was a blank in everything but religion. The use of intertextual material from the HB to describe their conversion effectively inducts them into the number of those who revere Yahweh. This in turn suggests that the Book of Jonah, though very interested in the relation between colonized and colonizer, subsumes that paradigm under one predicated on Yahweh's identity as sovereign creator and deliverer.

### 2.2.3 *Yahweh's Identity*

As with the human characters, intertextual connections do the lion's share in identifying Yahweh. The consistency of his interaction with Jonah the Israelite, the non-Israelite sailors, and the colonialist Assyrians confirms that a supra-colonialist paradigm makes sense of the otherwise nonsensical identity of Jonah and the unex-

accord with God's revealed will. It is also striking that that psalm addresses Israelites who have taken the covenant upon their lips but whose hearts disdain God's word (50:17; the psalm as a whole stresses the propriety of vows and sacrifices provided that the worshiper's life is likewise in accord with God's revealed will). Likewise Isa 19:21, which describes the eschatological restoration of Egypt (19:16–25), shows Israel's ancient enemies fulfilling the normal cultic duties of vows and sacrifices. "The language of Isaiah 19:20–21 appears to have been consciously chosen to demonstrate that Egypt will share the same kind of relationship with the Lord as Israel did." J. Oswalt, *Isaiah* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 243.

<sup>45</sup> "Der Erzähler stellt dem hebräischen Propheten, der sich Gottes Wort verschließt, Nichtisraeliten gegenüber, die sich dem Gott Israels im Gebet öffnen, seine Rechts- und Kultterminologie zu der ihren machen (v. 14) und schließlich zu Teilnehmen am Kultgeschehen werden (v. 16)." Lux, *Jona*, 121. It is within this context that one must see Jonah's contrast of himself with "those who regard vain idols [and] forsake their faithfulness" (2:8, Eng. 2:9) Since the heathen sailors are prominent in the prior context and the Ninevites in the subsequent context, it is difficult to see how Jonah's words could refer to Israelites. Jonah thus sets himself up as a faithful worshiper who enjoys Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, while those who worship false gods (the construction **הבלי שוא** is very strong, meaning "utterly worthless gods") have no hope of experiencing this divine response. Ironically, however, and without Jonah's knowing it, the sailors *have* been delivered, in nautical and judicial senses, by Yahweh himself.

pected responses of non-Israelites to the partial revelation of Israel's God.

The book begins by identifying the deity who commissions Jonah, and who miraculously delivers the sailors, by means of the tetragrammaton (1:1). The strong connection between Israel's deliverance from Egypt (with which Yahweh associates his name in a special way, Exodus 6) and the covenant made with Abram prefaces the narrative events with a hint that divine deliverance can easily extend beyond Israel's borders (Exod 6:2–8). Jonah's subsequent affirmation that Yahweh created "the seas and the dry land" also establishes divine sovereignty over all of creation (cf. Jonah 1:9 with Exod 20:11; Neh 9:6; Ps 146:6; Am 5:8; 9:6). This openness to Gentiles is strengthened by the description of the storm and subsequent deliverance in terms drawn from Psalm 107:23–32, the first section of that psalm which treats God's relationship to those outside Israel. Ps 107 introduces (anonymously) "those who go down to the sea in ships" and follows them through a storm (סערה in Ps 107:25, 28; סער in Jonah 1:4) to witness their prayers (צעק אל in Ps 107:28; זעק אל and קרא אל in Jonah 1:5, 14) and Yahweh's work of deliverance (מעשה in Ps 107:24; the hope that Jonah's god will עשה in Jonah 1:6). Once delivered, both groups of sailors offer cultic worship to Yahweh, though the description of the sailors' worship in Jonah significantly lacks the Zion element apparent in Ps 107 (Ps 107:32; Jonah 1:16).<sup>46</sup>

Among these elements, the sailors' prayer to Yahweh merits further reflection. As already noted, the author's recounting of the sailors' prayer is dependent upon Psalms 115:3 and 135:6. Ps 115 deals at length with the contrast between "the nations" (115:1) and those who believe in Yahweh and contrasts the idols' impotence with Yahweh's sovereignty and deliverance of those who trust in him. Ps 135 overlaps substantially with the description of idols in Ps 115, but adds references to the sea as subject to Yahweh (135:6) and Jerusalem as the site of his throne (135:21) that together create an interesting tension in Yahweh's identity: though he is tied to Israel, his deliverance is available globally.

