Jonah
The Reluctant Prophet

Erica Brown

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In loving memory of Irving and Beatrice Stone,
who dedicated their lives to the
advancement of Jewish education.
We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.

Their Children, Grandchildren, and Great-Grandchildren
Cleveland, Ohio, USA

This book is dedicated to my mother,
Tzipora Schoonmaker,
who taught her children never to run away
but to run toward God,
for in God's embrace
lies our truest strength.

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Preface

My romance with the Book of Jonah began early. Its whimsicality and visuality, its brazenness, and its poignant emotional and philosophical landscape make this short book heady reading. I began studying the Book of Jonah most intensely during my very first year of teaching. Its riddles made an outstanding impression upon students, who never failed to wrestle with its language and theology. Only once did I encounter a student who turned away from its gripping plot. While teaching in a gap-year program in a seminary in Israel, I found that a young woman who was registered for the course on Jonah had dropped out before the first class. "I studied this book already in ninth grade," she sighed. Jonah is a biblical book that can fascinate a reader for an entire lifetime and still not reveal all of its secrets. Boredom handicapped this young woman's curiosity. She closed Jonah's pages much too early.

Every year we read this small book; it beckons to us from its place in the liturgy on our greatest Day of Awe, and the repetition might clue the listener in to its relevance. The words of the text do not change, but we do. We bring a new and ever-maturing self to the Book of Jonah each year, so that it yields new subtleties to us again and again if we keep its pages and our minds open.

This particular book is organized as a series of three essays for each of the four chapters of the Book of Jonah, bookended by an introduction and epilogue. I make no claim for originality. There is nothing new under the sun, if not when Ecclesiastes was first written, then certainly not now, a few millennia later. What you will find on these pages is a melding of traditional exegetes, midrashic and other rabbinic literature, modern Bible scholars, and artists – all of whom, like me, fell under the spell of this book and were compelled to analyze it and swim in its dangerous and imaginative waters. Where classic medieval commentators are notably short on overarching explanations and tend more to a line-by-line reading than a holistic chapter-by-chapter approach, we will fill in the gaps using other scholars' writings.

For translation, I have relied predominantly, but not exclusively, on the Jewish Publication Society's *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*[1] and the *Koren Tanakh*.[2] I also relied upon the translation of relevant passages of *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* rendered by David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky in "Jonah and the Sailors from *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*"[3] and, in places, translations of standard medieval exegetes and Malbim from Steven Bob, *Go to Nineveh: Medieval Commentaries to the Book of Jonah Translated and Explained*.[4] In specific cases, I offer an alternative biblical translation of my own, usually scanning a variety of published and online translations – either in order to capture a specific meaning or when I felt that the translation needed to be more exact in context. When I refer to the biblical story, I use the past tense to describe acts and behaviors; however, I use the present tense when quoting commentators, even those who passed on hundreds of years ago, in order to render the ongoing, robust, and vibrant sense of continuity in commentary. The books are closed. The interpretation of the books remains open. Thus "Jonah fled" but "Rashi observes."

1. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003.
2. Second edition, Jerusalem: Koren, 2010.
3. In *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 59–66.
4. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013.

I am most grateful to Matthew Miller, Reuven Ziegler, Tomi Mager, Deena Glickman, Caryn Metz, and Avigayil Steiglitz of Maggid, who greatly improved upon the manuscript version, and give thanks to my Orthodox Union partners for their continued support. I also appreciate the insightful comments and edits of Jennifer Rubin Raskas and my husband, Jeremy Brown, and express my ongoing general appreciation – as always – to family, friends, and colleagues and especially to the two recent and beautiful additions to our family through marriage, Yoni and Rebecca. If books are our pleasure gardens and orchards, in the words of Yehuda ibn Tibbon, then thank you all for gardening with me.

Introduction

Prophetic Hesitation

The Book of Jonah, simply put, is misnamed. This is not an account of a prophet, although an unusual Hebrew prophet stands at its center. This is a book about God, a God associated with a particular nation, Israel, who expands His divine embrace to include non-Jews, animals large and small, and vegetation. Nowhere since the first chapters of Genesis do we find, in so few pages, mention of the world's totality and God's utter and urgent concern for the whole of creation. Jonah will serve as God's ultimate foil in this magical story, just as the sailors, the king of Nineveh, and the animals become foils for the prophet. Jonah's personal theological crisis will become the platform upon which God models divine compassion, urging Jonah to become more godly, more like his Creator. God serves Jonah as parent, friend, mentor, and teacher. God's props – from a fish to a storm to a gourd to a worm – are the teaching tools by which God patiently encourages the prophet to confront his ugliest self, predominantly his churlish disregard for a universe outside of his narrow, parochial concerns.

