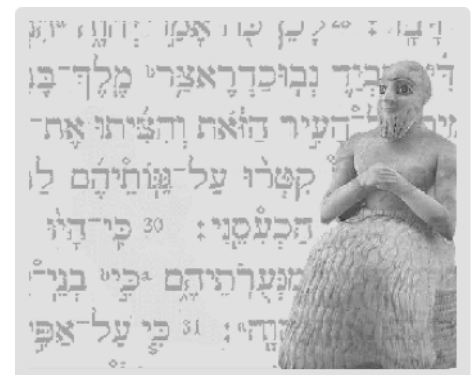


"Peace for Our Time": Reading Jonah in Dialogue with Abravanel in the Book of the Twelve

LENA-SOFIA TIEMEYER



“PEACE FOR OUR TIME”: READING JONAH IN DIALOGUE WITH ABRAVANEL IN THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

LENA-SOFIA TIEMEYER
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars, ancient and modern alike, have struggled with Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh. Why, given that he was a prophet of God, did he not heed the divine calling? The present article, pondering the same question, begins with a survey of scholarly attempts at elucidating Jonah’s seemingly bizarre behaviour. I shall then discuss in more detail Isaac ben Judah Abravanel’s explanation, namely, that Jonah, in fleeing from his commission, was being a martyr on behalf of Israel, willing to disobey God in order to ensure Nineveh’s destruction and concomitantly Israel’s survival. I shall finally explore whether or not Abravanel’s interpretation can be upheld when approaching the book of Jonah as an integral part of the Book of the Twelve. In particular, is it possible to reconcile Jonah’s message about Nineveh’s repentance and God’s mercy with Nahum’s message about Nineveh’s destruction? As noted by many scholars, the books of Jonah and Nahum stand at loggerheads. When being read side-by-side, interpreters often become puzzled by God’s behaviour: did he pardon Nineveh merely to destroy it later? Three commonly suggested solutions to this conundrum exist: (1) Nineveh’s repentance did not last long; (2) Jonah represents God’s ultimate final will while Nahum reflects God’s temporary will; and (3) Jonah was at fault because he did not trust God’s justice (as he did destroy Nineveh 100 years later).¹ I shall propose a fourth interpretation that minimizes the difference between the message of Nahum and the message of Jonah, namely, that Nineveh’s destruction is an inherent aspect of the text of Jonah. In a sense, I suggest that the whole book of Jonah can be read as an inverted *vaticinium ex eventu*, i.e., a prophecy written after the fact which is blatantly false and where the readers are supposed to recognize this aspect and to learn from it.

¹ See further A. Schart, “The Jonah-Narrative within the Book of the Twelve,” in R. Albertz, J. Nogalski, and J. Wöhrle (eds.), *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve: Methodological Foundations, Redactional Processes, Historical Insights* (BZAW, 433; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 109–28 (117–18).

JONAH RELUCTANCE TO GO TO NINEVEH: HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Why did Jonah flee from God's calling? This question has vexed and intrigued exegetes over the centuries. In the present context, I shall focus on the attempts made by traditional Jewish exegetes to explain Jonah's behaviour. I have chosen these particular interpreters as my main interlocutors because they sought to understand Jonah's decision in Jonah 1:3 within the wider context of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. As part of this endeavour, they constructed a back-story on the basis of the perceived references to Jonah elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and then appealed to this backstory in their explanations of Jonah's behaviour. In my view, their exegetical approach sheds light, although in a roundabout way, upon the message of the book of Jonah. Of special importance is the fact that the name Jonah, the son of Amittai, appears twice in the Hebrew Bible, namely in the book of Jonah and in 2 Kgs 14:23–25. While many modern readers of Jonah fail to connect these two characters, earlier exegetes emphasized this connection and made it integral to their interpretations.² I maintain that their emphasis is in line with that of the intended readers of the book of Jonah. To cite Ehud Ben Zvi, “nothing within the world of the book could have led an ancient community of rereaders to doubt that the two Jonahs were actually one.”³ In the rest of this article, I hope to show that this identification is inherent in the text of Jonah and provides an important key to its interpretation. In fact, I would go yet one step further and tentatively suggest that the author(s) of the book of Jonah *intended* its target audience to make this very connection.⁴ In short, the

² See, e.g., Radak, *Rabbinic Bible*, Jonah 1:1.

ויהי דבר ה' אל יונה בן אמתי לאמר—זה הנביא לא ראינו
 נבואה כתובה לו אלא זו שניבא על נינוה אבל מצאנו לו נבואה
 אבל לא נכתבה שכתוב בספר מלכים הוא השיב את גבול
 ישראל מלבא חמת עד ים הערבה כדבר ה' אלהי ישראל אשר
 דבר ביד עבדו יונה בן אמתי הנביא אשר מגת החפר

Jonah is moreover often given a mother. Many sages identify Jonah's mother with the woman of Zarephtah that hosted Elijah (1 Kgs 17) and whose son Elijah resurrected. It follows that Jonah would be the resurrected son. 1 Kgs 17:24 serves as the impetus for this identification, as it features the word “truth” (*אמת*), reminiscent of Jonah's patrilineage Amittai (*אמתי*). See, e.g., Pirque R. El. 33. For further discussion, see R. Adelman, *Return of the Repressed: Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha*, (JSJSup, 140; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 237–39. To complete the picture, he is also given a wife. See, e.g., the Jerusalem Talmud (y. Ber. 2:2–3 and y. Ber. 9:1). In these passages, Jonah's wife is mentioned as a person who goes up (on a pilgrimage) to the festivals to Jerusalem.

³ E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yebud* (JSOTSup, 367; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 44. See also his discussion on pages 45–54 of what it may have meant for the readers to approach the text of Jonah within the frame of their knowledge of the Jonah in Kings.

⁴ I am assuming a single author who is responsible for the Jonah

identification of the two characters with one another serves to anchor the book of Jonah in history. To anticipate my conclusion, I shall argue that the book of Jonah is constructed as a historical short story set in the eighth century BCE.⁵ Its main character Jonah is a person already known to the intended readers and they are supposed to understand Jonah's actions in light of this knowledge.

The following overview of scholarly attempts to explain Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh in Jonah 1:3 focuses on those explanations which accept the identification of Jonah with the man bearing the same name in 2 Kgs 14:25. As we shall discover, these are all good explanations but for one matter, namely that they fail to take into account what I call the *counterfactual quality* of the book of Jonah. The intended readers of the historical short story of Jonah would have known of the fall of Nineveh in 605 BCE and that knowledge would have coloured their understanding of the message of the book as a whole.

REASON 1: JONAH'S PREVIOUS BAD EXPERIENCES

In 2 Kgs 14:25, we learn that (1) Jonah lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II and that (2) God spoke through Jonah during this time. If we uphold the identification of this Jonah with the one in the book of Jonah, God's command in Jonah 1:1 cannot have been Jonah's first commission. Furthermore, it can be inferred that Jonah had obeyed God on the previous occasions (otherwise why would God speak to him again?). Based on the available textual evidence, an insightful reader can thus surmise that Jonah had at least two previous missions and that these missions influenced his decision to flee in Jonah 1:3.

