

# Jonah 1

The first chapter of the Book of Jonah features God's calling to Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach repentance. It also speaks of Jonah's attempted flight to Tarshish to avoid that same calling. We shall explore how interpreters through the ages have embellished the character of Jonah, with focus on his origin, his character, the reasons behind his disobedience, and his interaction with the sailors on board the ship.

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*Jonah 1:1*

And the word of YHWH came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying

The first verse of the Book of Jonah raises several questions. The ensuing discussion will focus on two key issues. First, what information can we glean from the description of Jonah as the 'son of Amittai'? Who were his parents and where did he live prior to his flight from Yafo? Second, was this the first time that 'God's word came to Jonah' or had God already commissioned Jonah to serve as a prophet earlier in his career?

## Jonah's Identity and Ancestry

2 Kgs 14:25 gives interpreters their chief starting point for establishing Jonah's identity. This verse refers to a person named Jonah, son of Amittai, who was a contemporary of Jeroboam II. We further learn that this Jonah was from Gath-Hepher. This reference compels most pre-critical scholars to identify the prophet in the Book of Jonah with this man, with the result that the events in the Book of Jonah are assumed to have taken place in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the eighth century BCE.

The Jewish sages sought to find out even more about Jonah's background story and family connections. Whereas 2 Kgs 14:25 states clearly that Jonah's father was Amittai, his mother's identity is more difficult to establish. Rabbinic traditions commonly identify Jonah's mother with the woman of Zarephath, who hosted Elijah (1 Kgs 17) and whose son Elijah resurrected. The basis of this identification can be found in the use of the word 'truth' (*emet*) in 1 Kgs 17:24. This word is then connected with Jonah's patrilineage Amittai (*amitai*), a name that contains the same three Hebrew letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav*. By extension, the whole narrative in 1 Kgs 17 is understood to provide information that is useful for uncovering Jonah's identity. God commands Elijah to go to Zarephath of Sidon, where God has commanded a widow to supply him with a place to stay (v. 9). In the ensuing narrative, Elijah performs a miracle whereby the woman has enough flour and oil to last until God would again bless the country with rain (vv. 13–16). Later, the woman's son becomes ill and finally stops breathing (v. 17). Elijah carries the boy upstairs, stretches himself out on top of the boy, and pleads with God to let the boy live (vv. 18–21), with the result that the boy's life is restored (vv. 22–24).

In many rabbinic stories, the resurrected boy is identified with Jonah, yet there is no consensus whether his resurrection took place before or after his mission to Nineveh. In the mediaeval midrash *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 33 (henceforth *PRE*), for example, Rabbi Simeon says:

Owing to the power of charity, the dead will be quickened in the future. Whence do we learn this? From Elijah the Tishbite 'For he betook to Zarephath, and a woman (who was) a widow received him with great honour'. She was the mother of Jonah and they were eating and drinking his bread and oil; he, she, and her son, as it is said, 'And she did eat', and he also (1 Kgs 17:15) was entreated of him, as it is said, 'And the Lord hearkened unto the voice of Elijah' (1 Kgs 17:22).

*The Lives of the Prophets (Vitae prophetarum)*, a document of Jewish origin written in Greek, elaborates on the same tradition (see Schwemer 2020). Taking the end of the Book of Jonah as its starting point, it narrates how Jonah, *after* having been to Nineveh, settles in Tyre together with his mother, the reason being that he was now considered a false prophet in his homeland Israel. At this time, Elijah had fled from Israel after having called a famine upon the land as part of his rebuke of the house of Ahab. Elijah stayed with Jonah and his mother in the region of Tyre. Jonah died at this point but was brought back to life again by Elijah. After the famine ended, Jonah and his mother moved to Judah. On the way, however, his mother died, and Jonah buried her.

Elijah was at that time rebuking the house of Ahab and having called a famine upon the land he fled. Coming to the region of Tyre he found the widow and her son, for he himself could not lodge with the uncircumcised. He brought her a blessing; and when her child died, God raised him from the dead through Elijah, for he wished to show him that it is not possible to flee from God.

This intertextual dialogue between the Jonah narrative and the Elijah narrative serves two purposes. It not only provides the reader with more information about the prophet Jonah, it also offers an explanation as to how and why Elijah was able to stay in Tyre: the widow in whose house he stayed was in fact an Israelite (and not a Gentile).

By contrast, the Portuguese Jewish statesman and philosopher Abarbanel (1437–1508 CE) argues that this event took place in Jonah's childhood and thus prior to his mission to Nineveh. In his commentary to Jonah 2:3 [Eng. 2:2], he explains Jonah's reference to God having saved him from Sheol as a reference to Elijah's miracle in 1 Kings when he brought Jonah back to life. Along similar lines, a few modern scholars position Jonah's death experience in his childhood and understand it as a key to his later behaviour in the Book of Jonah. Zornberg, for instance, explains Jonah's fear of facing God as a result of his earlier trauma of survival (cf. below, Jonah 1:3) (Zornberg 2008: 291–293). Fishman likewise explores what it would have meant for Jonah to know that his early resurrection and subsequent fate depended on the acts of 'a desperate impulsive mother and a feckless purveyor of false promises who occasionally gets lucky' (Fishman 2008: 312).

Several Christian sources also attest to this identification. In the prologue to his commentary on Jonah, Jerome (347–420 CE) appears to accept the Jewish tradition that Jonah was the son of the woman of Zarephath, and it is also found in the prologue to the Book of Jonah in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. Ephrem the Syrian (303–373 CE) likewise adheres to the same tradition, as he writes that Jonah, after completing his mission to Nineveh, retired to Tyre with his mother (Ephraem, *Repentance of Nineveh*, Introduction). Other Christian interpreters reject this line of thinking, instead maintaining that the woman of Zarephath was a non-Jew. This line of interpretation is supported by Luke 4:25–26:

<sup>25</sup>I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. <sup>26</sup>Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

Luther (German commentary), for instance, uses this passage to prove that the woman of Zarephath was a Gentile. The fact that Jonah identifies himself as a Hebrew in Jonah 1:9 means, according to Luther, that Jonah could not have been the son of the (Gentile) woman of the Elijah narrative. Instead, Jonah was 'an excellent and estimable man in the kingdom of Israel'.

Islamic traditions also provide Jonah with a mother. The tradition preserved in *Tales of the Prophet* and attributed to Kaab al-Ahbar names Jonah's mother Sadaqa ('righteousness'). Furthermore, according to the same tradition, Jonah's birth was miraculous as Sadaqa gave birth to him when she was no longer of childbearing age (Burge 2017: 588. Eng. transl. W. M. Thackston, al-Kisai, *Tales of the Prophets*, 321).

Some traditions do not stop with Jonah's parents but also, somewhat surprisingly given the complete lack of textual support, provide Jonah with a wife. Several classical Jewish texts associate her with pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Among them, *Mekhilta Attributed to R. Ishmael* 17:1, speaking of people who fulfil ritual requirements, mentions Jonah's wife:

The wife of Jonah used to go up for festivals to Jerusalem.

Thus, a woman never mentioned in a biblical book is reported as having set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Ginzberg 1913: 4:253). This widespread tradition is also attested in the Jerusalem Talmud (*y.Ber* 2:2–3, cf. *y.Ber* 9:1, and *b.Erub.* 10:1–2), stating that Jonah's wife used to go on pilgrimage but at one point was sent home. From this we can learn that women (as well as slaves and children) are exempt from the obligations of reciting the *Shema* and from wearing *tefillin*.

They asked: Lo, Michal daughter of Kushi used to wear Tefillin. And Jonah's wife used to go up to Jerusalem on the pilgrimages, and the sages did not object.

R. Hezekiah in the name of R. Abbahu, 'they sent the wife of Jonah home and the sages objected to Michal the daughter of Kushi's actions.'

Some traditions even name Jonah's wife. Several Islamic traditions describe how Jonah, together with his wife Anak and their two sons, went to Nineveh together (Burge 2017: 587–588. Eng. transl. W. M. Thackston, al-Kisai, *Tales of the Prophets*, 321–322). Much more recently, the libretto by Paul Goodman, accompanying the opera *Jonah* by Jack Beeson (1921–2010 CE), names Jonah's wife Hephzibah (to be sung by a contralto or mezzo soprano). This name, meaning 'my delight is in her', appears twice in the Bible: in 2 Kgs 21:1 referring to Hezekiah's wife and the mother of Manasseh and in Isa 62:4 referring to Jerusalem. It is unclear whether either of these two passages influenced Goodman in his choice of name.

Having established Jonah's family connections, many interpreters proceed to determine his tribal affiliation. The biblical account in 2 Kgs 14:25 informs us that Jonah came from Gath-Hepher, a place known from Josh 19:10–13, Judg 1:3, and 1 Kgs 17:9, yet its exact location is unknown. Readers of the Jonah narrative thus sought to establish more firmly the whereabouts of Jonah's hometown, as well as his tribal affiliation. The section on Jonah in *The Lives of the Prophets*, for instance, claims that Jonah came from the district of Kiriath-maon near the Gentile city of Ashdod (Azotus) on the sea. Based on this location, Jonah belonged to either the tribe of Asher or the tribe of Zebulun. To narrow down the possibilities, the rabbis appealed to the above-mentioned biblical passages:

<sup>10</sup>The third lot came up for Zebulun according to its clans: The boundary of their inheritance went as far as Sarid. <sup>11</sup>Going west it ran to Maralah, touched Dab-besheth, and extended to the ravine near Jokneam. <sup>12</sup>It turned east from Sarid toward the sunrise to the territory of Kisloth Tabor and went on to Daberath and up to Japhia. <sup>13</sup>Then it continued eastward to Gath Hepher and Eth Kazin; it came out at Rimmon and turned toward Neah. (Josh 19:10–13)

<sup>31</sup>Nor did Asher drive out those living in Akko or Sidon or Ahlab or Akzib or Helbah or Aphek or Rehob. <sup>32</sup>The Asherites lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land because they did not drive them out. (Judg 1:31–32)

<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah]: <sup>9</sup> 'Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.' <sup>10</sup>So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, 'Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?' (1 Kgs 17:8–10)

*Gen.Rab.* 98:11, for example, reports a discussion between Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yohanan. According to Rabbi Levi, citing Josh 19:10–13, Jonah, as indicated by his origin in Gath-Hepher (2 Kgs 14:25), came from the tribe of Zebulun. By contrast, according to Rabbi Yohanan, citing Judg 1:31–32 and 1 Kgs 17:9, Jonah came from Asher, as indicated by the above-mentioned identification of Jonah with the son of the woman of Zarephath near Sidon. Offering a compromise, Rabbi Levi concludes that whereas Jonah’s mother came from Asher, his father came from Zebulun (cf. *y.Sukk.* 5:1). The mediaeval Jewish exegetes also debated this issue. The mediaeval Jewish commentator David Kimhi (henceforth Radak, 1160–1235 CE), for example, used Josh 19:10, 13 to argue that Jonah was from the tribe of Zebulun.