The unlimited geographical reach of this gracious divine deliverance is complemented by its coming to the most unlikely recipients. For different reasons, every human character in the story could be seen as an improbable object of Yahweh's mercy, but all receive it! The non-Israelite sailors are far from Yahwism until the last minute, yet Yahweh clears them of guilt *and* saves them from the storm. Jonah's deliverance in 1:17 is almost unbearable for the reader given his twisted theology and xenophobia, and the sparing

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<sup>46</sup> See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 329–30; W. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5.1–882 (686).

of Nineveh in chapter 3 surprised the Ninevites themselves and likely every reader of the book! These components constitute a powerful portrait of Yahweh as willing to deliver all those who call on him, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, ideology, or religion.

Jonah himself continues (with no little disgust) the process of identifying God in 4:2 as “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.” This description first came to expression, canonically speaking, in Exod 34:6–7, a passage preeminent in the HB/OT as a source of ongoing reflection on Yahweh’s character.<sup>47</sup> Its historical context is the blatant fracture of the recently concluded Sinai covenant by Israel’s apostasy and idolatry with the golden calf. Yahweh, deeming the covenant relationship terminated, threatens to annihilate Israel and to continue his purposes through Moses. Moses intercedes passionately and successfully on Israel’s behalf by arguing on the basis of Yahweh’s gracious and compassionate character. Notably, this description of Yahweh’s person does not include “any limiting element which would confine Yahweh’s behavior to Israel.”<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, the contextual reference to the covenant with Abraham suggests otherwise (Exod 32:13; 33:1). Thus when Exod 34 is used in Jonah 4, divine pity for Nineveh adds further power to that already strong characterization. When Yahweh “relented concerning the threat” he had made (נחם על-הרעה), he did exactly what he had done in Exod 32, sparing those who have sinned against him simply because of his mercy and grace.<sup>49</sup> Fittingly, it is Yahweh who has the last word on his identity. He begins by reminding Jonah of the pity he had for the recently withered gourd, and in 4:11 establishes the propriety of his own pity for Nineveh, whose value far exceeds that of the gourd.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> James Limburg and others rightly point out that the closest parallel to Jonah 4:2 is Joel 2:13 (*Jonah: A Commentary* [London: SCM, 1993], 90). The difficulty of dating Joel greatly hinders any conclusions on the description’s use there, however. Thomas B. Dozeman, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Yahweh’s Gracious and Compassionate Character,” *JBL* 108 (1989), 207–223, explores how the Jonah and Joel texts illuminate each other, and how both together throw light on Exodus 32–34. The primacy of Exod 34:6–7 in the biblical storyline gives it priority, and in fact later uses intend to capitalize on its connotations.

<sup>48</sup> Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 167.

<sup>49</sup> As Dozeman points out: “the expansion of the formula of Yahweh’s gracious character [in Jonah 4:2] . . . is, itself, anchored in the same narrative context in which the formula is introduced in Torah” (“Interpretation,” 221). See also Fishbane’s brief remarks on the passage, *Biblical Interpretation in Israel*, 345–47.

<sup>50</sup> John H. Walton explores the plant’s role in making Jonah subjectively aware of the difference between receiving grace and having it taken away (“The Object Lesson of Jonah 4:5–7 and the Purpose of the Book

The use of the same verbal root-preposition pair (חוס על, “have pity on”) to describe Jonah’s sentiments for the plant and Yahweh’s compassion for Nineveh highlights the absurdity of Jonah’s behavior and belief, and God concludes his argument by reaffirming his right to pour out his grace on his creatures sovereignly. Yahweh (the only supreme power in the story) has shown his indiscriminate grace and compassion to the disempowered but colonially-motivated Jonah in saving him from a premature death, to the notoriously imperialist Neo-Assyrian empire by effacing Nineveh’s identity as a *ville violente* and so undercutting its colonialism, and to a group of non-Yahwistic sailors by hearing their prayer to withhold judgment for what might have been manslaughter or worse and by delivering them from a life-threatening storm. Ironically, these gentiles who have experienced Yahweh’s deliverance follow him more closely than his own prophet.