The world around Jonah is in constant flux. A group of sailors became a group of believers. A city and its king transformed themselves. A tree grew and died overnight. Everything and everyone changed, including God – but the prophet did not change. For this reason, we

have no idea what happened to Jonah when the words written about him end, unceremoniously, as if in mid-sentence or mid-story. There are only so many chances given to a person who fails to believe in personal transformation, let alone radical collective change. But more than the transformations personal or collective that appear in the book, it was God's ability to change that was the source of Jonah's caustic resentment.

We read this book on Yom Kippur not because of Jonah but because of the God of Jonah. If God can change, we can change. If God recruits all of nature to fight human nature in the story of one individual, then surely, we can all overcome the barriers to compassion, the niggling resistance to being different than we are, and the narcissistic pull that keeps our own worlds small and limited. Jonah was unmoved, but perhaps we will read his book as his critics and be moved precisely because he was not. Maybe we will see in the God of Jonah, the God of each and every one of us, a God who cares for us intimately and personally, a God who marshals the world's resources for our reformation, who asks us questions that force introspection. Can we adjust, adapt, amend, refine, and modify who we are on this holiest of days because God also changes? Or are we, like Jonah, secret believers that nothing ever changes, least of all who we are? The God of Jonah changes; that should be motivation enough. It was not enough for Jonah. Will it be for us?

This book will travel through the four chapters of Jonah's story and divide them into four distinct phases of Jonah's mission. We will trace his call to leadership and then his intransigence, his momentary rise to duty and then his tragic resignation. We will conclude with God's ultimate lesson for him. We begin with Jonah's retreat from responsibility that culminates in his drifting at sea, a powerful metaphor for a prophet unanchored. Jonah will be released from this aquatic adventure to a city in the throes of a transformation, a city he inspires that fails to inspire him. Finally, we will see Jonah swallowed by a different force than a powerful fish: God's word. God will frame Jonah's experience and his conclusions through questioning and modeling compassion. God's prodding, His subtle hints, His overt directives, and His manipulation of events will still not change the prophet but, carefully read, may change the readers of Jonah's story.

I have called Jonah the reluctant prophet. I could have called him the unchanging prophet, but we do not know how the story ends. Reluctance carries with it a sense of hesitation, the nod of the unwilling, the disinclined, the resistant, the oppositional, the unenthusiastic. All of these descriptors fit Jonah as he goes through different stages in his evolution as prophet. Even the few hints at his body language in the book are redolent with suggestion of helplessness and resistance: both his deep sleep in chapter 1 and his three days in the fish are often rendered by artists as a grown man in fetal position, hugging himself and making his world narrower and smaller. Whether tossed at sea or crouching under a gourd, our prophet lives alone. He cannot even stay in Nineveh long before leaving the city and building himself a booth for one far away. Jonah is the far-away prophet, always on the escape even when he is physically present.

THE JONAH ENIGMA

> Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters – four yarns – is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul Jonah's deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly! How billow-like and boisterously grand![1]

Father Mapple, the religious voice of repentance in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, draws his congregants at the New Bedford Whaleman's Chapel to this small biblical book with its maritime themes. He knew his audience. No one could empathize with Jonah's plight more than his congregation of seamen. There was "a low rumbling of heavy sea-boots" heard as they shuffled into the church to hear his passionate plea for personal change: "We feel the floods surging over us, we sound with him to the kelpy bottom of the waters; sea-weed and all the slime of the sea is about us!" Like Ahab, Father Mapple was a believer in a singular truth – God's justice – that must be pursued at all costs. He saw Jonah

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (London: CRW Publishing Ltd., 2004), 82.

ben Amitai, the son of truth, as the biblical protagonist who could best represent his message.