At this point, it should be noted that the Book of Jonah never specifies Jonah’s starting point. In Jonah 4:2, Jonah’s reference to his home can literally be translated to read ‘on [his] own ground’. This vague reference has caused especially Muslim retellings to detach Jonah from the Land of Israel and instead to see him as a Ninevite. As implied in the writings of both Ibn Ishāq and Al-Tha’labī, Jonah was commanded to speak to his fellow citizens of Nineveh. Quoting Ibn ‘Abbas, Ibn Ishāq states that ‘God, the Most High, sent Jonah to the people of his town, and they opposed what he brought to them and resisted them’ (Gregg 2015: 416. Eng. transl. Newby 1989: 224). Along similar lines, Al-Tha’labī, citing other scholars, situates Jonah on a mountain in Nineveh, in the region near Mosul (Gregg 2015: 421. Eng. transl. Brinner 2002: 681).

### Jonah’s Prophetic Career

In parallel, interpreters have asked questions about Jonah’s prophetic career, both prior to and after his mission to Nineveh.

#### *Jonah, Elisha’s Disciple*

A rabbinic tradition argues that Jonah, following his resurrection by Elijah, became Elijah’s disciple. This tradition probably comes from *b.San.* 113a, which speaks about Elijah’s student Joshua (!) and the curse that he would utter. Several other rabbinic traditions identify Jonah with the anonymous prophet in 2 Kgs 9:1–4 (e.g. Ginzberg 1913: 4, Chapter 8; opening statement in *PRE* 11; Rashi, *Rabbinic Bible*, 2 Kgs 9:1). After Elijah’s death, Jonah joined Elisha’s many disciples and was sent to anoint King Jehu (prior to his mission to Nineveh in Jonah).

The prophet Elisha summoned a man from the company of the prophets and said to him, ‘Tuck your cloak into your belt, take this flask of oil with you and go to Ramoth Gilead. <sup>2</sup>When you get there, look for Jehu son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi.

Go to him, get him away from his companions and take him into an inner room.  
³Then take the flask and pour the oil on his head and declare, “This is what the LORD says: I anoint you king over Israel”. Then open the door and run; don’t delay!  
⁴So the young man, the prophet, went to Ramoth Gilead. (2 Kgs 9:1–4).

*Seder Olam Rabbah* 19 (Part 2 [the prophets], sections 25–26 [Joash]) also preserves this tradition. This retelling conflates the material in 1–2 Kings with that in the prophetic books in an attempt to identify which prophet was active during which king’s reign:

Elisha went to Damascus and anointed Hazael as king over Aram and sent Jonah son of Amittay to anoint Jehu at Ramoth Gilead.

*Seder Olam Rabbah* (Part 2 [the prophets], sections 23–24 [Asa to Ahaziah]) makes the additional claim that all the prophecies to the House of Jehu were given through Jonah (cf. Scherman 1978: xxv).

Jehu ruled over Israel for 28 years. (2 Kgs 10:30) ‘And the Eternal said to Jehu: Since you were good and did the right things in my eyes, all my intentions you executed on the dynasty of Ahab, your Children of the fourth generation will sit on the throne of Israel. Who said that to him? Jonah son of Amittai. (2 Kgs 10:31–32)

*Gen.Rab.* 21:5–6 also identifies Jonah with one of Elisha’s disciples, more exactly with the one who was cutting down a tree and whose iron axe-head fell into the water (2 Kgs 6:5):

Resh Lakish said: [He has become] like Jonah, [of whom is written], But as one was felling a beam, etc.

#### *Jonah, the Prophet during Jeroboam II’s Reign*

The identification of Jonah with the eponymous prophet in 2 Kgs 14:24–25 tells us that Jonah delivered prophecies during the reign of Jeroboam II. This identification provides Jonah with both prophetic experience and prophetic credentials.

He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.

The Roman-Jewish scholar and historian Josephus (37–100 CE), for example, includes Jonah in his retelling of the events during the reign of Jeroboam II (*Ant.* 9:10) and emphasizes his previous prophetic assignments.

Now one Jonah, a prophet, foretold to him that he should make war with the Syrians, and conquer their army, and enlarge the bounds of his kingdom on the northern parts to the city Hamath, and on the southern to the lake Ashlaltitis; for the bounds of the Canaanites originally were these, as Joshua their general had determined them. So Jeroboam made an expedition against the Syrians, and overran all their country, as Jonah had foretold.

Several Church Fathers follow suit. Cyril of Alexandria (376–444 CE), identifying Jonah in the Book of Jonah with the prophet in 2 Kgs 14:24–25, states that ‘you could find him uttering a great number of oracles to the Jewish populace, transmitting the word of God on high and clearly foretelling the future’. Cyril further attributes the prophecies in 1 Kgs 25:25–27 to Jonah. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546 CE) likewise argues in his German commentary that this identification is certain and that it ‘contributes to a proper understanding of a man’s book if one knows his time, his place of residence, his person, and his background’. Luther accordingly concludes that Jonah first served and aided Jeroboam in his own country Israel before being sent further afield to Nineveh.

The notes to the Geneva Bible also appeal to these earlier missions, even though their assessment of Jonah’s success is different. These notes were compiled by a group of reformers in Geneva between 1560 CE and 1599 CE, among them John Calvin, John Knox, Miles Coverdale, William Whittingham, Theodore Beza, and Anthony Gilby. According to their comments to Jonah 1:1, 2, Jonah had prophesied in Israel but had been unsuccessful insofar as Israel’s conversion was concerned. Therefore, God charged him to go and pronounce his judgement against Nineveh, with the aim of making Israel realize how their disbelief had kindled God’s wrath.

In addition to these prophetic assignments during Jeroboam II’s reign, *PRE* 10 mentions yet another mission, namely to Jerusalem (Eng. transl. Adelman 2009: 219):

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.

In sum, the identification of Jonah in the Book of Jonah with the eponymous prophet in 2 Kgs 14:25 not only gives Jonah a family background and tribal affiliation, but it also provides him with a history of prior prophetic commissions. As we shall see further below, these prior commissions afford an explanation of Jonah’s reluctance to obey God.

A few modern retellings pick up the notion of Jonah having had a prophetic career prior to his mission to Nineveh. The children's film *Jonah: A VeggieTale Movie* (2002), for instance, begins with Jonah being an effective and God-fearing prophet in Israel. Less seriously, James Bridie's play *Jonah and the Whale* (Act 1) (1932) portrays Jonah as a very successful prophet in his small provincial town of Gath-Hepher in Zebulun. Before Jonah set to work, his town was in a pretty bad shape:

Jonah: This parish, Bilshan, was only a few short years ago a pretty obvious target for thunderbolts. Every man, woman and child in it, every domestic fowl moved in continual jeopardy; and their state was none the less shocking that they were unaware of the fact. They were given up to every unseemly hobby, from adultery to idolatry. I can only assume that Jahveh held His hand because He was stunned by their impudence.

In response to this situation, Jonah girded up his loins and got to work, with the result that 'in three weeks the place was unrecognisable'. The modern choral work *Jonah: A Musical Morality* (1989) by the Welsh composer William Mathias, and with text by Charles Causley, likewise opens with the speaker declaring:

[...] There lived a prophet,  
A preacher,  
An all-electric speaker,  
A hard-time teacher  
Of the old, old School  
His speech was thunder  
And it wasn't a wonder...  
And he told it well  
He told all the people  
Of Israèl

### Jonah's Longevity

According to several rabbinic sources, Jonah lived to a great age. As noted above, *Seder Olam Rabbah* 18 maintains that Jonah was alive to anoint Jehu. If Jonah was a boy during the lifetime of Elijah, old enough to anoint Jehu in 841 BCE, i.e. when he is estimated to have begun his reign (r. 841–814 BCE), and still alive during the reign of Jeroboam II (r. 786–746 BCE), he must indeed have lived to be very old (see Scherman 1978: xxxvi). Abarbanel, in his commentary to Jonah 3:1, does the maths more explicitly: if Jonah anointed Jehu in the year 3062 from the creation of the world and lived until Zechariah

who ruled Israel in the year 3164, Jonah must have lived another 102 years after his first occasion of prophecy. Slightly differently, *Eccl.Rab.* 8:10, discussing the identity of the 'wicked buried' referred to in Eccl 8:10, claims that Jonah was never buried (my translation):

Rabbi Judah son of Simon said: The, by Ezekiel, newly resurrected dead cannot be meant here, as they were not sinners but righteous. The son of the woman from Zarephath is also not referred to here, as he was never buried.

Going one step further, *Midrash Tehilim* 26:7 postulates an ever-living Jonah. He is described as completely righteous and therefore able to enter the Garden of Eden while still alive. In this context, Jonah is compared with the son of the Shunammite: whereas this boy died (2 Kgs 4:18), came to life, but ultimately died again because of his wickedness, the son of the woman from Zarephath (i.e. Jonah) never died (my translation):

But the son of the widow from Zarephath, i.e. Jonah ben Amittai, was a perfectly righteous man, purified by being devoured by the fish and in the depths of the sea, and he did not die, but 'the Eternal One spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah onto dry land' (Jonah 2:11), and he entered into Paradise in his life in his glory.

The Church Fathers, in contrast, highlight that Jonah's longevity meant that his prophetic career coincided with many of Israel's other prophets. Jerome, for example, in the Prologue to his commentary, notes that Jonah must have been a contemporary of Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah.

## Jonah's Name and Character

The basic meaning of the name 'Jonah' is 'dove'. The rabbis connected the name Jonah with the 'perfect dove' in Song 6:9a. Understanding God as the speaker in the verse and the addressee as Israel, the rabbis argued that Jonah's greatest characteristic was his perfection and his utter loyalty to God. It would thus be impossible that his flight to Tarshish was in any way a flight away from God; instead, his motivation was to ensure that Israel would not be slighted (cf. below).