1. Jonah can be identified with the anonymous prophets who were active during Jeroboam II's reign, such as the "son of the prophet" who anointed Jehu in 2 Kgs 9:1.⁶
2. In addition, again based on 2 Kgs 14:24–25, it can be deduced that Jonah had another mission during Jero-

narrative (excluding the psalm in Jonah 2:3–10 [Eng. 2:2–9]). Although it cannot be ruled out that later authors / redactors added single verses, there are good arguments in favour of its unified compositional history (see further Scharf, "The Jonah-Narrative"). For a survey and discussion of select scholarly theories who advocate gradual growth, see J. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW, 218; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 255–62. For a recent theory in favour of a core narrative and subsequent redactional layers, see also J. Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen* (BZAW, 389; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 365–99.

⁵ The term "short story" refers here only to the literary form of the book of Jonah, i.e. it denotes a short work of prose fiction. I shall discuss the specific genre of Jonah further below.

⁶ See, e.g., Seder Olam Rabbah 19.

boam II's reign which involved restoring the borders of Israel.

This last mission caused Jonah grief. Since Jeroboam II was a bad king, the very fact that this prophecy came true was to be lamented. This unfortunate outcome, in turn, gave a dent to Jonah's reputation as a prophet, which later led to Jonah not wanting to go to Nineveh (where, so the tacit argument implies, his reputation as a prophet would be given its death-warrant).⁷

This interpretation is to a large extent compelling if we uphold the identification of the character Jonah in the book of Jonah with the prophet in 2 Kgs 14:25. It fails, however, to account for the intended readers' likely knowledge of Nineveh's fall in 605 BCE (see further below). The demise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire would have cleared Jonah's reputation completely. Following the logic of this interpretation, Jonah should have been eager to go to Nineveh as his prophecy of doom would eventually be fulfilled, albeit with a delay of more than a century.

REASON 2: GOD'S HABITUAL COMPASSION

Another reason as to why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh is advocated by Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer. Pirque R. El. 10 speaks of yet another mission, this time to Jerusalem:

The second time, the Holy One blessed be he sent him to Jerusalem to destroy it, [but because they repented] God took pity on them, and changed His mind about the decree of doom and did not destroy it. And the Israelites called Jonah a false prophet.⁸

In Pirque R. El. 10, this in turn becomes one of two reasons behind Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh:

The third time, he was sent to Nineveh to destroy it. Jonah deliberated to himself, 'I know that these gentiles are close to repenting. Now when they repent, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will be filled with mercy towards them and transfer His fury [of the enemies of Israel] onto Israel. Is it not enough that the Israelites call me a false prophet, must the nations of the earth call me a false prophet as well?'⁹

The biblical narrative itself supports this line of exegesis, given Jonah's own admission in Jonah 4:2 that God is a "gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who changes his mind with regard to planned evil" (**כִּי יִדְעָתִי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֲרֹךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חַסֵּד וְנַחֵם עַל הַרְעָה**). Thus, a significant number of (predominantly rabbinic) scholars claim that Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh lest he be vilified. Past experiences had taught him about God's mercy in the

⁷ See, e.g., Pirque R. El. 10. See further Adelman, *Return of the Repressed*, 219.

⁸ Translation by Adelman, *Return of the Repressed*, 219.

⁹ Ibid.

face of repentance and so he did not want to be considered a false prophet.

This interpretation is on the whole convincing, in particular because it rests upon firm textual support (Jonah 4:2). Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he feared that the Gentiles would repent which, in turn, would lead to their salvation (something that Jonah did not desire). I disagree, however, concerning the reason for Jonah's reluctance. As soon as we postulate a date of composition *after* Assyria's downfall, Jonah will be vindicated as his prediction will turn out to have been correct all along. Thus, Jonah did not fear being called a false prophet; what he feared was the survival of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In a sense, my own suggestion (below) will draw this interpretation to its bitter end: the prophet Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he could foresee the—from his own perspective still future—consequences that God's compassion with Nineveh would entail.

REASON 3: A DETRIMENTAL COMPARISON

Last but not least, it has been argued that Jonah hesitated to go to Nineveh lest Israel fall short of the nations and be judged wanting when compared with them.¹⁰ For if the nations repented, then their repentance would point an accusing finger at sinful Israel and Jonah would have been instrumental in bringing about Israel's terrible condemnation. Jonah thus had to choose between obeying God and defending Israel's honour. In order to shield Israel from God's anger, Jonah chose not to go to Nineveh.

As in the two abovementioned interpretations, this suggested explanation would be convincing if the book of Jonah were composed in the eighth century. The problem arises when we take seriously a post-monarchic dating of the book. At the same time, there is truth also in this interpretation. Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh sought indeed to shield Israel from God's anger, albeit more indirectly: by passively triggering Nineveh's obliteration, he deprived God of his prearranged tool of destruction which he had planned to set against Israel.

REASON 4: JONAH WAS A MARTYR FOR ISRAEL'S SAKE

This brings us to Abravanel's interpretation. Exploring the reasons why Jonah fled from his commission, Abravanel suggests that Jonah was being a martyr on behalf of Israel. He knew that Assyria would soon threaten the Northern Kingdom and therefore, by refusing to prophesy (lest he encourage the Ninevites to repent), Jonah sought to ensure Nineveh's destruction and concurrently safeguard Israel's survival. In fact, Jonah fully expected that his disobedience would cost him his life, as he would under normal circumstances have drowned in the sea when the sailors tossed him overboard. In this regard, Abravanel compares Jonah with Moses, whose statement in

¹⁰ See, e.g., Mekilta Attributed to R. Ishmael I:111, and y. Sanh. 11:5.

Exod 32:33 reveals his desire to save Israel at the potential cost of his own life.¹¹

Abravanel's explanation carries with it a set of assumptions. Most prominently, it assumes that a repentant Assyria would (1) survive and (2) attack Israel. In parallel, it takes for granted that if Assyria failed to repent, (1) God would destroy it and (2) would not replace it in his plan to punish Israel. Abravanel's assumptions do not constitute the whole truth, however, as a whole range of other options are open to the reader. Could it not rather be that a remorseful Assyria would refuse to serve as God's tool of destruction? Would the ancient world on the whole not have been a safer place with a pious and God-fearing superpower? Yet upon further reflection, these objections do not stand closer scrutiny. On the one hand, a God-fearing Assyria would obey God's bidding and serve as his avenging servant. On the other hand, a destroyed Assyria would at least provide Israel with a time of respite until God had managed to locate a new tool to use for his punitive purposes.

Taking a step back and surveying the situation, Abravanel's suggestion fails to explain all the features of the book of Jonah. What it does successfully, however, is to highlight a key problem in the book, namely, the notion of foreknowledge and its repercussions for the overall appreciation of the plot and the message of Jonah. His interpretation serves, to use the term coined by Paul M. Joyce and Diana Lipton, as an example of reception exegesis insofar as it "shows a spotlight on biblical texts that have been dulled by familiarity."¹² In this particular case, my contention is that Abravanel may have spotted an inherent aspect of the narrative which prompts the reader to deconstruct and problematize the seemingly overt message of God's overriding compassion for repentant sinners.

IS JONAH THE PROTAGONIST OR THE ANTAGONIST?