### 3. IS A POSTCOLONIAL JONAH POSSIBLE?

I have argued that in Jonah, the primary element in non-Israelite *and* Israelite identity is the individual’s relation to Yahweh. This has an interesting effect on postcolonial readings of Jonah. Despite the oppressive presence and influence of the Neo-Assyrian empire in Israelite life in the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century setting established by the book, the narrative’s response to this imperialist reality is not simply a form of postcolonialism in which the identity of the colonized is contrasted with, or developed independently of, that of the colonizer.<sup>51</sup> Nor is the response that Jonah proposes essentially one of hybridity, since it transcends and thereby relativizes a response to colonialism on its own terms (i.e., primarily through ethnicity, culture, politics, or other power-related means). Rather, by identifying its human characters primarily in terms of their relationship to Yahweh, who alone rules the entire cosmos, the book puts all humanity on equal footing before him. While the attitude of the prophet Jonah himself is decidedly nationalist, the book that bears

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of Jonah,” *BBR* 2 [1992], 47–57). Whether the Book of Jonah ends with a rhetorical question or an assertion has some bearing on the meaning of chapter 4, but this has often been overstated. In recent discussion, e. g., P. Guillaume, “The End of Jonah is the Beginning of Wisdom,” *Bib* 87 (2006), 243–50, more emphasis needs to be put on the compatibility of God’s sparing Nineveh subsequent to Jonah’s preaching with his eventual destruction of it (cf. Nahum). To note but one point, the ambiguity of the Ninevites’ relationship to Yahweh after their “belief” in him, contrasted with the clear change to Yahwism on the part of the sailors, makes future judgment of Nineveh quite possible even within the future envisioned by the Book of Jonah.

<sup>51</sup> Note, e. g., Wallerstein’s argument that ethnic identity is formed when one political entity lives under the hegemony of another; I. Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

his name is “supra-nationalist,” by which I mean it proposes an alternative to identities staked mainly on nation-states.<sup>52</sup> Whatever one’s political, ethnic, and historical background might be, religious identity becomes the primary lens through which even issues as prominent as colonialism are seen. Consequently, whether in Assyria or Israel, empire receives a subtle but substantive critique.<sup>53</sup> In light of the religious transformations evident in the sailors and the Ninevites, it is important to note that nothing is *imposed* on them—all we witness are spiritual transformations which lead to new identities.<sup>54</sup>

But were not the transformations of the sailors and the Ninevites both forced upon them, given the danger of the storm in the first case and the threat of divine judgment in the second? Indeed, did not Yahweh act in much the same way as an imperialist nation toward these gentiles in using his unlimited power to get them to do what he wanted? In other words, while Yahweh seems to deconstruct colonialism in the Book of Jonah, does postcolonialism deconstruct Yahweh?<sup>55</sup>

To begin with the sailors, it is not at all clear that they convert to YHWH to escape death at sea. The text underlines a very different concern on their part, namely, the wish to avoid becoming guilty before Yahweh for murder or manslaughter. Their own gods having failed to save them, they come to revere the Creator without having any assurance that he will deliver them from their life-threatening predicament. That he does so is simply gratuitous.

In the case of Nineveh, this same articulation of unmerited and gracious deliverance is fortified by the clear understanding that one’s repentance or turning to Yahweh does not guarantee deliverance from threatened punishment: the Ninevites cannot presume

<sup>52</sup> On culture as a boundary marker in the ANE, see Mu-Chou Poo, *Enemies of Civilization: Attitudes toward Foreigners in Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China* (SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture; Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 152 and *passim*.

<sup>53</sup> Sugirtharajah concludes that “the Hebrew Scriptures seem to suggest that empires, because of their military strength and the power that comes with it, are more than likely to behave arrogantly” (*The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 191).

<sup>54</sup> Note Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (trans. R. Howard; New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), on the violence that human imposition is: “To impose one’s will on others implies that one does not concede to that other the same humanity one grants to oneself, an implication which precisely characterizes a lower civilization. . . [h]ere is where the violence resides. . .” (179).