More recent Jewish scholarly discussions have highlighted how the image of the dove connects the Jonah narrative to the flood narrative, where the dove plays a pivotal role. According to Keiter, the prophet Jonah is very much like the dove in the flood narrative: they both lack empathy, and neither gives enough thought to the severity of the destruction that God has foretold. The outcomes of the two narratives are also interconnected: in the flood story, God goes

ahead with the punishment, whereas in the Jonah narrative, God's mercy prohibits any act of punishment (Keiter 2012; cf. Amar 2006/7; Greenstein 2016).

The name Jonah has also been understood as referring to 'suffering'. This dual sense comes to the forefront in many Christian typological interpretations. Jerome (*Commentary to Jonah*, 1:1–2), for instance, explores both meanings in his discussion of Jonah's role as a precursor of Christ. He connects Jonah's name 'dove' with the Holy Spirit that descended in the form of a dove upon Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32–33). In parallel, Jonah's name 'suffering' predicts Jesus's passion (cf. Isa 53:5) and his weeping for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). In the concluding remarks in his German commentary, Luther likewise identifies Jonah as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The reformer Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558 CE) challenges Jerome's allegorical interpretation and instead favours a spiritual meaning whereby Jonah 'is a dove, that is, a Christian [...] He is the son of Amitai, that is, a true preacher and confessor of the word of God'. Thus, Jonah is not a type for Christ in Bugenhagen's reading; Jonah is a representative of all Christians and embodies their calling to preach God's word (Lohrmann 2012: 91).

Yet other retellings offer either puns or interpretations of the name 'Jonah'. The long poem 'A Feast for Worms' from 1620 by Francis Quarles (1592–1644 CE), for example, has God tell Jonah to go forth to Nineveh 'Not like a Dove, but like a Dragon go; Pronounce my Judgment and denounce my Woe' (section 1).

A few modern scholars have connected the name Jonah ('dove') with the legend of Semiramis. Although the best-known version of this legend is preserved in the second book (1–20) of the *Bibliotheca historica* by the first-century BCE Roman historian Diodorus of Sicily (or Diodorus Siculus), it has much earlier roots. The legendary Queen Semiramis is probably based on the historical Assyrian queen Sammu-ramat, who served as regent for her son Adad-narari III (r. 810–783 BCE) during the early years of his reign. Weinfeld, and in greater detail also Frahm, have pointed to four shared aspects between the Semiramis legend and the Book of Jonah: the name Semiramis may stem from the Akkadian word for 'dove' (*summu/summatu*), her mother is the fish goddess Derceto, she is associated with Ashkelon (cf. Yafo), and she is the queen of Nineveh. Based on these similarities, Frahm argues that the Book of Jonah forms a mid-rash on the Semiramis legend (Weinfeld 1991; Frahm 2016).

The contemporary biblical scholar Jione Havea, looking at the Book of Jonah from the perspective of the Pasifika (the region, peoples, and cultures of Pacific Islands, South Sea Islands, Oceania), highlights that the name 'Jonah' has both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, parents who name their son 'Jonah' wish their son to be at one with the sea. On the other hand, when trouble visits a family or community, they ask 'who is the Jonah', i.e. who is to blame (Havea 2020: ch. 1).

*Jonah 1:2*

Rise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, because its/their evil has risen before me.

Verse 2 speaks of God's call to Jonah to go to the Gentile city of Nineveh and proclaim that God has become aware of its wickedness. This command raises the question of whether God's salvation is only for the Jews or also for the Gentiles. Luther, for example, appeals to this verse (alongside Rom 3:29) as part of his argument that circumcision and the Law of Moses are not prerequisites for piety and pleasing God. It follows, according to Luther, that the Jews are mistaken in their claim that all must become Jews and accept and observe the Laws of Moses (German commentary to Jonah 1:2).

## 'Nineveh, the great city'

Nineveh, the capital city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, was one of the largest cities in the ancient Near East. In the Bible, it is known from 2 Kgs 19:36 as the capital city of Sennacherib. Within the narrative of Jonah, set ostensibly in the eighth century BCE (cf. above, Jonah 1:1), it constituted Israel's mightiest and most feared enemy. It was sacked in 612 BCE by, among others, Neo-Babylonian and Median forces. The Hebrew Bible is aware of Nineveh's destruction, as indicated by the Book of Nahum. It can thus be readily assumed that all subsequent interpreters of Jonah, and probably also its original author, were aware of Nineveh's demise (Tiemeyer 2017b). The Spanish biblical commentator Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (henceforth Ibn Ezra, 1089–1167 CE), for example, notes pertinently that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and that it is nowadays destroyed.

Alongside its political significance, the city of Nineveh conjures up images from Genesis. It is mentioned in Gen 10:10–11 as one of the mighty cities of Mesopotamia. The association with Shinar in Gen 10:10 creates a textual link between the city of Nineveh and the narrative of the tower of Babylon, set on the plain of Shinar (Gen 11:2). As a result, the name Nineveh very early on came to serve as the epitome of godlessness. Jerome, for example, connects Nineveh with the builders of the tower of Babel, stating that the city was sinful even back then as its inhabitants constructed a 'tower of pride'.

Although a symbol of wickedness, Nineveh also projects the notion of a pious and successful imperial city (cf. also Jonah 3). The German Protestant reformer and theologian Johannes Brenz (Latinized as John Brentius) (1499–1570 CE) transforms the image of Nineveh into a model for imperial

England that is worthy of emulation. Through Jonah's preaching, Nineveh became a beacon of light to the (less fortunate) nations around it, thus justifying and legitimizing the actions of the imperial centre (Staffell 2008: 493–496). In his commentary to Jonah 3:4 (*News from Niniue*, p. 46), Brennius writes:

For as Ionas could not go from house to house generally throughout ye Citie of Niniue, but stode in a convenient place of ye City, that the fame of his preaching might come to all men, even so the word of the Lord is not wont to be carried to every corner of every region, but it is revealed & published in the speciall and principall kingdomes, that by them the fame thereof might be spread abroad throughout the whole world, that no man might have excuse.

George Abbot (1562–1633 CE), the Archbishop of Canterbury, expresses similar sentiments in his series of sermons on Jonah (*Exposition*, p. 17). For him, Nineveh was the celebrated and powerful imperial centre of the Orient, yet in his own time was replaced by London. In his first lecture, devoted to Jonah 1:1–2, he both praises Nineveh for its piety and warns London that unless it shows the same willingness to repent, it may also ultimately be replaced by a more God-fearing city (see Staffell 2008: 497–498).

Our Prophet in his preaching need find no such fault: his charge hath a name: it is Niniue that great Citie, which ruled over the earth, the seat of the Empire, the Ladie of the East, the Queene of nations, the riches of the world, where more people did inhabit, then are now in some one kingdome.

The notion of Nineveh as 'a great city' in Jonah 1:2 anticipates the references to its large land area and huge population later in Jonah 3:2–3 and 4:11. The Geneva Bible Notes to Jonah 1:2 claim rather specifically that it was about 48 miles in circumference, had 1,500 towers and 120,000 children (cf. below, Jonah 4:11). Its great size is also stressed in Judith 1:1: 'Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned over the Assyrians in Nineveh the great city' (Ueberschaer 2020).

Modern scholars have noted the prevalent use of the term 'great' (Heb. root *gd*) throughout the Book of Jonah. Not only is Nineveh 'great' (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11), but there is also a 'great storm' (1:4) causing a 'great fear' (1:10, 16), as well as a 'great fish' (2:1 [Eng. 1:17]), Jonah's 'great joy' over the *qiqayyon* (4:6), and the verbal form 'to grow' (4:10) (Halpern and Friedman 1980: 81–82).

Not all commentators take the reference to Nineveh literally. The *Glossa Ordinaria*, for example, argues that the term 'city' here refers to the world. As such, it is a prophecy of how the world will accept Jesus, whom the Jews have disdained.

‘and call out against her’

The statement ‘and call out against her’ raises the question: what is Jonah to cry out? The biblical text does not spell out the content of Jonah’s message. The simple answer, according to the French rabbi and biblical commentator Shlomo ben Itzchak (henceforth Rashi, 1040–1105 CE), is God’s proclamation. A few scholars, however, have assigned exegetical significance to the absence of a concrete message. Radak discusses the possibility that Jonah fled from his mission simply because he objected to go to Nineveh without knowing what exactly God wanted him to say. Radak ultimately rejects this interpretation, favouring instead the alternative that Jonah was aware of God’s message to the people of Nineveh and fled *because* he knew exactly what God wanted him to say. In Radak’s view, Jonah knew precisely that his message was going to be ‘and Nineveh will be overturned/destroyed’ (Jonah 3:4). Coming from a different angle, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797 CE), commenting on Jonah 1:2, connects this statement with Isa 40:6–8 and suggests that the deeper intention of Jonah’s message was to convey humanity’s temporal frailty in contrast to God’s eternity (Shapiro 1997: 12).

Exploring the purpose of Jonah’s proclamation, two lines of thinking dominate: (1) its purpose was to foretell Nineveh’s imminent destruction or (2) its purpose was to cause the Ninevites to repent, with the aim of averting the foretold destruction. A few scholars maintain that Jonah here, as in 3:4, is simply commanded to convey God’s decision to destroy Nineveh. The Russian biblical commentator and Kabbalist Rav David Luria (henceforth Radal, 1798–1855 CE), for example, in his commentary to *PRE* 10.5, states that the proclamation here is the same as in Jonah 3:4, i.e. Nineveh’s destruction. As this interpretation is potentially problematic, given that it removes part of the impetus for Jonah to flee, most exegetes instead think that Jonah is commanded to convey God’s desire that they repent. For example, the Russian rabbi, grammarian, and biblical commentator Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser (henceforth Malbim, 1809–1879 CE) argues in his commentary to Jonah 1:3 that God commanded Jonah to encourage the Ninevites to repent, as the decree of their punishment had not yet been sealed. In a very outspoken fashion, the modern choral work *Jonah: A Musical Morality*, by the Welsh composer William Mathias, declares upfront that Jonah is supposed to preach repentance and to offer God’s forgiveness. The choir sing:

Go now to Nineveh, the good Lord said. [...] Preach them repentance and God’s good grace. [...] Preach repentance. Offer the gift of God’s forgiveness. Redemption, forgiveness to all the people. Throw away your narrow pride, Jonah. Open your mind. Open your heart to all peoples. The love of God, the forgiveness of God is for all the people.