Perhaps Father Mapple picked Jonah as his subject for the same reason that we pick Jonah as an inspiring text to read at the end of the holiest day of a Jewish calendar year:

> But what is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches? Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson; a lesson to us all as sinful men, and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God. As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah. As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was in his wilful disobedience of the command of God – never mind now what that command was, or how conveyed – which he found a hard command. But all the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do – remember that – and hence, he oftener commands us than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists.[2]

Father Mapple asked the ultimate sacrifice of his congregation: the abnegation of self that true obedience demands – true obedience that Jonah himself was hard-pressed to provide. We obey God when we disobey a personal impulse to ignore duty. But when Father Mapple speaks of Jonah's deliverance and joy, we cannot help but wonder if the priest actually read the text before constructing his lesson.

Tumbling back many centuries from Melville's New England coastline, we find ourselves in Narbonne in the early thirteenth century. Rabbi David Kimche (or "Radak," 1160–1235) asked a question about the Book of Jonah: "And it could be asked why this prophecy is included in the Holy Scriptures."[3] Indeed, why? Radak puzzles over a book devoted to a "gentile nation of the world." He concludes that,

2. Ibid.
3. Radak to Jonah 1:1.

> it was written to be a moral lesson to Israel, for a foreign nation that is not part of Israel was close to repentance, and the first time a prophet rebuked them, they turned to a complete repentance from evil. And Israel, whom the prophets rebuke from dawn to dusk, still do not turn from their evil!

His comments sting with their truth. Radak, following in his critique, suggests that Jonah fled so as not to bring punishment on his people, thereby demonstrating more honor for the Israelites than he showed toward God.[4] He also mentions the *aggada* that Jonah received prophecy twice but not three times because of his obvious failings as a prophet.[5] Yet he softens the blow by adding another lesson based on Jonah's miraculous salvation in a fish belly twinned with God's compassion for Nineveh: "God, who is blessed, is merciful to those who repent from any nation and grants them mercy, even more so when they are many."[6] According to Radak, this book highlights both Israel's recalcitrance and God's expansive mercy. Yet these lessons are commonplace in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible and told in ways far more believable than this fanciful tale. The oddity of the book offers its charms and, at the same time, its unlikely details can serve as a distraction from its deeper meanings. Before we begin an intensive study of the book's four chapters, we must deepen Radak's question rather than dismiss it: Why is this book included in the biblical canon?

To strengthen our question, we turn to the scholar Elias Bickerman, who included Jonah in his classic work, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*.[7] One wonders what he specifically had in mind in including Jonah in his exploration of "strange books." Was it God's unusual demand that a Hebrew prophet moralize to an important Assyrian stronghold, which was, not inconsequentially, a sworn enemy of the Israelites? Perhaps it was the absurd assumption that one can run away from the Almighty? Then there is the book's fairy-tale depiction of the great sea monster

4. This is based on the introduction to the comments in the *Mekhilta* to *Parashat Bo*.
5. See Yevamot 98a.
6. Radak to Jonah 1:1.
7. Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

that swallowed but did not consume the prophet and then conveniently dropped the prophet off on assignment. The outsized fish is not the only animal to make an appearance here. In contrast to the leviathan, there is the lowly worm that destroyed Jonah's precious gourd. There are also the beasts of Nineveh, pious animals that wore sackcloth and ashes to beg, as it were, for their own redemption. Nature too served as an odd conduit to God's will – from the midrashic reading that the tempest in chapter 1 happened only over Jonah's ship to the description of the harsh east wind and sun that provoked Jonah to ask for his own death in chapter 4. Sandwiched in between the negotiation between God and Jonah over his future is the mass conversion in chapter 3 of an entire city from the simple utterance of Jonah's five words. Never in the history of sacred literature could a prophet boast of such success, but still Jonah turned away, moved toward, and then turned away again from Nineveh. Is there anything that is *not* strange in the Book of Jonah?

All of these unusual elements mean that the Book of Jonah does not sit comfortably within any genre of typical epic hero legends or myths of antiquity. Jonah does not fit into Joseph Campbell's neat evolution of the protagonist; he did not accept great responsibility with enthusiasm nor did he face difficult trials of strength and patience.[8] He did not kill a beast in a string of events that prompted his self-actualization; instead, he was saved by a water beast making him, on some level, an antipode to the mythic Greek hero or perhaps even a parody of such figures. Judged by ancient Greek standards, Jonah was meek and cowardly, self-effacing and unsuccessful, even when he opted to accept God's challenge.