Before concluding this History of Research, it is worthwhile asking whether the name Jonah ("dove") is meant to signal to the reader that Jonah is the protagonist or the antagonist of the story. The situation is, however, ambiguous and no clear answer can be found. On the one hand, the overall positive connotations of the dove (cf. the Flood Narrative) suggest that Jonah is the protagonist.¹³ On the other hand, as pointed out by Hyun C.P. Kim, the word יונה appears elsewhere in the book of the Twelve only in Hos 7:11; 11:11; and Nah 2:8 [Eng.

¹¹ For an English translation of Abravanel's commentary, see S. Bob, *Go to Nineveh: Medieval Jewish Commentaries to the Book of Jonah, Translated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 66–110 (74–76, Answer to the Second Question).

¹² P.M. Joyce and D. Lipton, *Lamentations through the Centuries* (Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 17–19.

¹³ Cf. E. Levine, "Justice in Judaism: The Case of Jonah," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5 (2002), 170–97 (177).

2:7]. In Hos 7:11, Ephraim is likened to “a silly dove without a heart” (כיונה פותה אין לב) which is less than complementary, as is the comparison of penitent Israel with doves as they return from Assyria (וכיונה מארץ אשור) in Hos 11:11. Nah 2:8 further speaks of Nineveh’s maidservants who will moan like doves (ואמהתיה מנהגות כקול יונה). It should also be mentioned that Zeph 3:1 uses the verb ינה (“to oppress”) to describe a city (הוי מראה ונגאלה העיר היונה).¹⁴ In view of this wide range of connotations, all pointing in different directions, it is unclear whether the name “Jonah” conveys positive or negative connotations, with the result that Jonah becomes an ambivalent character. It is up to the reader to determine whether he is the hero or the anti-hero of the narrative.

READING JONAH WITH ITS AUTHOR AND INTENDED AUDIENCE

Abravanel’s interpretation gains strength when we read Jonah from a historical-critical perspective with focus on its author(s) and intended readers. It is fair enough to say that most scholars date Jonah after 721 BCE, i.e. after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and also after 612 BCE, i.e. after the sacking of Nineveh.¹⁵ This means that the author(s) of the book of Jonah had certain fixed data points at their disposal vis-à-vis Nineveh and its relationship with Israel and Judah when they composed the book:

1. By naming the prophet Jonah ben Amittai in line with the prophet with the same name in 2 Kgs 14:23–25, they created a story set during the reign of Jeroboam II between 786–746 BCE. In a sense, they wrote “historical fiction.”
2. They thus envisioned God’s command to Jonah to have happened prior to Nineveh’s destruction by the Neo-Babylonian-Mede coalition and the final destruction of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 605 BCE.
3. They knew that the Neo-Assyrians remained strong throughout the eighth century and that they posed a serious threat to the survival of Israel and Judah:
 - a. King Sargon II sacked Israel in 721 BCE.
 - b. King Sennacherib brought death and destruction to Judah during his campaign in 701 BCE (cf. 2 Kgs 18–19).

Thus, the authors of the book of Jonah knew from the outset that because Nineveh was not destroyed during Jeroboam II’s reign, it came very close to destroying Jerusalem. They also

¹⁴ See further H.C. Kim, “Jonah Read Intertextually,” *JBL* 126 (2007), 497–528 (510–12).

¹⁵ For arguments in favour of a post-monarchic date of Jonah, see the discussion by Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 7–9, as well as the extensive bibliography cited in footnote 19.

knew that although Nineveh was not destroyed in the eighth century, it was destroyed later. In other words, the authors of Jonah were painfully aware of the real danger that Nineveh posed to God's people and they were equally aware of its ultimate demise.

The intended audience had access to the same information. We would be naïve to think that the ancient readers of Jonah were unaware of the ruins of Nineveh. From their perspective, Nineveh was no more, yet before its disappearance it had managed to destroy the people of Israel and it had nearly managed to destroy Judah. Thus, they would have read the story of Jonah as a counterfactual narrative with an inherent bitter flavour.

I further contend that the abovementioned knowledge constitutes a key to the full range of meanings that the authors of the book of Jonah sought to convey. When the book of Jonah is being read as an eighth century composition, God's decision to spare Nineveh demonstrates the depth of his compassion for sinful Nineveh. When we take seriously its likely post-monarchic date of composition, however, we are faced with a more complicated situation. In my view, a post-monarchic audience would neither be able to deny knowledge of Assyria's threat to Jerusalem nor knowledge of the fall of Assyria, in the same way as a modern reader cannot deny knowledge of the Second World War. This knowledge is imbedded in the fabric of society and familiarity with this event can readily be assumed by an author.

A MODERN EQUIVALENCE

As a modern equivalence, let me cite an example. I am an avid watcher of historical TV series. As such, I know already at the outset, when watching, say, *Wolf Hall* or *The Tudors* that Anne Boleyn is going to be beheaded. This knowledge will influence my watching experience of the entire series. I can still enjoy the viewing but my foreknowledge is colouring my experience. There is no suspense. Of course, my foreknowledge is not unique. Rather, the film-makers must take the fact that Anne's execution is common knowledge into account when making the film in the first place and to structure it according, yet they cannot change the ending. Anne must die.¹⁶

So, I contend that the book of Jonah is constructed with the foreknowledge of Nineveh's subsequent actions and ultimate end in mind. What, then, does it mean that the book ends with Nineveh's repentance? It would be as if the TV series *Wolf Hall* ended with Anne's wedding to Henry VIII. This ending would in all likelihood annoy the audience—who know better—as it suggests that Henry VIII is going to live happily ever after with Queen Anne rather than, as the audience fully well

¹⁶ It should be noted that there are films that change history. See, e.g., Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds* (sic), 2009, where a plot to kill Hitler in 1941 is successful. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inglourious_Basterds.

know, with the actual nightmare of another four wives. The books underlying the TV series form a case in point: Hilary Mantel knew that her book *Wolf Hall* demanded a continuation so she wrote *Bring up the Bodies*.

READING JONAH IN POST-MONARCHIC TIMES

Ben Zvi has to a certain extent anticipated my suggested reading in his book *Signs of Jonah*. He points out that the historical audience for which the book was composed would have known very well that Nineveh was destroyed. In addition, Nineveh for them was associated not only with the image of an enemy of Israel but also with absolute destruction. In contrast to Babylon, Nineveh was a mighty empire that was never rebuilt; it was “removed from the world forever.” More than that, from the perspective of the post-monarchic readers, God, being a transcendental deity, would also have known about Nineveh’s eventual destruction already as he spoke with Jonah ben Amittai.¹⁷ Ben Zvi thus speaks of a “double ending” in the sense that the post-monarchic reading community would have been aware of the two opposed fates of Nineveh: the historical fate of annihilation and the narrative fate of redemption. Furthermore, the readers’ awareness of both endings contributes to their understanding of the book of Jonah.¹⁸ First, readers who are familiar with Nineveh’s ultimate demise cannot agree with Jonah’s statement in 4:2b that God is “a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Instead, according to Ben Zvi, Jonah is being doubly ridiculed within this “satire within a satire.” Jonah is clearly wrong, since God is perfectly capable of carrying out massive destruction. God is a deity defined by his ability both to forgive and to execute judgement.¹⁹ Furthermore, Ben Zvi maintains that the book of Jonah can be read as a satire against those readers who attribute to repentance not only too little but also too much power when it comes to influencing God’s decision-making. Repentance is meaningful but “*not everything*.”²⁰ In fact, even Jonah’s role in the drama is of secondary value as the city of Nineveh was razed in an act of God’s supreme will.²¹ Moreover, the book of Jonah advocates an understanding of God’s words which surpasses that of both those readers who doubt the fulfilment of prophetic proclamations as well as those who focus overly much on exact deadlines for the fulfilment of prophetic divine pronouncements. God’s promises and justice will be fulfilled but in God’s own timing.²² Taken together, these different voices render the book of Jonah polyphonic as it advocates multiple and complementary voices.²³