Seeking a middle path, Ibn Ezra maintains that Jonah was merely given the task of stating that God's message at this time was that Nineveh's wickedness had become known to God, i.e. the content of verse 2b, yet he was (more indirectly) entrusted with calling the people of Nineveh to repent (commentary to Jonah 1:1).

At this point, a few scholars try to exonerate Jonah's anticipated disobedience in Jonah 1:3. The Egyptian Jewish rabbi, philosopher, and biblical commentator Sa'adia HaGaon (882–942 CE), as quoted by Ibn Ezra in his commentary to Jonah 1:1, attempted to explain the verb 'call against it' (וּקְרָא עֲלֶיהָ) as an invitation rather than as a command to prophesy by appealing to Exod 2:20, where Moses's future father-in-law asks his daughters to 'call' Moses so that he could eat bread. Ibn Ezra rejects this interpretation, however, stating that the two passages are hardly parallels. Rather, Ibn Ezra chooses to compare Jonah's behaviour here with that of Moses's series of objections in Exod 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13. Moses' hesitation was, in fact, worse than Jonah's, insofar as Moses was merely tasked with bringing his chosen people out of Egypt, whereas Jonah was saddled with the much more onerous commission of bringing repentance to Nineveh.

'its wickedness has ascended before Me'

The final letter *mem* of the word *ra'atam* can be understood in two ways. It can either be a possessive m.pl. suffix 'their' and thus refer to the inhabitants of Nineveh, rendering the phrase 'their evil'. Alternatively, it can be understood as an enclitic *mem* that is attached to a f.sg. suffix, rendering the phrase 'its evil' (referring to the city). The Vulgate (*malitia eius*) and the LXX (τῆς κακίας αὐτῆς) support the second reading (see further Sasson 1990: 75–76).

The phrase 'its wickedness has ascended [to God]' echoes two passages in Genesis. First, as pointed out by the prologue to the Book of Jonah in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, it recalls the similar statement in Gen 18:20–21 pertaining to Sodom and Gomorrah. The glossator argues that because Jonah was ignorant of the dispensation of God who desires the salvation of all men (cf. 2 Pet 3:9) and therefore did not want the pronounced divine judgement to be revoked, Jonah decided to flee from before God's face. Second, it recalls Gen 4:10, where Abel's blood cries out to God from the earth. These two allusions to Genesis serve to establish Nineveh as a symbol of extreme evil, an impression that is reinforced in 1:3 by Jonah's flight: Nineveh is the very last place that Jonah wishes to visit (Lindsay 2016).

The phrase by itself raises the question of whether God refers to a specific (act of) wickedness. The Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* (chs 4–5) comments on this issue at length. The young people of Nineveh searched for

(illicit) sexual pleasures, whereas the old people tricked each other. More generally, the sermon stresses the Ninevites' lack of gratitude to God for his abundant blessings upon their city (e.g. fecundity, fair weather) and their lack of justice towards one another. Other commentators focus more on Nineveh's acts of evil against Israel. The French Jewish biblical commentator Yosef Kara (1065–1135 CE), for example, argues that this statement refers to Nineveh's destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the exile of the ten northern tribes (Zlotowitz 1978: 80).

Focusing more on the sins that the Ninevites did *not* commit, Ibn Ezra, on the basis of the phrase 'a great city to God' in Jonah 3:3, maintains that Nineveh only recently had become a wicked city. Further, the people of Nineveh cannot have been guilty of idolatry, given that biblical text fails to mention that they destroyed their idols as part of their repentance. In other words, quoting Ibn Ezra, had they been guilty of idolatry, they would have destroyed the idols (otherwise their repentance would have been insufficient) (cf. below Jonah 3:10).

#### *Why Did God Send a Prophet to Forewarn Non-Jews about the Consequences of Their Wickedness?*

The notion that God is concerned with the sins of the foreign, Gentile city of Nineveh prompts the wider question as to why God called Jonah in the first place. The Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 2:1–3, originally written in Greek but preserved to us in an old Armenian translation, likens God to a healer who wishes to cure the world:

[A]s a good doctor He sought after the right medicine for the city's illness, in order to stop the spread of the illness and to outstrip the menace by His help. And this medicine had a reputation contradicting salvation, for wishing to keep alive and protect the city, He dispatched a prophet, threatening it with ruin – correctly, I think, and [in this way] teaching [it] the genuine craft of the doctors (as the most skilful of them [do]); they promise to keep the sick alive and set them upright by curing with fire and water.

*On Jonah* thus refers to the predicted disaster as the necessary cure, i.e. the essential impetus to bring about Nineveh's repentance. It derives the notion of God as a healer from, among other texts, Exod 15:26; Ps 103:2–3; and Deut 32:39 (Muradyan and Topchyan 2013: 776–777).

Looking at the related issue as to why God bothered with the *Gentile* city, Radak, informed by Amos 3:2, notes that God acts on the evil of the nations of the world in those specific cases when their evil is related to 'violence' (*hamas*). This was the case at the time of Noah (Gen 6) and this was the case of Sodom (Gen 19). God is less concerned with their other sins; in this respect, God treats

Israel distinctively in that he notes *all* its sins (and thus holds his chosen people to a higher standard). Radak claims that the Ninevites' particular sins were robbery and oppression. Further, inspired by the statement 'the violence of their hands' in Jonah 3:8 and the occurrence of the same word 'violence' in the flood narrative (Gen 6:11, 13), Radak argues that God had to intervene because his creation was at stake.

Several commentators, Christians and Jewish alike, argue that the true focus of God's command to Jonah is Israel rather than Nineveh. Among Christian interpreters, Theodore, Bishop of Mopsuestia (350–428 CE), claims in the Introduction to his commentary on Jonah that God sent Jonah to the nations because the Jews were unbelieving and reluctant to heed his prophecies. Among Jewish interpreters, Abarbanel (in the Introduction to his Jonah commentary) and later also Malbim highlight that God wished the people of Nineveh to repent, as their repentance would enable God to use Assyria as a rod to punish Israel (cf. Isa 10:5). If they had remained as sinful as they were in Jonah's days, so the logic goes, God could not justifiably have used them as his tools. Knowing that Israel's future survival was at stake, Jonah decided to disobey God for the sake of saving Israel (see further below).

Turning to the even wider issue of why God is in the habit of sending prophets as harbingers of his imminent judgement, Luther, in his German commentary to Jonah 1:1, declares that 'whenever God's wrath is about to be kindled, He usually first sends His Word to save a few'. In support of this claim, Luther mentions that God sent, among others, Noah before obliterating the earth (Gen 6), Lot before annihilating Sodom (Gen 19), and Moses before afflicting Egypt. He further sent Hosea before doing away with Israel; now Jonah is sent before destroying Nineveh. Ultimately, God sent Jesus before the appearance of the final wrath at the Last Judgement. In this manner, Luther stresses that the possibility of repentance and thus our salvation is imbedded in God's very sending of a prophet. The details of Luther's opinion are, however, unsupported by the biblical text insofar as nothing in the narratives about Noah and Lot implies the possibility of repentance; this aspect is being read into the narratives by later readers.

In fact, when we read Jonah intertextually with Gen 18–19, Jonah's *lack* of intercession stands out. In contrast to Abraham, who fulfilled his prophetic role of intercessor, Jonah made no attempt to change God's mind (McLaughlin 2013: 76–77; Schellenberg 2015: 356). On a different level, however, Jonah and Abraham are carrying out the same function, namely to make sure that God upholds justice. For Abraham, that justice means that God should not punish the innocent with the guilty; he does not argue that God should spare the guilty (Schmidt 1976: 160–164). The link between Jonah and Gen 18–19 is accentuated, and further problematized when we add Jer 20:16 into the mix. This verse reports

how God did not ‘change his mind’ (*niphal* of root *nḥm*, cf. Jonah 3:9, 10) but instead went ahead and ‘overthrew’ (root *hpk*, cf. Gen 19:21; Jonah 3:4) ‘the cities’ (i.e. Sodom and Gomorrah). Nineveh in Jonah thus serves as the opposite of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis as it was *not* overthrown, because God *did* change his mind. The real historical Nineveh (and also the literary Nineveh in Nahum), however, becomes Sodom and Gomorrah’s successor, which in the end is also overthrown.

### *Jonah 1:3*

And Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from before YHWH, and he went down to Yafō and he found a ship coming [to/from] Tarshish and paid its fare and went down into it to come with them to Tarshish from before YHWH.

The imagery of this verse is beautifully captured by Melville in Father Mapple’s sermon on Jonah in Chapter 9 of *Moby-Dick*:

He skulks about the wharves of Joppa [...] with slouched hat and guilty eye, skulking from his God; prowling among the shipping like a vile burglar hastening to cross the sea. So disordered, self-condemning is his look, that had there been policemen in those days, Jonah, on the mere suspicion of something wrong, had been arrested ere he touched a deck. How plainly he’s a fugitive! No baggage, not a hat-box, valise, or carpet-bag – no friends accompany him to the wharf with their adieux. (Herman 1851 / Richard Bentley / Public domain)

Melville, through this portrayal of Jonah, suggests that the potentially comical prophet of the biblical narrative is really a troubled and isolated man, whose rebellion against God reflects his anguished spirit. The hat seeks to hide him from God’s eyes, yet the prophet himself knows fully well the futility of this endeavour (Rathbun 1991: 4).

### ‘And Jonah rose to flee’

The opening statement of Jonah 1:3 raises one of the central theological questions of the Book of Jonah, namely, why Jonah decided to defy God’s command. We shall explore five widely held and influential interpretative lines. Many of these interpretations share the notion that Jonah, due to his prophetic office, knew that Nineveh would repent, a notion that is emphasized later in Jonah 4:2. Expressed differently, the statement in Jonah 4:2 is often, but not always, read back into the fabric of Jonah 1:3 and understood to provide the key to Jonah’s disobedience.

## 1. God's Habitual Compassion

A dominant explanation for Jonah's flight is Jonah's knowledge of what we may call 'God's habitual compassion'. To a certain extent, this explanation walks hand in hand with the related explanation that Jonah fled because he feared being called a false prophet, as well as the idea that Israel would be compared unfavourably to the nations. The biblical narrative itself supports this line of exegesis: in Jonah 4:2, Jonah admits 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'. 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 face of repentance, and so he did not want to be considered a false prophet.