From a biblical perspective, however, the details and narrative arc of Jonah's story are not unusual. We find similar themes and linguistic parallels all over the Hebrew Bible, demanding intertextual treatment, the shaping of meaning through an understanding of the relationships between one text and another. Many of these relationships will be explored in depth on these pages. The scholar George Landes contends that the Book of Jonah has

8. See Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (San Francisco: New World Library, 2008), particularly chapters 1 and 3 on departure and return.

> no fewer than sixty-three places in the text where the author's deliberate or inadvertent withholding of information poses at least some interpretive issue for the reader and, in addition, thirteen places where narrative features create a dissonance in the logic or coherence of the story.[9]

The narrative choices on the part of the author create abundant opportunities for rabbinic interpretation and the work of modern scholarship in filling in the gaps and in speculating on meanings and intentions.

Jonah's Movement: Ascent and Descent

Moving away from language, we find that on a visual level, Jonah's story shares beguiling horizontal and vertical dimensions with other biblical stories of ascent and descent. Jonah was told to rise and go to Nineveh. He did rise, but he went elsewhere. His ascent was the wrong ascent. Running away on a ship and being carried by a fish stimulate in the reader an impression of horizontal movement, particularly Jonah's sojourn aboard the ship. The horizon scanned against the water and sky creates an image of forward propulsion on the surface of existence. And yet there are also multiple vertical commands and rejections that take the form of ascents and descents. Jonah was told by God and the ship's captain to *get up*. But Jonah consistently *lowered* himself, as many traditional and modern scholars have pointed out. Jonah *went down* to Jaffa, *down into* the ship, *down into the recesses* of the ship, and then finally *down into a deep sleep*. Varying conjugations of Y-R-D suggest a continual movement downward. And because Jonah did not take the horizontal path to Nineveh, he would suffer the

9. George M. Landes, "Textual 'Information Gaps' and 'Dissonances' in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. William W. Hallo, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Robert Chazan (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 273–4. I am grateful to Stu Halpern for directing me to this essay. For more on textual omissions and discordances in the Hebrew Bible, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), chapters 6–7.

vertical descent to Sheol.[10] By the end of Jonah's prayer in chapter 2, Jonah was at the *very bottom* of the sea, on its sandbars: "I sank to the *base* of the mountains; the bars of the earth closed upon me forever" (Jonah 2:7). Jonah's reference to Sheol in his prayer suggests even greater depths, the pit or belly of the underworld, and a continuous and desired brush with death itself.

Yet God did not allow the prophet to pursue this descent. Once Jonah reached the very end of the known world, God rescued him, bringing him out of death waters and back to a life of purpose and service: "Yet You brought my life up from the pit" (ibid.). Once the descent and ascent were complete, the text moves back to its horizontal dimensions: "The Lord commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land" (v. 11).

Several biblical narratives follow this similar descent/ascent pattern.[11] The most obvious are the narratives of Joseph who was thrown into a pit, rose out of it, and continued to rise in an almost meteoric upward gradient.[12] Later, after his seduction at the greedy hands of Potiphar's wife, he was thrown into prison. Lowering his rising star at this stage would have meant a sharp climb downward given the speed of his professional ascent. But Joseph, ever the favorite, managed to work his way back up in the graces of the court until he became the vizier of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. His youthful dream of having

10. Sheol, as it is used biblically, refers to the grave or to the abode of the dead, appearing over seventy times in the Hebrew Bible. See, for example, Gen. 37:35; 44:29; I Kings 2:9; Ps. 88:4; 89:48; Prov. 1:12. Some believe it is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek term "Hades."

11. In addition to the Joseph stories, note the rise and fall in Judah and Tamar's story in Genesis 38 and Naomi's fall and later ascent in the Book of Ruth. More to follow on Naomi's story below.

12. Genesis 39 uses excessive language to demonstrate Joseph's rise, "The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man" (v. 2); "And when his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord lent success to everything he undertook, he took a liking to Joseph" (v. 3); "The Lord blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of the Lord was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside" (v. 5); "Joseph was well built and handsome" (v. 6). Is it a wonder that Joseph's fall, when it came, would be total and that his climb upward would be matched by a sharp slope downward?

the sun and moon bow down to him meant that early on he regarded himself as a person who could soar vertically to heights unimaginable.