¹⁷ Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 17–18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17–21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22, 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

²² Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 22–25, 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

I agree with many of Ben Zvi's conclusions, yet with a few caveats. In particular, I maintain that the "double ending" of the book, combined with its intended multiplicity of theological viewpoints, does not necessarily imply that it must be read as a satire or that it ridicules the character of Jonah (alongside select reading communities who held the abovementioned views). The book is, as Ben Zvi states, polyvalent, yet as such it can be read, as I shall show further below, more as a philosophical treatise on divine justice and human suffering. For example, I concur with Ben Zvi's assessment of God's omnipotence and the limited role that both Jonah's proclamation of Nineveh's destruction and the Ninevites' ensuing repentance has for God's decision-making, yet that does not make Jonah's statement in Jonah 4:2b a matter of ridicule. On the contrary, Jonah's declaration of faith reveals the conflict between God's love and God's justice, perceived not only by Jonah the character in the book but also by the author(s) of the book and the intended reading community.

The issue of a "double ending" brings us back to Abravanel's interpretation. Abravanel does not suspend his knowledge of Nineveh's fate but instead reads the book of Jonah with this commonly known data point in mind. His foreknowledge informs him that the ending of the book cannot be the "real" ending but only a mere interlude. Abravanel's interpretation reveals his unease with the book as he struggles to uncover the true motivation behind Jonah's seemingly spontaneous refusal to go to Nineveh. In his hand, Jonah becomes an Oedipus figure who, striving to act responsibly in order to prevent patricide and wrongful matrimony, chooses to flee from Thebes, only to find that all his endeavours came to nothing. Jonah flees so that Assyria will be destroyed before its appointed time, so that Israel may have a chance of survival. All the time, though, Abravanel knows that history cannot be rewritten and that Jonah must inevitably fail.

THE HISTORICAL QUALITY OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

Despite the authors' and intended readers' likely knowledge of Nineveh's deeds and its eventual downfall, the book of Jonah mentions neither Israel nor Judah and Jerusalem. It also never refers to the Neo-Assyrian Empire or to any of its political exploitations of its neighbouring states. Instead, it speaks generally of Nineveh's "wickedness." In fact, the book of Jonah has a story-like quality which eschews all blatant references to any historical reality. In parallel, this very vague quality makes the surprisingly detailed reference to Jonah, the son of Amittai, positioned right at the very beginning of the short story, stand out as an unequivocal pointer to 2 Kgs 14:23–25. The opening expression *ויהי דבר ה' אל . . . לאמר* which occurs together with the calling of a prophet in, among other places, 2 Sam 7:4 (Nathan), 1 Kgs 12:22 (Shemaiah), 1 Kgs 13:20 (an anonymous prophet), and 1 Kgs 17:2 (Elijah) is an additional reference to

the DtrH.²⁴ By using this phrase, the authors of Jonah signal that Jonah ben Amittai is on par with and maybe also one of these prophets of old.

In a different way, the reference to Nineveh's "wickedness" in verse 2 invites the readers to remember *all* the connotations that this image conjures up. From an eighth century BCE perspective, Nineveh's worst crimes still lie in the future and thus cannot be enumerated if the authors wish to maintain the "historical" character of their book. This knowledge must instead stay in the subtext of the book. At the same time, the overarching reference to its "wickedness" turns Nineveh into a symbol of evil that is able to convey effectively all (from the readers' perspective) its past crimes.

Last but not least, Jonah's ethnic self-description as a "Hebrew" in Jonah 1:9 enables him to represent the entire people, Israelites and Judahites alike. It does not mar the eighth century fiction and, in parallel, it is possible for all the people in post-monarchic times to identify with Jonah. He, like them, is a Hebrew rather than, more specifically, a citizen of an independent nation.

READING JONAH WITH THE FALL OF NINEVEH IN MIND

Several pre-critical works explore the consequences of reading Jonah alongside knowledge of the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. The book of Tobit, for example, appears to omit Nineveh's repentance in its endeavour to make Jonah's prophecy agree with historical reality. In Tob 14:4, we read:

Go into Media my son, for I surely believe those things which Jonas the prophet spake of Nineve, that it shall be overthrown (ἐλάλησεν Ἰωνας ὁ προφήτης περὶ Νινευη ὅτι καταστραφήσεται); and that for a time peace shall rather be in Media; and that our brethren shall lie scattered in the earth from that good land: and Jerusalem shall be desolate, and the house of God in it shall be burned, and shall be desolate for a time.²⁵

According to the book of Tobit, any repentance on behalf of the people of Nineveh is simply ignored.²⁶ There are two manuscript traditions of Tob 14:4. Alexandrinus and Vaticanus (GI) mention "Jonah" whereas Sinaiticus (GII) follows the longer tradition which mentions "Nahum."²⁷ It is commonly held that

²⁴ Cf. D.V. Edelman, "Jonah Among the Twelve in the MT: The Triumph of Torah over Prophecy," in E. Ben Zvi and D.V. Edelman (eds.) *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (BibleWorld; London/Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2014), 150–67 (152), although Diana Edelman is making a different point.

²⁵ Translation: The Authorized Version.

²⁶ See further B. Ego, "The Repentance of Nineveh in the Story of Jonah and Nahum's Prophecy of the City's Destruction—A Coherent Reading of the Book of the Twelve as Reflected in the Aggadah," in P.L. Redditt and A. Scharf (eds.), *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW, 325; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 155–64 (156–57).

²⁷ See J. Limburg, *Jonah* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John

the tradition in Sinaiticus (Nahum) is earlier.²⁸ Even so, the book of Tobit interacts with the Jonah tradition on several occasions. Notably both Tobit and Jonah encounter a fish (Jonah 2:1 [Eng. 1:17]; Tob 6:2), and both wish to die (Jonah 4:3; Tob 3:6). It is possible that the younger version inserted the name “Jonah,” as well as the verb *καταστραφήσεται* (“overthrow,” cf. Jonah 3:4 where the LXX uses the same verb), to emphasize further these parallels, as well as to solve any contradiction between the books of Jonah and Nahum.²⁹ According to the reading in GI of Tob 14:4, Jonah is being presented as a prophet whose prophecy came true.

Josephus’s retelling of the Jonah narrative in his *Jewish Antiquities* 9.214 likewise ends with Jonah’s declaration that Nineveh will be destroyed in 40 days. As Beate Ego states, the reader “gets the impression once again that Jonah’s prediction is quite similar to the prophecy of Nahum.”³⁰ Josephus may thus have aimed to align his retelling of the Jonah narrative with either the memory of Nineveh’s fall or the book of Nahum or, indeed, both.