### 1.1 *Fear of Being a False Prophet*

Many interpreters suggest that Jonah fled for fear of being called a false prophet. The origin of this interpretation is the belief that a prophet whose prophecy does not come true is a false prophet (Deut 18:22):

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.

Schellenberg has argued that Jonah's anger at God sparing Nineveh and Jonah's subsequent wish to die is a conscious allusion to Deut 18:20, 22, serving to portray Jonah as an 'anti-prophet' (Schellenberg 2015: 359).

This notion of prophethood is, however, not in line with the general Israelite (and ancient Near Eastern) notion of prophecy. In contrast to, say, a meteorologist, a prophet's reputation does not depend on the correctness of his/her forecast but on his/her ability to effect spiritual transformation. Ezekiel's watchman, for example, warns the people of the oncoming danger with the aim of making them change their behaviour and thus to forestall the danger (Ezek 3:17; 33:1–11) (cf. Tiemeyer 2005; see also Bickerman 1967: 33, 40; Adelman 2011: 83). As put very aptly by Eagleton, 'the only successful prophet is an infelicitous one, one whose warnings fail to materialize [...] What they get done is to produce a state of affairs in which the state of affairs they describe won't be the case. Effective declarations of imminent catastrophe cancel themselves out, containing as they do a contradiction between what they say and what they do' (Eagleton 1990: 233).

Nevertheless, many rabbinical texts explain Jonah's flight as a matter of saving his own prophetic reputation. This interpretation is often influenced by the identification of Jonah with not only his namesake in 2 Kgs 14:25 but

also with the anonymous prophet in 2 Kgs 9:1 (see above Jonah 1:1). This identification informs readers that Jonah had already carried out at least two prior missions, namely, to anoint Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1) and to prophesy regarding Jeroboam's restoration of the borders of Israel (2 Kgs 14:24–25). The second prophecy in 2 Kgs 14:24–25, however, caused Jonah grief. Since Jeroboam was a bad king, the very fact that this prophecy came true was unfortunate. As a result, Jonah's reputation as a prophet took a dent, later leading to Jonah not wanting to go to Nineveh where, so the logic goes, his reputation as a prophet would be given its death warrant (see further Adelman 2009: 220). Expressed in the words of the opening section of *PRE* 10 (Eng. transl. Adelman 2009: 219):

The fifth day of the week was also the day on which Jonah fled from God's presence. And why did he flee? Because the first time, He (God) sent him to restore the borders of Israel and his words were fulfilled, as it says [2 Kgs 14:25].

Later, *PRE* 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.

In *PRE* 10, this reputation, in turn, becomes one of two reasons why Jonah did not want 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 [onto the enemies of Israel] and transfer His fury [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?'

Jonah's past experiences had taught him that God shows mercy when (His) people repent. Therefore, as he suspected that the Ninevites might repent, Jonah decided to refuse God's mission to save his prophetic reputation. Mixed in with this fear is another danger, hinted at in the last quote from *PRE* (above), namely, that if the Gentiles repented, God would compare Israel unfavourably with them and use the nations to punish Israel.

A few Jewish commentators offer a more nuanced interpretation, as they distinguish between Jonah's own perception of prophecy (cf. above) and the less sophisticated beliefs of the people around him. As expressed by Radal in his commentary to *PRE* 10.5, whereas the wise would have realized that

repentance changes God's decree and thus understood Jonah to be a true prophet, the ignorant masses, as well as the whole Assyrian nation, would have considered Jonah to be false one. Jonah, having tasted the bitterness of vilification earlier, was not inclined to risk his reputation again and thus fled (Scherman 1978: xxxvii).

From a modern Jewish American perspective, Oren and Gerson compare Jonah's dilemma with that of a president faced with the option of going to war in order to prevent an anticipated massacre, yet as the massacre is prevented, they are often blamed for starting a war. The moral of the story is that it is almost impossible to receive credit 'for averting cataclysms that never occur' (Oren and Gerson 2007).

Several Church Fathers are aware of this interpretation (cf. also Jonah 4:2). Tertullian, for example, claims that Jonah foresaw that God's mercy would be poured out on the heathens, thus causing Jonah to fear that that would prove him to be a false prophet (*On Purity*, 10). Likewise, John Chrysostom (349–407 CE), the Archbishop of Constantinople, states explicitly in his Homily 2:18–20, 'On Repentance and Almsgiving', that Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh due to God's customary philanthropy:

He hastily fled far away into exile, for he said, 'I am going away to preach; you repent as a lover of mankind, and then I am executed as a false prophet' [...] He spoke about them, and, in this manner, Jonah was considered a false prophet.

Later, Francis Quarles's poem 'A Feast for Worms' (section II) voices the same opinion that Jonah was afraid of being called a false prophet:

I know my god is gentle, and inclin'd  
To tender mercy, apt to change his mind.  
Upon the least repentance: Then shall I  
Be deem'd as false, and shame my Prophecy.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390 CE), Archbishop of Constantinople, likewise states in his *Oration* 2.106 that

[Jonah] fled from having to announce the dread and awful message to the Ninevites, and from being subsequently, if the city was saved by repentance, convicted of falsehood: not that he was displeased at the salvation of the wicked, but he was ashamed of being made an instrument of falsehood, and exceedingly zealous for the credit of prophecy, which was in danger of being destroyed in his person, since most men are unable to penetrate the depth of the Divine dispensation in such cases.

Yet, Gregory ultimately rejects this interpretation as unworthy of a prophet of God who undoubtedly would not be so 'ignorant of the design of God'. He would surely also not have imagined that he could ever flee from God's presence, knowing – both as a prophet and as a sensible man – that God's power is everywhere (*Oration* 2.107–108). Instead, Jonah fled to save Israel (*Oration* 2.196):

When he saw the falling away of Israel, and perceived the passing over of the grace of prophecy to the Gentiles – this was the cause of his retirement from preaching and of his delay in fulfilling the command.

Luther also rejects the notion that Jonah would have been afraid of being considered a false prophet: according to the narrative logic of the book, Jonah obviously did not know what would happen. If he had known, why would he have been sitting outside the city in Jonah 4:5 to see what would happen? (German commentary, Jonah 1:3).

### **1.2 Fear of Israel Being Compared Unfavourably with the Nations**

Other interpreters propose an interrelated reason as to why Jonah fled, namely, that he feared that Israel would be compared unfavourably with Nineveh and thus found wanting. In other words, if the nations repented, then their repentance would point an accusing finger at sinful Israel, with the result that Jonah would have been instrumental in bringing about Israel's terrible condemnation.

Several Church Fathers favour this explanation. Jerome, for instance, states that Jonah, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was aware that the repentance of the people (of Nineveh) would be the destruction of the Jews. Once the Gentiles had come to believe, then Israel would surely perish. When realizing the danger that Nineveh's repentance would constitute for Israel, Jonah decided to save his people by fleeing. Jonah's disobedience to God can thus be compared with Moses's expressed willingness to die on behalf of Israel (Exod 32:31–32, cf. below). Thus, according to Jerome, Jonah's behaviour was, if not fully laudable, at least honourable. Furthermore, in Jerome's view, Jonah felt that God was unduly punishing him by sending him to a place like Nineveh that was characterized by idolatry and ignorance of God.

Theodore of Mopsuestia, in the introduction to his commentary to Jonah (cf. also Jonah 1:1–2), also speaks of Jonah not wanting to go to Nineveh because he feared an unfavourable comparison between the Gentiles and the Jews. For Theodore, the events at Nineveh pointed forward to Jesus: the move '*en masse* to godliness' of the Gentiles would inevitably put the Jews to shame as they remained unresponsive and resistant to Christ the Lord despite having had him in their midst. Like Jerome, Theodore further explains Jonah's decision to flee as an act of compassion. Like Paul in Rom 9:1–5, who preferred being cut off

from Christ for the sake of his brothers, Jonah's flight stemmed from his desire to save his people: Jonah opted to flee thinking that he would thus avoid prophesying to the Ninevites and so preserve Israel's honour.

On this issue, Cyril of Alexandria's comment to Jonah 1:3 is another case in point. Cyril states quite frankly that Nineveh's repentance was Israel's condemnation, as hinted at in Matt 12:41 (cf. also the Prologue of the *Glossa Ordinaria*):

They were convicted of being forward, unresponsive, paying little heed to the laws of God. After all, at a single prophet's preaching, the Ninevites were instantly brought around to a sense of obligation to repent, despite suffering from extreme deception, whereas those others set at naught Moses and prophets, and spurned Christ himself, the Saviour of us all, despite his supporting his teachings with miracles, through which they should have been convinced quite easily that he was God by nature and became man to save the whole earth under heaven, and them before all others.

Cyril further argues that Jonah feared that the fate proclaimed by him would not take effect and that the people of Nineveh

[...] though unaware of the kindness of the compassionate God, might take advantage of it and do away with him as a charlatan, deceiver, and liar who had persuaded them to make needless efforts. Barbarians, you see, are ever disposed to anger and quite ready to act like a bull, even without any real basis for their frenzy.

The Jewish sages and the mediaeval Jewish commentators give this line of interpretation a different slant. In their hands, Jonah becomes a martyr for Israel who had to choose between obeying God and defending Israel's honour. To shield Israel from God's anger, Jonah, therefore, chose not to go to Nineveh. Using the rabbinic terminology of 'father' (i.e. God) and 'son' (i.e. Israel), Rabbi Scherman aptly states that Jonah had to choose between obeying God and defending the honour of Israel. 'In order to shield the child from the wrath of its Father, he chose not to go to Nineveh.'

This notion is connected to a wider discussion of prophetic responsibility. The *Mekhilta Attributed to R. Ishmael* 1:3 outlines three types of prophets:

1. Those who are aware of honouring the father and also aware of honouring the son: e.g. Jeremiah
2. Those who are aware of honouring the father but not aware of honouring the son: e.g. Elijah
3. Those who are aware of honouring the son but not aware of honouring the father: e.g. Jonah

The *Mekhilta* thus highlights two opposite sides of the prophetic office, namely, whether prophets should accentuate their role as God's spokespersons before Israel or their role as Israel's intercessors before God. Jonah, in the view of the *Mekhilta*, is doing the latter and should accordingly be compared with Moses, who was willing to die for the sake of Israel (Exod 32:32, cf. Jerome above). In this way, Jonah, like other prophets before him, was willing to give his life for Israel's survival:

R. Nathan says, 'Jonah went only to commit suicide in the sea, as it is said, "And he said to them: "Take me up and cast me forth into the sea." As so you find that the patriarchs and prophets gave their lives for Israel.'