An additional important descent/ascent narrative with literary parallels to Jonah is present in another four-chapter book of the Bible, the Book of Ruth. The book opens with a small, intact family moving from the rocky terrain of Bethlehem, in the region of Judah south of Jerusalem, to the smooth plains of Moab during a famine. Yet as we travel with this family, we find that very quickly, its female protagonist Naomi suffered one loss after another: the loss of her people, her country, her husband, and her sons to Moabite wives, then childlessness (according to midrashic tradition), and then, finally, the death of her two sons. If we trace the opening five verses of Ruth, we find an inverted pyramid of loss and grief, plummeting Naomi into a personal descent she blamed on God's wrath: "The Lord has dealt harshly with me. Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me" (1:21). In one of the most extraordinary uses of the term *vatakom*, she rose to find her way back home (v. 6) – no easy task for a woman of the time who could simply have resigned herself to permanent mourning.[13] This rise informs the spirit of ascent that permeates the book, eventually culminating in the genealogy of King David.

Jonah, however, did not end his eponymous book on a vertical incline of success. He moved horizontally away from the book's supposed center. He moved eastward. Eastward is never a positive direction, biblically speaking; this is true from the very first chapters of Genesis.[14] Eastward suggests a movement away from goodness and

13. Yael Ziegler, in her excellent book, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), discusses this verb and the feelings that inspired it: "Drawn after her husband's decision and constrained by circumstances beyond her control, Naomi must have been keen to return to her hometown. The first verb, *vatakom*, may imply especially avid action. If this verb alludes to the end of the mourning period, when the mourner 'gets up' from mourning the dead, then Naomi's return is undertaken at the first possible opportunity after her sons' death" (p. 133).

14. God planted the garden in the eastern part of Eden and created human beings there (Gen. 2:8). Ezekiel had a vision of people bowing to the east from the Temple (Ezek. 8:16) and gates of the Temple facing east (40:22). But when human beings sin, they move further and further away from this direction of God and goodness. When Adam and Eve were chased from the garden, they moved eastward and a sword-bearing angel was placed east of the garden to ensure they would not return

intimacy, from holiness and purposeful existence. It affirms that this is a book to be taken seriously as a theological struggle between human beings and their Maker.

Larger Than Life

Despite the sober nature of the material, modern Bible scholar Arnold Band contends that the Book of Jonah was originally conceived as a parody – and not only a parody but *the* parody of the Bible.[15] The outsized natural phenomena are meant to be noted as part of the conceit of an outlandish story,[16] as is the appearance of several *leitworts* – repeated words that offer thematic suggestions – and the distortion of serious themes present in earlier biblical works. These *leitworts* draw us again

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(Gen. 3:24). After Cain murdered his brother, he too moved "east of Eden" (4:16). Lot journeyed eastward in the direction of Egypt when he separated from Abraham (13:11).

15. "If we are correct in our argument that the Book of Jonah was originally a masterwork of parody we are confronted with a literary phenomenon which has few parallels (I can think of none)," Arnold J. Band, "Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 177. Band is not alone. See John A. Miles, Jr., "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series 65, no. 3 (1975): 168–81; Baruch Halpern and Richard Friedman, "Composition and Paronomaisa," *Hebrew Annual Review* 4 (1980): 79–91; John C. Hulbert, "'The Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh!': Satire in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 21 (October, 1981): 59–81; and James S. Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," *Traditions in Transformation*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 213–46. For a critique of Miles's thesis, see Adele Berlin, "A Rejoinder to John A. Miles, Jr., with Some Observations on the Nature of Prophecy," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series 66, no. 4 (1976): 227–35. Berlin writes that Miles is "implying that the canonizers of the Bible did not understand the message of the book" (p. 227), a position not helped by the fact that it was deemed appropriate by the sages for inclusion in the High Holiday liturgy, "hardly the appropriate occasion for a parody of the Bible" (ibid.).

16. Some might see in Jonah a comedic tale – as some other biblical books or narratives have been regarded – because of the strange natural phenomena. However, this is not indicated in content, only in the "props" of the story. For the role of humor in the Bible, see F. Landy, "Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis," *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda Thomas Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 99–116, no. 23 in the Bible as Literature Series. Other helpful essays in the same volume include Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humor, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament," (pp. 39–58), and Yehuda T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction" (pp. 21–38).

and again to intentioned meanings, something lost on the reader without a grasp of Hebrew. They also point to the multivalent nature of the book. Translations often use synonyms to add sophistication to biblical verse but, in so doing, they can compromise the simplicity and value of a word written again and again, like a hammer knocking meaning into the reader. There are key words that appear several times in this book of only forty-eight verses – seventeen in the first chapter, ten in the middle two chapters, and eleven in the last.