READING JONAH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

To explore further the counter-factual ending of the book of Jonah, let us turn to its function within the Book of the Twelve, as well as in the wider canon of the Hebrew Bible.³¹ In this larger textual context, Nineveh’s survival in Jonah is put in dialogue with Nineveh’s destruction as referred to in the nearby material of Nahum 1–3 and Zeph 2:13–15. The impression formed by readers of the single book of Jonah, namely that its ending differs from their own knowledge of past history, is strengthened when readers choose to approach Jonah as an integral part of the Twelve. Expressed differently, when the

Knox, 1993), 80, including footnote 131.

²⁸ See Ego, “The Repentance of Nineveh,” 156. For a more detailed discussion, see M. Bredin, “The Significance of Jonah in Vaticanus (B) Tobit 14.4 and 8,” in M. Bredin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Tobit: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (LSTS, 55; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 43–58. Mark Bredin argues that Vaticanus intentionally interpolated “Jonah” into the text in order to stress that salvation was open to the nations. His starting point, namely that Jonah was directed against Jewish intolerance, is, however, fundamentally opposite the one for which I am arguing in the present paper.

²⁹ Cf. Ego, “The Repentance of Nineveh,” 156–57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 159. See also L.H. Feldman, “Josephus’ Interpretation of Jonah,” *AJSR* 17 (1992), 1–29 (16).

³¹ For a good discussion of the different arguments for and against a Book of the Twelve, see E. Ben Zvi and J. Nogalski, *Two Sides of a Coin: Juxtaposing Views on Interpreting the Book of the Twelve / The Twelve Prophetic Books* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), where James Nogalski puts forward arguments for treating the twelve books as an intentional redactional unit, while Ben Zvi, focusing less on the redactor and more on the reader, argues that it is likely that ancient readers would have approached the twelve books as discrete units.

book of Jonah is being read on its own, the readers are struck by its counter-factual ending. This counter-factual aspect of the book of Jonah is confirmed for those same readers when they encounter Jonah alongside Nahum within the Book of the Twelve. They are bound to conclude that Nineveh's repentance was insincere or at least not long-lasting. To cite Aaron Schart, when Jonah is being read alongside Nahum, the Ninevites's repentance becomes "mere fiction" (*ist nur eine Fiktion*).³²

In the MT of the Twelve, we meet the sequence Jonah–Micah–Nahum. It is possible that this positioning of Jonah between Amos and Micah was motivated by the above mentioned identification of Jonah with the prophet in 2 Kgs 14:23–25.³³ For the sequential reader of the Twelve, this order—with Jonah preceding Nahum—implies that God temporarily spared Nineveh yet his judgment ultimately fell upon the city.³⁴ Nahum thus has the final word and it agrees with history. In this sense, Nahum "corrects" the perspective of Jonah.³⁵

The same relative order of Jonah–Nahum is reinforced in the LXX, where Nahum follows Jonah immediately (whereas Micah is positioned between Amos and Joel).³⁶ To cite Marvin A. Sweeney, while Jonah shows that even Nineveh can be forgiven and granted mercy by YHWH, the LXX sequence makes clear that "no such forgiveness will be granted in the absence of repentance." God is now punishing Assyria for its arrogance in abusing Judah and Israel.³⁷ Along similar lines, Jason

³² A. Schart, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Neubearbeitungen von Amos im Rahmen schriftensübergreifender Redaktionsprozesse* (BZAW, 260; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 291.

³³ H.W. Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 3: Obadja und Jona* (BKAT, XIV/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn; Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), 53, or idem, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, transl. M. Kohl (CC; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), 75.

³⁴ For the order of these books, see Burkard M. Zapff's discussion in his article "The Perspective on the Nations in the Book of Micah as a 'Systematization' of the Nations' Role in Joel, Jonah and Nahum? Reflections on a Context-Oriented Exegesis in the Book of the Twelve," in P.L. Redditt and A. Schart (eds.), *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW, 325; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 292–312 (293–97).

³⁵ Zapff, "The Perspective on the Nations," 300–301. See also D.L. Christensen, "The Book of Nahum: A History of Interpretation," in J.D. Watts and P.R. House (eds.), *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D.W. Watts* (JSOTSup, 235; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 187–94 (187), who regards Jonah and Nahum as midrashic reflections of Exod 34:6–7. While Jonah focuses on God's mercy, Nahum focuses on God's wrath, both of which are essential for a correct understanding of the divine nature.

³⁶ The question of whether the order of the LXX is older than the order of the MT is open. While Zapff, "The Perspective on the Nations," 294–95, argues that MT preserves the earlier sequence, Edelman, "Jonah Among the Twelve," 161, upholds that the LXX testifies to the earlier sequence.

³⁷ M.A. Sweeney, "Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the

LeCureux maintains that the order to the LXX is *theologically* rather than historically motivated, placing Jonah and Nahum together due to their shared focus. In contrast, the MT is making a *historical* statement by positioning Jonah before Micah: if the people of Nineveh had not repented, then the invasion of Mic 1 would never have happened. “In this way, Jonah is being used as a historical person, on a historical mission, the results of which led to historical invasions.”³⁸ Agreeing with LeCureux, yet taking his insights into a slightly different direction, I maintain that the positioning of Jonah before Micah and Nahum in the MT shows simultaneously that the MT canon used Jonah as a historical book and that they were aware of the historical consequences that God’s compassion had for Judah’s fate. Because God spared Nineveh, Samaria was destroyed and Judah was invaded.

At this point, it should be acknowledged that several scholars have argued that the remains of scrolls from the Minor Prophets from Cave 4 near Qumran testify to a single manuscript, 4Q76, which places Jonah after Malachi. Jonah would thus constitute the final word in the Book of the Twelve. For Barry A. Jones, for example, 4Q76 reflects the earliest placement of Jonah. In his view, the likelihood that Jonah was the last book in the Twelve to have been composed renders it plausible that it was at first positioned at the end of the Twelve.³⁹ Its original positioning after Malachi would further be supported by the literary affinity between Jonah and Malachi (esp. Mal 1:11–14).⁴⁰ According to Jones, Jonah was subsequently moved to its present position after Obadiah as a result of scribal uncertainties vis-à-vis the proper sequence of the individual books in the Twelve. Its dialogue with Nahum is better understood as a later development and as part of the reception history of Jonah.⁴¹ While Odil H. Steck agrees with Jones that 4Q76 places Jonah after Malachi, he emphasizes that 4Q76 is a single manuscript. In view of this, Steck postulates that the positioning of Jonah is secondary and reflects merely the specific viewpoint of select scribes in the early second century BCE.⁴²

The more recent research by Philippe Guillaume has, however, cast doubt on whether the Jonah fragment actually should be joined to the Malachi fragment, or that they even belonged to the same scroll. Although it is certain that Mal 3

Twelve,” in idem, *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 175–88 (183).

³⁸ J. LeCureux, “Reading Jonah as ‘History’? The Implication of Canonical Location for Jonah and the Book of the Twelve,” *Pacifica* 28 (2015), 68–78.

³⁹ B.A. Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon* (SBLDS, 149; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 132, 135–39, 237–39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156–58.

⁴¹ Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve*, 197–98, 213–14.