The Jerusalem Talmud (*y.San* 11:5) makes the point poignantly, quoting Jonah as saying that he had no choice but to flee:

Jonah said: 'I know that these Gentiles are nigh unto repentance, and lo, I shall go and prophecy against them, and they shall repent, and the Holy One, blessed be he, consequently will come and inflict punishment on [those who hate] Israel [meaning, on Israel itself]'. 'So what should I do? [I have no choice but to] flee'.

Jonah was prepared to endanger his prophetic calling and to forfeit God's grace for the sake of Israel. In other words, he was willing to commit a transgression for a noble cause.

Many mediaeval Jewish exegetes pick up this line of exegesis (e.g. Rashi [Jonah 1:3], Radak [Jonah 1:1]). Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to Jonah 1:1, rejects the idea that Jonah resented being called a false prophet for three reasons. First, Jonah did at this point not know God's message to Nineveh (which was only given in Jonah 3:4); second, the notion that Jonah would be inflamed because the people of Nineveh would call him a false prophet is absurd, given that he did not live among them; third, the people of Nineveh were no fools – they would have figured out that Jonah's prophecy would be conditional; why else would God bother sending this message in the first place? In parallel, Ibn Ezra accepts the idea that Jonah prioritized the well-being of Israel over against following God's command, citing the rabbinic idiom that Jonah 'prioritized the honour of the son and did not prioritize the honour of the father'.

*Lam.Rab.* 31:2, inspired in part by the association of the name Jonah with the verb 'to oppress', compares the fate of Jerusalem with that of Nineveh. In words akin to Jesus's lament over Jerusalem in Matt 23:37–39, the midrash bemoans that Jerusalem did not learn a lesson from Nineveh but persisted in its evil ways and accepted no correction:

The oppressing city: should she not have learned from the city of Jonah, which is Nineveh. One prophet did I send to Nineveh, and the city repented, but to the

Israelites in Jerusalem how many prophets did I send: 'Yet the Lord forewarned Israel and Judah by the hand of every prophet and seer, saying "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes"' (2 Kgs 17:13). 'And though I sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them daily and early' (Jer 7:25), 'daily and early' means rising up early to send them in the morning and likewise at night. 'She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction' (Zeph 3:2).

## **2. Foreknowledge that Nineveh would Later destroy Israel**

Another less prevalent line of interpretation may be labelled 'historical' insofar as it takes the destruction of Israel in 721 BCE by the Neo-Assyrian Empire as a given. It is also biblical in the sense that it places the Book of Jonah in dialogue with the Book of Nahum, which (depending on its date of composition) either predicts or laments the Neo-Assyrian obliteration of Israel. One of its chief advocates is the Portuguese Jewish statesman and philosopher Abarbanel. In the introduction to his commentary to Jonah, he rejects the above-mentioned reasons, namely, that the nations were close to repentance and that their repentance would somehow shame Israel:

This is a very weak explanation. For perhaps in the repentance of the people of Nineveh the Israelites would be shamed. And they would repent from their sins turning to The Eternal who would have mercy on them for their personal acts [of repentance].

Abarbanel then also dismisses the explanation that Jonah feared being called a false prophet in case the people of Nineveh repented, and God pardoned them:

This also does not make sense to me. For the people of Nineveh believed in [the words of] Jonah and therefore performed repentance growing out of [the words of] his mouth. And he knew that if they returned in repentance as a result of his words they had already believed in [the validity of] his prophecy. If they had not believed in it they would not have returned in repentance.

Having eliminated these two widespread explanations, Abarbanel offers his own take on the matter:

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh for he knew of the future difficulties which would befall the [ten] tribes of [the Northern Kingdom of] Israel. Therefore, he closed his soul to God's call for the purpose that the nations of Assyria and Nineveh its capital would be destroyed.

In other words, Jonah chose to be a martyr on behalf of Israel (cf. above). He knew that Assyria would soon threaten the Northern Kingdom. 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 his disobedience to cost him his life, as he would under normal circumstances have drowned in the sea when the sailors tossed him overboard. In this regard, Abarbanel, as Jerome and others before him, compares Jonah with Moses, whose statement in Exod 32:33 reveals his desire to save Israel at the potential cost of his own life (Abarbanel, Commentary to Jonah, Answer to the second question, cf. Tie-meyer 2017b).

A few, predominantly modern, interpreters add an extra dimension to this interpretation, namely, that Jonah actively *hated* the Neo-Assyrians, due to the immense suffering that they caused Israel and many other people groups in the ancient world. Jonah's flight from God's commission stemmed from his hatred of, or at least deep feelings of hurt associated with, the Assyrians. Given what they had done and were going to do to Israel and others, they did not deserve God's mercy. Stefan Andres's novel *Der Mann im Fisch*, written in 1963, reflects on the parallels between Assyria at the time of Jonah and his own generation in Germany. Jonah, when hearing the call to go to Nineveh, refuses to go as he thinks that the people of Assyria deserve to perish due to their crimes. They are not worthy of being given the opportunity to repent and live. Jonah thus flees from God and sinks into oblivion as he is hurled overboard, only suddenly to find himself in the twentieth century and to realize that wars are still going on and that whole cities are bombed and turned to dust and ashes. Jonah's faith in God collapses and, once back in his own time again, he refuses to be God's puppet in his dealings with Nineveh. Although he rages against God, Jonah ultimately ends up bowing in submission to a God who is inconsistent and incomprehensible, yet also almighty and merciful (see further Liptzin 1985a: 246–247).

Auster, in his *The Invention of Solitude* (p. 169), makes a similar comparison. After highlighting the Assyrians' animosity and violence against Israel as expressed through the words of the prophet Nahum, he states pertinently:

Not only does [Jonah] run away, he goes to the limit of the known world. This flight is not difficult to understand. Imagine an analogous case: a Jew being told to enter Germany during the Second World War and preach against the National Socialists. It is a thought that begs the impossible.

This aspect is also found in modern scholarly literature, where Nineveh's cruelty and acts of destruction towards Israel are compared with those of Nazi

Germany. André and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque ask poignantly (LaCocque and LaCocque 1990: 121–122):

Where is the Auschwitz survivor who would go to Berchtesgaden or Berlin carrying God's salvation?

Yvonne Sherwood postulates that the author of Jonah may, in fact, be creating fantastic stories to try out the principle of universal mercy in the most extreme circumstances, asking a fantastic 'What if' (Sherwood 1998: 67):

What if Nineveh, the 'bloody city' as Nahum puts it, the equivalent of Berlin of the Third Reich, repents?

### 3. Jonah was Afraid

Several (predominantly but not exclusively Christian) interpreters suggest that the true reason behind Jonah's flight was fear. The idea that Jonah ran away because he was afraid to go to Nineveh is, to my knowledge, first attested in Josephus's retelling of the Jonah narrative (*Ant.* 9:10): 'But he went not, out of fear'. This interpretation gains momentum at the time of the persecution of the early Christians. In his encouragement to his fellow Christians not to fear death and torture as a martyr ('On Flight in Time of Persecution'), the North-African Christian apologist Tertullian (160–220 CE) refers to Jonah. Rather than fleeing as Jonah did, and having God confine him in a beast, unable either to find death or escape, Tertullian advocates staying firm and doing God's will, no matter what:

A certain bold prophet also had fled from the Lord, he had crossed over from Joppa in the direction of Tarsus, as if he could as easily transport himself away from God; but I find him, I do not say in the sea and on the land, but, in fact, in the belly even of a beast, in which he was confined for the space of three days, unable either to find death or even thus escape from God. How much better the conduct of the man who, though he fears the enemy of God, does not flee from, but rather despises him, relying on the protection of the Lord.

This idea of Jonah's fear of the people of Nineveh reappears in the fourteenth-century English homiletic poem 'Patience' (lines 74–80):

Greatly was he wroth in his wit, and wildly he thought:  
'If I bow to His bidding and bring them this tale,  
And I am taken in Nineveh, my trouble begins:  
He tells me those traitors are drunken shrews;  
I come with those tidings, they take me quickly.  
Pen me in a prison, put me in stocks,  
Wind me in a warlock, wrest out my eyes.'

Jonah is often seen as a type for Christ, yet the poet responsible for 'Patience' presents Jonah more as an anti-type by emphasizing the difference between the two. Although Jonah and Jesus shared the same vocation (to preach to the Gentiles) and the same plight (to spend three days and three nights in the land of the dead), Jonah is depicted as the very opposite of Christ (lines 74–80). The ensuing lines 95–96, which speak about stripping and crucifixion, allude unequivocally to Jesus's passion. The reader of the whole poem thus cannot help but realize that Jonah angrily refused to undertake a task to which Jesus later submitted willingly (Andrew 1973: lines 130–231).

Though I am taken to Nineveh and robbed naked,  
Ruthlessly rent on a cross, by many ruffians.

'Patience' further uses the Book of Jonah to teach patience, courage, and facing hardship without complaint. In the poet's hand, although Jonah first sought to avoid his fate by fleeing from God's command, his subsequent voyage to Nineveh constitutes his acceptance of death, in this case brought about by vicious madmen in Nineveh. God's call to Jonah was thus intended not only to save the people of Nineveh but also for the benefit of the prophet's own soul (Davis 1991: 277–278). 'Patience' was set to music by the American composer Dominick Argento (1927–2019 CE) in his choral work *Jonah and the Whale* (1973). He translated the entire poem into modern English himself and used parts of it as the backbone of the libretto. Argento follows the lead of the poem and attributes fear as the chief reason for Jonah's flight.

This interpretation resurfaces at the time of the Reformation. Luther (German commentary, 1:2–3) remarks on the courage that it would have taken for Jonah to go to Nineveh. He draws a comparison between Jonah's task and a hypothetical situation in his own life: what courage would he need if God were to call him to rebuke the Turkish Emperor? Any man would have been afraid of going with such a message to a mighty king in a foreign land. Yet, even though such a calling might be almost absurd, the foolishness of God is wiser than men (1 Cor 1:25). Along similar lines, Calvin offers a three-part explanation to the question of Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh (Lecture 72). First, it was a novel thing for (the Israelite) prophets to preach abroad. Second, given Nineveh's reputation as a licentious city, Jonah doubted that they would heed his call and be converted. Third, Jonah feared what the people of Nineveh would do to him on hearing his message of doom. Not only would they not believe him; they would harm him for taking the liberty of preaching such a message.