The word that appears with the greatest frequency in the book is *gadol*, or "great"; it appears fourteen times in forty-eight verses, most frequently to describe the city of Nineveh itself. Its size, according to the book's second verse, seems to justify God's mission that Jonah make this city's reformation his chief task and responsibility. Being large in both size and population, Nineveh was worthy of God's attention and the time and energy of the prophet. This refrain repeats itself at the very end of the book as well, this time with an edgy jab at Jonah. God told him that He Himself invested in this city because it was an *ir gedola*, "a very great city," and then backed up this information with its numerical population of 120,000 people and their cattle. The fact that these were people who did not know their right from their left was not a reason to ignore them, God implied; rather, it was a reason for a more intensified divine investment. Whenever God mentioned the city, He added the adjective; in the narrator's description of Nineveh in chapter 3, an *additional* adjective is added with an ironic twist: "Nineveh was an enormously large city" (Jonah 3:3). This is a translation of a more complex description, *ir gedola leElohim*, meaning that it was "a city that was great to God" or for God. God is often referred to in liturgy as *HaGadol*, "the Great One"; thus the implication is that this city was large even by divine standards. This also offers a subtle wordplay: not only was this an expansive city; in this narrative, it was God's city. If it was God's city because it merited redemption and compassion then it must have been a large or great city to God's prophets. Jonah was not to be an exception.

Nineveh, the word most often modified by "large" in the Book of Jonah, is by no means the only element worthy of this adjective in the book's pages. The book tells us of a *great* wind, a *great* storm, a *great* fish. Nature in the book is outsized and daunting. To Jonah, who was

trying to escape forces larger than himself, everything appeared as an overwhelming taunt to his powerlessness.

If the book seems unbelievable because of its dramatic expressions of size, it is far from the only biblical text that employs unrestrained imagination. The talking donkey in Numbers was wiser than her master (22:28–29). Two female bears killed forty-two children for ridiculing the prophet Elisha (II Kings 2:23–24). When David asked King Saul for permission to marry his daughter, the king, who did not desire the match, demanded a bride price of one hundred foreskins of his Philistine enemies; David showed up with two hundred (I Sam. 18:25–27). If the plot of Jonah seems fantastical, it is because it is, or at least, according to some modern Bible scholars, was meant to be:

> The storm at sea and the threat of death by drowning recall the Deluge; the brief oracle Jonah recites in Nineveh uses the fateful term used to portray the devastation of Abraham's pleading for Sodom. These three referents are from Genesis, as is what might be termed a burlesque of the Tree and Serpent story, Jonah's dejection over the eating of a gourd by a worm. Even a superficial reading, then, situates one familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures in a literary world which is extremely familiar.[17]

This pastiche of familiar tropes mashed together, according to Band, highlights the way the author of the book uses parody to show the absurdity of Jonah's proposition – that a prophet can flee from God. The facetiousness of a prophet sleeping while his boat was capsizing or a king who quickly responded to a prophet's words and even commanded animals to fast and wear sackcloth all point to a book ridiculing Jonah. How and why this book was transformed into the serious text it is today, according to this theory, represents a fascinating departure into the world of hermeneutics.

Another pair of scholars, one a theologian, the other a clinical psychologist, contend that Jonah was written as a criticism of the narrow-minded upper classes of Jerusalem, who saw in Israel the realization of God's exclusive love; it is "a protest against a well-to-do party in Jerusalem

17. Band, "Swallowing Jonah," 181.

in the fifth century BCE which abused its power in order to 'ghettoize' Judaism."[18] By demonstrating that the same God could care for the residents of the capital of the Assyrian Empire by sending them a Hebrew prophet, Jonah was dispelling this notion with his very person.