⁴² O.H. Steck, “Zur Abfolge Maleachi-Jona in 4Q76 (4QXII^a),” *ZAW* 108 (1996), 249–53.

did not constitute the end of the scroll in question, it cannot be confirmed that Jonah 1 was its direct continuation.⁴³ Most recently, Mika S. Pajunen and Hanne von Weissenberg have demonstrated that the physical join of the Malachi and the Jonah fragments is impossible (“unless a number of anomalies in material and scribal practices are assumed”).⁴⁴ They focus instead of establishing the relative place of Malachi and Jonah in 4Q76. In their view, we are probably dealing with a scroll of three or four books of roughly equal size, where Jonah was the final book and Malachi was the antepenultimate one.⁴⁵ This positioning, in turn, suggests that the idea of a collection with a fixed order is a later concept.⁴⁶ In view of these findings, the evidence from 4Q76 sheds only limited light on the relative order of Nahum and Jonah.⁴⁷

The opposite situation occurs if we instead read the material diachronically. The exact dating of the various textual layers in Jonah and Nahum are in the present context unimportant; what matters is their relative dating. If we accept the current common view that the earliest material in Nahum was written sometimes between 663 BCE (i.e. the fall of Thebes, cf. Nah 3:8) and 612 BCE (i.e. the fall of Nineveh), admitting the possibility of later, post-monarchic additions,⁴⁸ Jonah becomes the chronologically later composition. This relative dating begs the question whether Jonah was written as a corrective of Nahum. Kim answers “yes” to this question, arguing that Jonah was composed to challenge and counter-balance Nahum.⁴⁹ In contrast, Burkard M. Zapff answers “no,” as he makes the salient

⁴³ P. Guillaume, “The Unlikely Malachi-Jonah Sequence (4QXII^a),” *JHS* 7/15, doi:10.5508/jhs.2007.v7.a15.

⁴⁴ M.S. Pajunen and H. von Weissenberg, “The Book of Malachi, Manuscript 4Q76 (4QXII^a), and the Formation of the ‘Book of the Twelve,’” *JBL* 134 (2015), 731–51 (739–42).

⁴⁵ Pajunen and Weissenberg, “The Book of Malachi,” 749.

⁴⁶ Pajunen and Weissenberg, “The Book of Malachi,” 750–51.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Edelman, “Jonah Among the Twelve,” 161.

⁴⁸ For a detailed survey of scholarly views, see Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*, 97–99. Nogalski himself argues for the gradual growth of the book, with two formative layers. The earliest layer would stem from the time of Nineveh’s destruction, while later material was added in the post-monarchic era (pages 127–28). For a somewhat different approach, see D.L. Christensen, *Nahum. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009), 53–57, who distinguishes between the setting in which the author intended us to place the content of the book of Nahum and the setting in which the author wrote the various material in the book. In Duane L. Christensen’s view, the book of Nahum has no “real history apart from its context as the seventh of twelve ‘books’ within [the Book of the Twelve], for there is no way to demonstrate that the book of Nahum ever existed independently as a document written within the time span reflected in the content of the book itself.” This is true, yet it is equally important to remember that we also lack contrary evidence which would show unequivocally that the book of Nahum never existed as an independent book.

⁴⁹ Kim, “Jonah Read Intertextually,” 524.

distinction between the origin of the book of Jonah and its insertion into the Book of the Twelve. According to Zapff, Jonah was not composed to serve as a corrective to Nahum; it became a response to Nahum only upon its incorporation into the Twelve.⁵⁰

Zapff's distinction brings us to the inclusion of the book of Jonah into the Twelve. Although many theories abound, most historical-critical scholars agree that Jonah was incorporated at a very late stage. Moreover, many scholars envisage a two-stage development of Jonah: the Jonah narrative existed first as an independent book, to which the psalm (Jonah 2:3–10 [Eng. 2:2–9]) was added at the time of its incorporation into the Twelve. James Nogalski, for example, argues that Jonah was incorporated into a pre-existing form of the Twelve in the fourth century BCE or later, at which time the psalm in Jonah 2:3–10 was inserted into Jonah. Like Zapff, Nogalski further maintains that Jonah was added to serve as a conscious contrast to Nahum, as it presupposes that the nations can have a salvific relationship with YHWH.⁵¹ Martin Roth likewise maintains that the psalm in Jonah 2 was introduced into the book of Jonah at the same time as the book was included in the Twelve. In the earlier version (i.e. the one without the psalm), Jonah is the disobedient prophet who flees from his commission in order not to be a false prophet. In contrast, the final version depicts Jonah as a person of faith whom Israel should emulate.⁵²

Along slightly different lines, Jakob Wöhrle also considers the incorporation of Jonah into the Twelve to have taken place very near the end of the latter's completion in the second half of the third century BCE. Jonah's inclusion, so Wöhrle, was part of a wider redactional scheme which sought to emphasize God's mercy (*das Gnaden-Korpus*). At this point, the editor re-worked substantially the already existing book of Jonah and, in parallel, inserted material into other books (Joel 2:12–14; Mic 7:18–20; Nah 1:2b, 3a; Mal 1:9a) to make them all align. These additions were inspired by the "thirteen attributes of mercy" in Exod 34:6.⁵³ The juxtaposition of Jonah and Nah 1:2b, 3a in this redaction stresses that on the one hand a city as sinful as Nineveh is given a chance to repent, yet on the other hand there are limits to God's compassion.⁵⁴ Finally, although Scharf criticizes the details of Wöhrle's proposed *Gnaden-Korpus*, he concurs that Jonah belongs to the final redaction of the Twelve. Furthermore, along the lines of the aforementioned

⁵⁰ Zapff, "The Perspective on the Nations," 300–301, 311.

⁵¹ Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*, 248–73. Nogalski argues that Jonah's attitude towards foreigners shows affinity with the material in Zech 8:20–23; 14:16–21; and Mal 1:11.

⁵² M. Roth, *Israel und die Völker im Zwölfprophetenbuch: Eine Untersuchung zu den Büchern Joel, Jonab, Micha und Nahum* (FRLANT, 210; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 114–16, following Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 424–25.

⁵³ Wöhrle, *Der Abschluss*, 396–419.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 415–16.

authors, Schart maintains that the incorporation of Jonah changed the overall message of the Twelve, bringing to the forefront God's mercy whilst downplaying his anger.⁵⁵

I do not wish to cast doubts upon these postulated redaction-critical schemes vis-à-vis the gradual growth of Jonah and/or its incorporation into the Twelve, yet I maintain that its final editors were as aware of the *intentionally* counter-factual quality of Jonah as its original authors. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the incorporation of the book of Jonah into the Twelve strengthened its already existing counter-factual quality. In other words, when Nahum and Jonah were brought into dialogue with each other, Nahum emphasized the counter-factual ending of Jonah and forced the readers to confront anew the fact that Nineveh failed and fell. Therefore, the common claim that the Book of the Twelve, through its incorporation of Jonah, stresses God's mercy needs to be nuanced.