Fear also appears in the oratorio *Jonas* by the Italian composer Giacomo Carissimi (1605–1674 CE). This piece features 21 sections and is scored for soloists, choir, 2 violins, violoncello, obligato, and basso continuo. In the third

section, sung by 'the Historian', Jonah 'feared greatly' when he heard God's voice and decided to flee (*et timuit timore magno*).

Thomas Bradbury, an English congregational preacher (1677–1759 CE), hints at the notion of fear in his sermon 'The Repentance of Nineveh: Consider'd and Apply'd, in two Sermons', from 1720. He emphasizes how Jonah went 'to a People, thus swell'd up with Plunder' (Nah 3:1) (p. 7), how Jonah had to 'throw himself into such a Crown, and tell them that in the publick Streets, which would make every one that heard it abhor him' (p. 8), how Jonah did not have 'Angels to protect him from a ravenous Multitude' (p. 9), and how his message was 'the most dangerous to him' (p. 12). Drawing a parallel to Paul's preaching to a 'roaring Mob' in Ephesus (inferred from 1 Cor 16:8), Bradbury declares that just as God protected Jonah in Nineveh, so he will always protect those who faithfully deliver his Word (p. 10).

In more recent times, the character of Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick* offers a similar interpretation in his sermon on Jonah (ch. 9). Father Mapple's Jonah, however, does not resemble the biblical character very much, lacking the latter's desire to see Nineveh destroyed. Rather, Father Mapple's Jonah flees because he fears the hostility that the people of Nineveh will show to him as they hear his message. In *Moby-Dick*, it is instead Captain Ahab who personifies the biblical Jonah, as he pursues a path of hatred and destruction to fulfil what he believes to be his destiny. In this pursuit, Captain Ahab, like Jonah, endangers the lives of his crew (Wright 1940: 191–192; eadem 1975: 54. Cf. Rathbun 1991: 4–8; Sprang 2011: 453–457). In Melville's hand, the Jonah of his sermon accepts God's correction, whereas Ahab (not unlike the Jonah of the Bible) rejects it and instead displays his anger against God (Herbert Jr 1969: 1614).

Laurence Housman's play, *The Burden of Nineveh*, likewise considers fear to have been the main reason why Jonah chose to run away (scene 1). This fear, however, is concerned less with what the people of Nineveh might do to him and more with the possibility that the prophecy would all be a mistake: Jonah has not heard God correctly:

Jonah: How do I know that His Word has come to me?

Shemmel: You may not know how – but you know it has come, Jonah ... Don't you?

[...]

Shemmel: When the Word of the Lord comes to you, it's no question of wanting, then. It takes hold of you – won't let you go. You become a different man ... You are not your own any more. Five years ago, when you told Israel (so proud as they were then of having beaten Syria three times) that three times wasn't enough, and that Syria would beat them yet – they were so angry that some were wishing to

kill you. But you were not afraid of them: you were the true prophet then. And you didn't get that from yourself.

Jonah: No; I got that from our Lord and Father Elisha just before he died. 'Twas his prophecy, not mine. That's how I came by it – just took it from him. And being his, I was sure of it.

This opening scene alludes to the aforementioned Rabbinic tradition of Jonah being one of Elisha's disciples (see Jonah 1:1). Jonah expresses the fear that although he has heard God's voice correctly in the past (i.e. in 2 Kgs 14:24–25), that was together with Elisha; now he is on his own for the first time.

The chapter 'Three Simple Stories' by Julian Barnes, part of his book *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, hints at this understanding as well, yet twists it into a poignant criticism of God who moves his characters to his own liking with no regard for their suffering:

Jonah, disliking the task for unexplained reasons which might have had something to do with a fear of being stoned to death by the partying Ninevites, ran away. (p. 175)

In Barnes's hand, Jonah's position is vindicated. He juxtaposes the Jonah story with a story of a boatload of Jewish refugees who ultimately, being denied the right to disembark the ship at every port, are sent back to continental Europe to die in concentration camps. Jonah's distrust of God thus turns out to be justified (Sherwood 2000: 166–168).

#### 4. Jonah was Angry

Predominantly Islamic sources explain Jonah's disobedience as a result of his anger. The Qur'anic retelling of the Jonah narrative in Q37 states that Jonah ran away 'like a slave from captivity'. This statement is often conflated in Islamic retellings with the material in Q21:87–88, the end result being that Jonah ran away in anger.

And Yunus, when he went away in **wrath**, so he thought that We would not straiten him, so he called out among afflictions: There is no god but Thou, glory be to Thee; surely I am of those who make themselves to suffer loss. So We responded to him and delivered him from the grief and thus do We deliver the believers.

The statement in Q21.87 'And Yunus, when he went away in wrath' came to be problematic to later Islamic traditions, due to the principle of prophetic infallibility (*iṣma*). Qur'anic exegetes therefore often tried to explain (away) this matter in a number of different ways: Was Jonah's anger directed against God or against someone else? Was he angry before or after his mission to Nineveh?

As recorded in Al-Tha'labī's 'Jonah, son of Amittai' and Al-Ṭabarī's *History of al-Ṭabarī*, early interpreters/*Ḥadīth* transmitters suggested five possible reasons (cf. Burge 2017: 587):

1. Ibn 'Abbās: Jonah was angry at Hezekiah, King of Israel, and the prophet Isaiah (Al-Tha'labī).
2. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: Jonah was angry with God because God did not allow Jonah to prepare properly before going to Nineveh (Al-Tha'labī).
3. Ibn 'Abbās: Jonah wanted to procure a riding animal before going to Nineveh, but the angel Gabriel prevented him (Al-Tha'labī, Al-Ṭabarī).
4. Ibn 'Abbās: God removed the punishment from Nineveh (Al-Ṭabarī).
5. Ibn 'Abbās: Jonah was angry at the Israelites for their unbelief (Al-Tha'labī).

Other interpreters when faced with the same issue, among them Ibn Kathīr, opted for active denial: Jonah was not angry at all, the rationale being that Jonah, as a prophet of God and thus infallible, *could not* have been angry (with God).

Additionally, this sura raises a problem regarding the sequence of events: at what point in the narrative did Jonah 'call out among afflictions'? In short, did Jonah's stay in the fish precede or follow his mission to Nineveh (cf. below Jonah 2:2)? Beginning with those interpreters who maintain that Jonah ran away *prior* to his mission to Nineveh (i.e. following the storyline of the Hebrew Bible), the Persian scholar, historian, and exegete of the Qur'an, Al-Ṭabarī (839–923 CE), fleshes out the aforementioned third possible reason for Jonah's anger. He claims that Gabriel commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh in haste. Jonah wished for a camel and then shoes, but Gabriel denied him both, claiming that the matter was too urgent. As a result, Jonah fled in anger at Gabriel.

A greater number of Muslim interpreters, however, argue that Jonah ran away *after* his mission to Nineveh. This interpretative move can partly be explained by a desire to align Jonah's mission with that of Muhammad. Just as Muhammad and his followers encountered hostility from the people in Mecca, so Jonah's first mission to Nineveh failed due to the hostility of the city. Further, just as Muhammad, after his interlude in Medina, returned to and seized control of Mecca, so Jonah returned and converted Nineveh. The Persian Shi'ite scholar Al-Qummī (923–991 CE) claims in his *tafsir* (a commentary on the Qur'an<sup>1</sup>) that Jonah announced God's punishment and fled the city before that dreadful hour. When God later withdrew his punishment, Jonah ran away in anger at God (*Tafsir Qumi* 1:318–319, on Q10.98, as cited by Reynolds 2010: 122–123). Likewise, the Persian theologian al-Zamakhsharī (1075–1144 CE) claims in his *tafsir* that Jonah went to Nineveh twice. He fled after his first, unsuccessful visit. Al-Zamakhsharī admonishes Jonah, stating that he should have been patient and waited for permission from God to leave the people of

Nineveh (*Al-Kashshaaf* 3:131, on Q21.87, as cited by Reynolds 2010: 121, 124). Along similar lines, the Syrian Sunni scholar Ibn Kathīr (1300–1373 CE) maintains that Jonah was swallowed by a fish only after his initial visit to Nineveh, to where he later returned (*Tafsir Ibn Kathīr*, Vol. 6 [Surat Al’Isra’, verse 39 to the end of Surat Al’Mu’minūn, surat Yūnus]).

### 5. Jonah was Mad

Last but not least, in John Kitto’s *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* (p. 142), the entry ‘Jonah’ offers madness as the reason for Jonah’s flight from before God’s presence:

His attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord must have sprung from a partial insanity, produced by the excitement of distracting motives in an irascible and melancholy heart. The temerity and folly of the fugitive could scarcely be credited, if they had not been equalled by future outbreaks of a similar peevish and morbid infatuation. The mind of Jonah was dark and moody, not unlike a lake which mirrors in the waters the gloomy thunder-clouds which overshadow it, and flash over its sullen waves a momentary gleam.

#### *Was Jonah Guilty of Suppressing Prophecy?*

In addition to the question of motive, Jonah’s flight raises questions of sin. First, is it a sin to suppress prophecy and, if so, did Jonah commit that sin? Second, was Jonah’s disobedience a sin in itself? In broad terms, Jewish scholars have concerned themselves with the first issue while Christian scholars have explored the second.

The Babylonian Talmud (*b.San.* 10:5 [89a]) reports how a Tannaitic authority is quoted before Rabbi Hisda that a person who suppresses his prophecy is to be flogged. Rabbi Hisda objects, asking how anyone would know about this fact (since the prophecy was, in fact, suppressed). Rabbi Abbaye responds that the prophet’s fellow prophets would know, as God does nothing without telling his servants the prophets (Amos 3:7). Rabbi Hisda voices the theoretical possibility that God might choose not to carry out his decision, as in the case of Jonah (how, so the logic goes, would anyone then know that Jonah resisted the prophecy). Rabbi Abbaye retorts that Jonah was told that Nineveh would be ‘turned’ (3:4); he was not told whether it was for good or bad.