An Evolving Message

Whether regarded as parody, a cautionary tale, a testament to the power of repentance, or a narrative conveying the relational struggles of a Hebrew prophet with his God, the Book of Jonah continues to fascinate and challenge its readers. Four short chapters gave birth to over a millennium of debate and interpretation. In the canonization of the Bible, there was never a question, as there was with the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes,[19] as to whether or not the Book of Jonah should be included because it relates the story of an intransigent or rebellious prophet. And yet, the book seems other-worldly; it is hard to wrap one's mind around the action and inaction of the prophet, the distractions of nature, and the speed of the city's transformation. The Book of Jonah begins and ends abruptly, with neither the genealogical and geographic markers typical of biblical

18. André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 24. This pair contends that the author of the Book of Jonah was likely influenced by the ancient satirical works of Menippus from Gadera (third century BCE). This point was also made by James S. Ackerman in "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith*, F. M. Cross festschrift; ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 227. George Landes argues against this view in "Textual 'Information Gaps' and 'Dissonances,'" 226–227.

19. See Mishna Yadayim 3:5 for the well-known debate about whether or not these two works have the same capacity to render one's hands impure:

> All the holy writings make the hands impure. The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes make the hands impure. R. Yehuda says: The Song of Songs makes the hands impure, but there is a dispute about Ecclesiastes. R. Yose says: Ecclesiastes does not make the hands impure, but there is a dispute about the Song of Songs. R. Shimon says: Ecclesiastes is one of the leniencies of Beit Shammai [who say it does not make the hands impure] and one of the stringencies of Beit Hillel [who say it does make the hands impure]. R. Shimon b. Azzai said: I received a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day when they appointed R. Elazar b. Azaria head of the court that the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes make the hands impure.

books nor an ending that offers, if not a satisfying denouement, then at least any ending at all. By concluding with a question asked by God, the text leaves the reader with no idea what ever happened to Jonah. And yet the story compels with its intrigue. Robert Alter suggests that Jonah, among other later biblical books, departs from the "stringent narrative economy" generally found in the Hebrew Bible and has been "replaced by a reveling in the sumptuousness of details."[20] He also offers a number of ways to view the story: "Jonah has variously been described as a parable, a Menippean satire, or a sailor's yarn."[21] Another scholar, stymied by the problem of its genre, calls it simply "a short story."[22]

What the book meant when it was originally written and what it came to mean in its later association with the High Holiday mood of atonement and transformation have changed over time. As Bickerman points out, because the book was likely written in the fifth century BCE, its author was "unlike the rabbis; for them prophesying was a thing of the past, having ceased, they believed with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, that is, about 500 BCE."[23] The author, like others of antiquity, likely believed that prophets were foretellers of the future. As such, their predictions presented the humans who craved them with a "conditional fate." Once they learned of what might happen to them, they could choose to behave differently.

Richard Friedman contends that Jonah's story is only one of two in all of prophetic literature that features dramatic miracles. Its public nature is dampened somewhat because Jonah is the book's only named witness:

> In the prophetic books there are no more grand public miracles and few personal miracles. In all fifteen books, there are only two classic miracle stories. The first is the story of the fish that swallows Jonah. It is a personal miracle; no one witnesses it except Jonah himself.... After Jonah, probably the other most striking miracle in the books of the prophets is the story of Isaiah and

20. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 78.
21. Ibid., 77.
22. James S. Ackerman, "Jonah," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), 234.
23. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 29.

> the shadow that turns back on the steps (Is. 38:7–8). This, too, is a personal miracle, with few witnesses.[24]

Friedman may be ignoring some of the miracles that took place in the books of Joshua and Judges, Samuel and Kings; on the other hand, he may be referring to the frequency of the miracles and the fact that Jonah's work was done with a gentile nation and its king, much the way Moses' miracles impacted Egypt and Pharaoh, its leader. Friedman believes that because there are so few public miracles in prophetic works, the textual emphasis shifts away from them and toward symbolism. While we have no small share of miracles in the Hebrew Bible, these seem to be largely relegated to the first third of the Book of Exodus. Egypt was a land of magic, a place where God contested Pharaoh's might using the cultural context that mattered there. After the Splitting of the Sea, this surfeit of God's intervention through fantastic and very public displays slowed down, almost to a halt, with future miracles largely limited to singular or private events. The Book of Jonah, however, seems to revisit that period of miracle-saturation; in it, God used one miracle after another to entrap Jonah and encourage a reluctant repentance.