A possible way out of the Nahum–Jonah conundrum is to argue that Nineveh in the book of Jonah should not be understood as a reference to the historical city bearing the same name but instead should be understood more as a symbol of evil, in line with Gen 10:12 (stating that Nimrod travelled to Assyria where he built Nineveh). According to Roth, for example, the symbolic use of Nineveh in Jonah removes any contradiction between Jonah and Nahum. It follows, so Roth, that Jonah 1:2 and Nah 3:9 address different matters.⁵⁶ I disagree. Although the name “Nineveh” has clear symbolic value, this in itself does not lessen its historical connotations. Expressed differently, a post-monarchic reader of Jonah may not necessarily have distinguished in any salient manner between Nineveh's symbolic connotations and its reputation for politically and military exploitations over the past centuries. With this in mind, Nineveh in Jonah and Nineveh in Nahum are not each other's opposites but instead points on a sliding scale. Furthermore, the endeavour to identify Jonah with a known character from the DtrH (cf. above) suggests that the authors of the book aimed to lend their narrative a certain historical flavour. Rather than picking a random name, the author(s) of Jonah chose to identify their protagonist/antagonist with a person with unmistakable historical dimensions who could be dated to the reign of Jeroboam II.

⁵⁵ Schart, “The Jonah Narrative,” 118–27.

⁵⁶ Roth, *Israel und die Völker*, 127–28. See also, e.g., Childs, *Introduction*, 425, and, from a different perspective, Levine, “Justice in Judaism,” 174.

READING JONAH WITH DIFFERENT EYES

Most readers understand the book of Jonah to preach God's ultimate mercy towards the most despicable of sinners.⁵⁷ There is nothing wrong with these types of readings, yet other, less affirmative readings are also possible.

The question of the message of the book of Jonah is intertwined with the question of its genre. I am well aware that the book of Jonah has often been read as a satire,⁵⁸ but this is not the only way of reading it. Etan Levine presents a convincing case for reading Jonah as a wisdom tale or even a philosophical treatise on the essence of justice.⁵⁹ Beginning with Jonah's statement in Jonah 4:2, Levine argues that Jonah is dissatisfied with "God's juridical posture": according to "the morality of antiquity," humans must correct any imbalance caused by evil.⁶⁰ What God advocates in Jonah, however, is a situation where no equivalent suffering, no compensatory good deeds, and no expiatory rite is needed for Nineveh to obtain forgiveness. Furthermore, it opens the question of God's right in the first place to forgive an evil that was not done towards him but towards the victims of Nineveh's evil.⁶¹ Jonah's dialogue with God can thus be read as an example of the human struggle against injustice or, in Levine's own words, against "metaphysical and abstract legal philosophy."⁶² As to the book as a whole, Levine maintains that the author sides with neither Jonah's view (evil must be punished) nor God's view (repentance warrants forgiveness) but seeks instead to present an open-ended moral dilemma.⁶³ Along different lines, Chesung J. Ryu offers a postcolonial reading of Jonah where Jonah's final silence is a legitimate response to God's mercy on Nineveh and in fact the only resistance left for the colonized and oppressed Jews in post-monarchic Yehud. Ryu asks a pertinent question (but unfortunately does not really answer it), namely, how is it possible for the oppressed to write a book the theme of which praises God's universal salvation towards their oppressors.⁶⁴

I wish to suggest a new reading of Jonah in line with the two aforementioned readings, yet also taking its counter-factual

⁵⁷ See, e.g., J.H. Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma* (StBibLit 5; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), esp. 124–33.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Schart, "The Jonah Narrative," 110–11, J.S. Ackerman, "Satire and symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in B. Halpern and J.D. Levenson (eds.), *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 213–46, and D. Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (BJS, 301; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 93–159.

⁵⁹ E. Levine, "Jonah as a Philosophical Book," *ZAW* 96 (1984), 235–45.

⁶⁰ Levine, "Justice in Judaism," 178.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 177–79, 193.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶³ Levine, "Jonah as a Philosophical Book," 243–45.

⁶⁴ C.J. Ryu, "Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1–11," *JSOT* 34 (2009), 195–218 (198).

ending into account. What happens when we read Jonah with the knowledge from the outset that (1) Jonah's mission will merely postpone the inevitable, and (2) this postponement caused massive suffering to Israel and the rest of the ancient Near East? In the words of the concluding question in Nah 3:19:

Nothing can heal your wound; your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?⁶⁵

When we read Jonah together with Nah 3:19, we are bound to reach the conclusion that it would have been better for Israel had Jonah succeeded in avoiding his mission. The only people who benefited from Jonah's failure (from his perspective) to circumvent his mission were the people of Nineveh. They were given "peace for their time." They avoided destruction and were blessed to live to see their grand-children.

Can we live with such a reading of Jonah, where the momentary happiness of the inhabitants of Nineveh weighs heavier than Israel's chance to survival? Is it right to do "good" for momentary benefits? Is it sufficient to give temporary happiness to a person in need, even if we know from the outset that when we are gone, all the good that we have done will disappear and things will revert back to bad again? Can we say that Jonah's mission was "worth it," as it spared the specific men, women, and children in Nineveh at that point?

Read in this manner, the book of Jonah becomes a kind of inverted Wisdom Tale. Unlike Job who suffered despite having done nothing to warrant that kind of punishment, the people of Nineveh escaped suffering despite having done much to deserve it; unlike Job who held on to his belief in a just deity despite the visible facts to the contrary, Jonah questioned God's right to extend justice to whomever he wants. In this way, the message of both books ultimately turns out to be a philosophical query of God's omnipotence and his right to do as he pleases.

THE MESSAGE OF JONAH FOR A POST-MONARCHIC AUDIENCE

If Jonah was composed and read with a post-monarchic audience in mind, what would have been its intended message? Ryu's aforementioned question, namely how the downtrodden post-monarchic community (in Yehud) could write a book which praised God's universal salvation towards their oppressors, demands an answer. In my view, Jonah's counterfactual quality not only provides a clue to the answer but also shows that Ryu's question is wrongly phrased. The book of Jonah *does not* present a picture of undisputable praise of God's universal salvation. It is rather a two-side coin which shows both God's and Jonah's views and ends without a resolution. Notably, both characters are given roughly equal narrative space in Jonah 4.

⁶⁵ My translation follows the NIB here.

As such, I suggest that Jonah should be placed alongside other post-monarchic texts, such as the lament in Isa 63:7–64:11 (64:4–5 [Eng. vv. 5–6]), which question and problematize God’s faithfulness.⁶⁶ Jonah, read in this light, becomes yet another post-monarchic text which demands an answer to the apparent failure of God’s promised salvation (expressed, e.g., in Isa 40–55) to materialize. In the book of Jonah the Gentiles are forgiven without further ado after a single show of repentance. In contrast, Israel is still being punished for its sins with no salvation in sight.

Furthermore, rather than interacting with what Levine calls “the morality of antiquity,” I suggest that the book of Jonah reacts to and to a certain extent also objects to the theology of the DtrH. Israel’s destruction at the hands of the Neo-Assyrians as told in 2 Kgs 17:7–18 is presented as God’s punishment due to Israel’s sins. In contrast, God in the book of Jonah is willing to forgive the people of Nineveh instantaneously. Although the comparison between the two may be understood as a critique of Israel’s incorrigibly sinful nature, the lack of symmetry between Israel’s sins and Nineveh’s sins towards YHWH renders this interpretation hard to swallow. How can God forgive a ruthless Gentile nation because of one single act of repentance while he chooses to ignore the continuous plight of his own people eking out a living, either in exile or in poor Yehud, despite having already suffered the punishment for their sins? The book of Jonah, like the lament in Isa 63:7–64:11, questions God’s sense of justice. Jonah, like the lamenting people in 63:15 asks God why he is withholding from them his zeal and his strength, his tenderness and his compassion (63:15b, אִיהַ קְנֵאתֶךָ וּגְבוּרַתְךָ הַמִּזֶּן מֵעֵד וּרְחֻמֶיךָ אֵלַי, (הַתְּאַפְקוּ)).