<sup>55</sup> Here I take deconstruction to be what a text does when it “undermines the philosophy on which it relies.” Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Practice after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983), 86, cited in John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (rev. and enl. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 225.

that Yahweh will relent and change his mind (3:9).<sup>56</sup> Thus while the Assyrians clearly understood the threatened destruction of their city as punishment for their wickedness, their repentance is not presented as being motivated by self-interest; rather, the only sure result of the repentance is subjective, being a new relationship with the God whom they believe they have offended. Doubtless they understood it also increased their “chances” of being spared, but such concerns are relativized by the emphasis on Yahweh’s sovereignty and grace. Threats of punishment in Jonah thus function as epistemological aids designed to help those in violation of the Creator’s will remedy the situation before they meet the fate that attends such behavior (this comes to classic expression in Jer 18:7–10, and addresses worries that God does not remain faithful to his word to punish Nineveh)<sup>57</sup> rather than as celestial strong-arming that corrupts the free moral and volitional agency of the one who repents.<sup>58</sup>

In the end, then, postcolonialism does not deconstruct the Book of Jonah or the God who figures so largely in its story line. Comparisons between Yahweh’s exercise of saving, divine power and the exercise of material, military power by colonizing states are

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<sup>56</sup> Philip P. Jensen, “Interpreting Jonah’s God: canon and criticism,” in R. P. Gordon (ed.), *The God of Israel* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 64; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 229–45, notes that this removes the possibility of “cheap grace” (244). The observations of W. C. Gwaltney, Jr., that “throughout Mesopotamian history . . . one senses a pervasive pessimism that the god’s decisions were arbitrary and amoral” (“Assyria,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World* [ed. by Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi, with a foreword by Alan Millard; paperback edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 77–106) and of F. A. M. Wiggermann, “Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia” (*CANE* 1859–61), that the affairs of the world were governed by divine decrees, show that this is typical of the Mesopotamian world view in the ancient period.

<sup>57</sup> The relevance of Jer 18:7–10 for the Book of Jonah is noted in Jensen, “Interpreting Jonah’s God,” 234.

<sup>58</sup> Given the almost complete silence of the Book of Jonah on the details of divine agency in spiritual transformation (other than the threat against Nineveh), further analysis of the theological and anthropological aspects of religious responses is almost impossible. The long-term commitment of the sailors to Yahweh suggests that they did not resent the possibility that he might have facilitated their change of heart in some way—whatever influence the storm had on their decision, it was a decision to which the narrative leads us to believe they stuck once safe on land. Similarly, the Ninevites show no suspicion that their own repentance was not genuine because it was undertaken under the threat of judgment, or that their actions of repentance somehow compelled Yahweh to change his mind about punishing them. Whatever contemporary convictions about human freedom may be, the Book of Jonah portrays human freedom as inviolate in the context of divine intervention.

misconstrued primarily because the power relationship between the two parties is radically different in its nature and realization: human commitments to “fear” or “believe in” the God of Israel without a guarantee that such action will bring with it deliverance from present or possible future distress; a human being’s deliverance (rather than subjugation) by the God who created her or him; and the fact that a unique Creator-God delivers human beings with no expectation of himself gaining something so as to self-aggrandize all invert the experience and motives of colonized and colonizer in the imperialist paradigm.

#### 4. POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE PROPHETIC VOICE

Jonah’s message remains un-deconstructed by postcolonialism, and indeed postcolonialism can help it be heard in our contemporary context.<sup>59</sup> Within the bounds of the present study, Jonah’s greatest contribution may be his offer of a “home” independent of human structures and culture to all those disillusioned by the arrogance and violence of human interaction on personal, social, and national levels.<sup>60</sup> In the words of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the book of Jonah proposes a solution to the “quest for relevance,” which he defines as “a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.”<sup>61</sup> A large part of the book’s power lies in its zestful articulation of this type of epistemological shift in such unlikely characters. In the course of the narrative the divine identity becomes determinative for the non-Israelite sailors and the Ninevites, creating a disjunction between political and religious identities that the book integrates into its description of an appropriate response to colonialism. This choice by ethnic and religious non-Israelites to order their lives in relation to and with Yahweh, God of Israel, also provides an elegant foil for the rebellious prophet and proposes a transforming response to colonialism and human failings of any kind.

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<sup>59</sup> See the thought-provoking comments of Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire*, esp. 145–91, and the critical but constructive reflections of F. F. Segovia, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead,” *JNT* 30.4 (2008), 489–502, and L. S. Rukundwa, “Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64 (2008), 339–51.

<sup>60</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, 191; this can be done without sacrificing epistemological certainty, however, *pace* Sugirtharajah.

<sup>61</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Studies in African Literature; London: James Currey, 1986), 87.