Another mythical aspect of the book has to do with chronology. By the time the book was canonized, Nineveh no longer existed. Instead, it remained residually in the biblical imagination as a mythic city of great proportions, capable of great evil but also capable of great and rapid change. It would have been, in the ancient mind, the equivalent of a modern-day reference to a city of sin, much in the way that Sodom and Gomorrah became associated with immorality from the days of Abraham. Nineveh, however, was twinned with another association: belligerence. The very word "Nineveh" conjured trepidation among the enemies of the Assyrians. The city, first mentioned in Genesis 10 as part of Nimrod's empire,[25] was associated with a neighboring city great in size: "The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh,

24. Richard Friedman, *The Disappearance of God* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 63–64.

25. Nimrod was the great-grandson of Noah, the son of Cush: "Cush also begot Nimrod, who was the first man of might on earth. He was a mighty hunter by the grace of

in Shinar. From that land he [Nimrod] went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah, which is the great city" (v. 10–12). Read in this light, the events in the Book of Jonah are less of a description of current events. The book is, perhaps, a cautionary tale about prophets who reject their mission. Or it might be the inspiring story of pagan sailors and the great and wayward people of Nineveh who reformed themselves and thus atoned for their sins, offering the hope that anyone can change.

The enigma or strangeness of the prophet and the story led contemporary scholar Avivah Gottleib Zornberg to conclude that Jonah may well be a mythic character:

> Essentially it stands alone. If this text tells of a largely unidentified figure who inhabits a world of great force, who flees from God and who ultimately speaks only to choose death over life, then perhaps it belongs to the mythic, or symbolic, rather than historical narrative .... And perhaps his story, in all its enigmatic force, is never to be finally decoded, its mystery resolved; but it is to evoke the elusive nature of narrative meaning, the internal silence at the heart of all stories.[26]

By singling out the uniqueness of Jonah, to the point of questioning the prophet's very existence, Zornberg minimizes the impact of the prophet's story, suggesting to the reader that such a rebellion could never have taken place. A story, however, can be both unique and real. Whereas the existence of Job was contested in the Talmud, Jonah himself was never regarded as a fictional character in traditional scholarship.[27] R. Shmuel

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the Lord, hence, the saying, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter by the grace of the Lord'" (Gen. 10:8–9). He was described as ruling over the land of Shinar, with Nineveh as its capital or at least one of its most significant cities.

26. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "Jonah: A Fantasy of Flight," in *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken, 2009), 81.

27. See Bava Batra 15a–b, where a number of talmudic scholars regarded the ellipses in the text as an opportunity to situate Job historically. R. Yehoshua b. Levi argues that Job lived in the days of Moses. R. Yoḥanan and R. Elazar contend that Job was one of the exiles from Babylonia. R. Yehoshua b. Korḥa states that Job lived in the

b. Naḥmani argued that Job could not have existed because of the supposition the story makes about God. Yet no such rabbinic debate exists concerning Jonah. Even among those not afraid to say that a biblical character was really a mythic figure, Jonah did indeed exist.

DATING THE PROPHET

Perhaps the oddity of the prophet is related to the time period in which he lived and the context in which he led. Jonah's composition dates roughly to the fifth or early fourth century BCE, reflecting on the slice of a prophet's life many centuries earlier. The first reference to it is among the Twelve Minor Prophets – minor only because of the length of these books – and it appears in the apocryphal work of Ben Sira (49:10), written approximately in 180 BCE. Jonah served as prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II, the fourteenth king of Israel. Jeroboam's reign in the eighth century BCE spanned over four decades and is referenced not only in the Book of Jonah but also in Hosea, Joel, and Amos. Jeroboam is often mentioned with disdain as a perpetrator of idol worship and a king of material excess at a time of great prosperity for ancient Israel – a fact that gave rise to a ruling class of merciless elites: "He did what was displeasing to the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had caused Israel to commit" (II Kings 14:44). It is immediately after this verse that we meet Jonah for the first time and sense the prophet's despair at ministering to a king who was evil and corrupt but who expanded the borders of the Kingdom of Israel:

> It was he who restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the Sea of Arava, in accordance with the promise that the Lord, the God of Israel, had made through His servant, the prophet

time of Esther. Others believe he lived at the time of Jacob. These views may have to do with the rabbinic understanding of true tragedy; historically, the Jewish people confronted the theodicy as a real rather than abstract conundrum. There is also the sweeping statement that "Job never was and never will be" – a way of suggesting that God would never conceive of such a trial, to cause suffering to a human being and make him a pawn in a wager between God and Satan. Resh Lakish believed that Job was indeed a real character, but the events purported to him could never have happened (Genesis Rabba 57).