JONAH AND THE GENTILES

Finally, my proposed reading raises a pertinent question: if the book of Jonah is counterfactual and its message of compassion for the people of Nineveh is ambiguous, where does that leave the other group of Gentiles in the story, namely the sailors who in chapter 1 are described as decent human beings who hesitate to cast Jonah overboard?⁶⁷ The answer to this question can also be found in the counter-factual quality of the book of Jonah. As the incident with the sailors clearly reveals, neither the character of Jonah nor the book of Jonah is reported as objecting to non-Israelites *per se*. On the contrary, Jonah the prophet is

⁶⁶ I wish to thank Dr. Blaženka Scheuer for this suggestion, raised when I presented a draft version of this article in the biblical seminar at the University of Lund, 1 Nov, 2016. For a discussion of the genre and the translation of Isa 64:4–5, see L.-S. Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites and Prophetic Rage: Postexilic Prophetic Critique of the Priesthood* (FAT II/19; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 100–109.

⁶⁷ I wish to thank Prof. Meira Polliack for raising this question when I presented a draft version of this article in her seminar at the University of Tel Aviv, 3 May, 2016.

happily talking about his worship of YHWH with the sailors (1:9) and Jonah the book reports how the sailors ended up fearing YHWH and offering sacrifices to him (1:16). Rather, the prophet Jonah ran away from his mission because God commanded him to go to Nineveh (1:2). The problem was not their *non-Israelite* identity but their specific *Ninevite* identity (i.e. part of a people who, if being allowed to survive, would end up destroying Jonah's homeland Israel).⁶⁸ The key issue in the book of Jonah thus concerns God's decision vis-à-vis *the specific people of Nineveh*, i.e. whether they will be saved due to their repentance as in its the counter-factual ending or whether they will be punished for their deeds as in the historical ending. Thus, the comparison between the sailors and the people of Nineveh offers to a certain extent a false dichotomy.⁶⁹

Instead, the sailors constitute an interesting parallel to Jonah. In a sense, by initially refusing to toss Jonah overboard they defied God, just as Jonah initially defied God by refusing to go to Nineveh.⁷⁰ In addition, they behaved like Jonah as they were seemingly willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to save Jonah, just as Jonah was willing to die in order to save his people. At the same time, the sailors ultimately fall short of their intention as they give in to God's will and toss Jonah into the sea (Jonah 1:14–15).

Lastly, when the episode about the sailors in Jonah 1 is read as part of its wider context of the Book of the Twelve, the sailors become examples of those Gentiles who join themselves to God and to Israel (e.g. Zech 2:15 [Eng. 2:11]; 8:22–23). In this sense, the book of Jonah presents two alternative ways forward for Gentiles: the ideal way of the compassionate sailors and the counter-factual way of the people of Nineveh.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have proposed that the book of Jonah can be read as a serious book which deals with genocide and the possibility to stop it. To do justice to its message of compassion, we need to read Jonah alongside its intended post-monarchic readers and as an integral part of the Book of the Twelve. Read in this way, Jonah is presented as a true prophet, steeped in the tradition of Moses, who understands his prophetic calling as a two-sided task. Not only is he God's representative who is charged with conveying God's message; he is also Israel's representative who, like Moses before him, is willing to risk his life

⁶⁸ Cf. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 62.

⁶⁹ Needless to say, many scholars across the centuries have compared the two. For a survey of the ways that exegetes over the ages have interpreted and contrasted the sailors with the people of Nineveh, see L.-S. Tiemeyer, "Jonah and the Foreigners: Interreligious Relations in the Reception History of the Book of Jonah," in H. Hagelia and M. Zehnder (eds.), *Interreligious Relations: Biblical Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 261–81.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 74, who highlights the motif of the sailors' defiance of God.

in order to save them. Just as Moses was willing to die alongside sinful Israel in Exod 32:32 unless God forgave them all, so Jonah was willing to die at sea in order to ensure Israel's survival.

When we read the book of Jonah like this, it becomes a deeply disturbing book and God's final speech in Jonah 4:11 (ואני לא אחוס על נינוה העיר הגדולה) threatens to become ambiguous.⁷¹ God's (rhetorical) question leaves the book open-ended, demanding an answer from the readers. They may choose to side with God's point of view but it is equally possible that they may opt to side with Jonah and to venture an answer: yes, you have this right, but we also maintain the right to object to your decision.⁷²

FINAL REMARKS

Compassion can be a two-edged sword. Again, fiction, this time a conversation between Frodo and Gandalf in the *Fellowship of the Ring*, can help us to reach a deeper understanding of the matter:

“What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature [Gollum], when he had the chance!”

“Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need . . . Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. . . My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least.”⁷³

Jonah was no Bilbo and he was right not to be. The story of Israel and the Neo-Assyrians was not modelled after the *Lord of the Rings* and Sargon II was no Gollum who ultimately destroyed the ring and thus (inadvertently) defeated evil. On the contrary, Sargon II brought evil and destruction to Israel.

Let me end with some concluding thoughts on fore-knowledge and how it impacts one's experience. The final

⁷¹ For the possibility of not reading Jonah 4:11 as an interrogative but instead as a declarative statement, see further E. Ben Zvi, “Jonah 4:11 and the Metaphoric Character of the Book of Jonah,” *JHS* 9/5 (2009), 10-13, doi:10.5508/jhs.2009.v9.a5. This reading would contrast Jonah who felt “pity” versus God who ultimately does not show “pity.” Post-monarchic readers aware of Nineveh's fall “would have least wondered about the exact significance of the text.” I follow Ben Zvi in his view that the author, by not adding an interrogative ה to the sentence, left it open to the readers to ponder both understandings of the sentence.

⁷² Cf. W.B. Crouch, “To Question an End, to End a Question: Opening the Closure of the Book of Jonah,” *JSOT* 62 (1994), 101–12 (112).

⁷³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Chapter 2: *The Shadow of the Past* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1955), 85–86.

scene of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, set in Russia in 1905, portrays how Tevye and his family are driven away from Anat-evka.⁷⁴ Most of them are going to Chicago. Chava and Fyedka, however, are leaving for Krakow, declaring that they are unwilling to remain among the people who can do such things to others. At that moment, I cry. Why? Because I know that while Tevye's (fictional) descendants will be safe in the US, Chava's and Fyedka's (equally fictional) children will in all likelihood perish at Auschwitz, a mere 50 km west of Krakow.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ The original Broadway production from 1964 is based on the older tale by Sholem Aleichem, written between 1894 and 1914.

⁷⁵ I am not the only one who detects echoes of the Holocaust resonating through the finale of *Fiddler on the Roof*. See further J. Hillman, *Echoes of the Holocaust on the American Musical Stage* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 75.