A similar discussion, yet with a different verdict, is found in the Tosefta (*Sanhedrin* 14:15, cf. Sifré to Deuteronomy 177:1), in the context of identifying a false prophet. There Jonah is listed alongside Zedekiah, the son of Kenaanah, who prophesied what he had not heard (1 Kgs 22:11); Hananiah, the son of Azzur, who disagreed with Jeremiah (Jer 28:1–17); the companions of Micaiah (1 Kgs 20:35); and those like Iddo, who transgressed his own words (2 Chron 9:29);

as well as any person who changed his prophecy, or a stranger who ministered in the temple, or someone who ministered before being fully cleansed, etc. All these people are subject to the death penalty.

Later Jewish commentators attempted to exonerate Jonah from this misdemeanour. Malbim, in his commentary to Jonah 1:2, solves the conundrum by postulating a difference between ‘prophesying’ and ‘calling to repentance’. In this way, according to Malbim, God’s initial calling, which Jonah refused, was not to prophesy (i.e. it did not predict Nineveh’s destruction), but to call them to repentance. The aforementioned Talmudic decree, therefore, does not apply to Jonah. In fact, Jonah fled towards Tarshish lest he be given a more specific message in the form of a prophecy (which he would not have been able to refuse as its suppression would have led to his death warrant).

Looking more at the aspect of disobedience itself, Luther, in his German commentary to Jonah 1:3, argues succinctly that rather than trying to defend Jonah’s defiance and to describe it as something else, due to a misguided notion that prophets cannot sin, ‘we shall stick rigidly and inflexibly to the Word of God and agree that Jonah here committed a grave and serious sin’. He sinned as gravely as Adam did in Paradise, and for that, he was duly punished by having to spend three days in the fish. These three days stood in direct proportion to the enormity of Jonah’s sin (cf. below, Jonah 2:1). In line with Luther’s overarching theological understanding, Jonah’s ultimate salvation was not due to any act that Jonah himself committed inside the fish but was solely owing to God’s mercy. In parallel, Luther emphasizes that Jonah did not despair in his sin but clung firmly to God’s mercy: ‘If he had despaired, he would never have come forth from the whale’s belly. His strong faith in the midst of his sin makes it impossible for God to forget him; He must again deliver him’.

In modern scholarship, the notion that a prophet would refuse to prophesy after having received a word from God has been compared with Amos 3:7–8:

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared – who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken – who can but prophesy?

According to Schellenberg, these two verses emphasize God’s task of sharing his future plans with his prophets, and the prophets’ task of responding to it. In her view, Jonah’s refusal to fulfil this role contributes to the portrayal of Jonah as an ‘anti-prophet’ (Schellenberg 2015: 361–362).

### *Fleeing from God – Mythical, Fictional, and Scholarly Retellings*

The notion of a person trying to flee from God is common in myths. It is indeed so common that it is often impossible to determine whether (1) a given myth

is a source of influence for the Book of Jonah, (2) Jonah is a source of influence for the myth, or (3) both texts are part of the same phenomenon. Here, I shall discuss a few texts which are likely inspired by the biblical texts, without ruling out other sources of influence.

There are several intriguing parallels between the Book of Jonah and material inspired by the life of the Irish missionary monk St Columba (521–597 CE), called *Colm Cille* (meaning ‘dove of the church’) in Irish. As the very name ‘dove’ conveys a possible allusion to Jonah, hearers are encouraged to connect the two characters (see further Layzer 2001: 75). In the *Life of St. Columba* by Adomnán of Iona (624–704 CE), for example, St Columba is likened to Jonah. Adomnán continues to tell a story which occurred when St Columba was living on Iona. As brother Berach planned to sail for Tiree, St Columba told him not to take the normal route lest he be terrified by a monster of the deep. Yet Berach did not follow the advice and duly soon encountered an enormous whale. At that point he remembered St Columba’s words and was filled with awe. This tale is then repeated but with a distinct difference: another brother, Baithéne, is told by St Columba that he would encounter a great whale. In response, Baithéne expressed his confidence in God who holds both him and the whale in his hand. Upon hearing this, St Columba told Baithéne to go in peace as his faith in Christ would shield him from danger (*Adomnán, Vita Sancti Columbae* §1.19, cf. Sharpe 1995: 125–126). As Layzer has shown, both brothers, Berach and Baithéne, are analogous to Jonah. While Berach may be likened to Jonah pre-fish, i.e. the Jonah who disobeys God, Baithéne may be likened to Jonah post-fish, i.e. the Jonah who carries out God’s command (Layzer 2001: 85–87).

The notion of a person trying to flee from God is a common trope in fiction. The Swedish novel *Guldspiken* (*The Golden Nail*, 1985) by Peter Nilson (1937–1998 CE) forms a sustained allusion to the Book of Jonah, made explicit already in its opening statement through a reference to Jonah and the fish. In his novel, Nilson explores a lay preacher’s attempt to flee from his calling to preach. This motif comes to the forefront when the chief protagonist, the poor boy Elias, hears a voice from heaven telling him to go to hell and preach there. He flees, only to experience hell on earth aboard a ship to Africa (pp. 98–100, 109–131).

Jonah’s flight is sometimes more widely understood to represent his struggle with God and his sense of alienation from God and the world, as well as the latter’s lack of belief in him. As Sherwood aptly states, Jonah becomes ‘a patron saint of all those who feel the need to curse’ due to the unsettledness and fickleness of their existence. (Sherwood 2000: 171). Paul Auster (b. 1947), for example, employs the motifs of being ‘inside the whale’ and of ‘shipwreck’ as leitmotifs throughout his book *The Invention of Solitude* (part II ‘The Book of Memory’, 1982, p. 83) to designate the estrangement that characterizes much of

post-holocaust Jewry. In his commentary on modern-day urban existence, the character George Oppen uses the term 'shipwreck of the singular' to refer to his own sense of being separated and even banished from the rest of humanity (p. 83, cf. p. 96). The 'Book of Memory, book 7', contains the strongest reference to the Jonah narrative. Auster/Oppen likens his own existence to Jonah running away from the presence of the Lord to meet his doom by shipwreck. In Auster's hand, the story of Jonah is one of solitude. Jonah is not, like Jeremiah, merely reluctant to speak; he refuses to speak (pp. 132–135). As to the reason for Jonah's fleeing, Auster puts it movingly (pp. 134–135):

If the Ninevites were spared, would this not make Jonah's prophecy false? Would he not, then, be a false prophet? Hence the paradox at the heart of the book: the prophecy would remain true only if he did not speak it. But then, of course, there would be no prophecy, and Jonah would no longer be a prophet. But better to be no prophet at all than to be a false prophet 'Therefore now, O lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live'.

Therefore, Jonah held his tongue. Therefore, Jonah ran away from the presence of the Lord and met the doom of shipwreck. That is to say, the shipwreck of the singular.

Auster further alludes to the character of Jonah by repeated references to Pinocchio (pp. 83, 139–143, 174–176), who is yet another incarnation of the recalcitrant prophet (cf. below) (Hau 2010: 236, note 121). Auster returns to the image of Jonah in the belly of the whale towards the end of the book. Oppen sits in his small room in the same way as Jonah sits in the belly of the fish, abandoned not only by God but also by his creative muse and desperately trying to reconnect with his creativity (p. 169).

Jonah's struggle with God is also the topic of several poetic retellings. The American poet Gabriel Priel (1911–1993 CE) compares himself to Jonah, and describes an existence torn between faith and a desire to flee from it:

The prophet Jonah ran from his angry Master  
And I to my ship empty of God and man  
[...]  
I, God willing, while escaping my Master, hope to find  
A minute of refuge in a season of faith and ripeness.

The Chilean poet Enrique Lihn (1929–1988 CE) likewise expresses his own sense of unease with the fickleness of his existence through those of Jonah:

I could damn everything equally, just don't ask me in the name of what.

In the name of Isaiah, the prophet, yet with the grotesque and unfinished gesture of his colleague Jonah,

who never managed to get through with his simple task, given to the ups and downs of good and evil, to the fickle circumstances of history that plunged him into the whale's belly.

[...]

And Jehova's doubts about him, wavering between mercy and anger, grabbing him and tossing him that old instrument whose use is doubtful

no longer used at all any more.

[...]

Another group of modern scholars have sought to bridge psychoanalysis and Jewish and biblical scholarship. They all agree that 'fleeing' is the dominant motif in the Book of Jonah, with focus on Jonah's flight from dialogue with God and his inability or refusal to face his own traumas. In the central essay, Zornberg understands Jonah to address the eternal human dilemma of fleeing from God's presence. Jonah refuses to stand vulnerable between life and death before God in prayer; he refuses to face his conscience, and struggles to receive forgiveness (Zornberg 2008). Shulman's response to Zornberg stresses Jonah's attempt to escape not only from God but also from himself (Shulman 2008). Salberg elaborates further as she emphasizes Jonah's despair due to his lack of capacity for self-reflection and his inability to deal with his own feelings. In her view, Jonah's death wish presents an easy way out of his despair (Salberg 2008).

From a very different perspective, the Israeli poet Maya Bejerano (1993) uses Jonah's flight to explore the modern Israeli search for God in her poem 'Midrash Jonah'. In her hands, Jonah is not fleeing God as much as seeking a new understanding of him:

Jonah  
 Jonah how much courage  
 courage to know was in you  
 [...]  
 for it was just that which you wanted,  
 carried and cast into the story sea of possibilities  
 [...]  
 your daring flight to Tarshish transformed into determined diving towards Him  
 [...]

Jacobson, responsible for this translation from Hebrew into English, understands the poem to express how our modern search for God may result in our acceptance of the divine will, as well as our uncertainty about what such an acceptance might entail (Jacobson 1997: 234–240).

*Fleeing from Oneself*

In the commentary to the Book of Jonah in the *Queer Bible*, Michael Carden argues that Jonah's flight from and subsequent acceptance of his God-given mission can be read as a story of coming out. According to Carden, Jonah's flight and subsequent hiding in the ship may be likened to the experience of the closet, in the sense that he is fleeing from who he really is. Realizing that his flight and his time in the fish provides but an illusory security, he is ultimately forced to face reality (Carden 2006: 466–467; Havea 2020: ch. 7).

## 'to Tarshish'

Jonah 1:3 continues to state that Jonah rose to flee 'to Tarshish'. The exact location of Tarshish has been much debated through the ages. There are three main lines of interpretation (all reaching across the Jewish-Christian divide):

A first group of scholars, among them Josephus (*Ant.* 9:10), Cyril of Alexandria, Saadia Gaon (as quoted by Ezra, *Rabbinic Bible*, Commentary to Jonah 1:3), and Calvin (Lecture 72), identifies Tarshish with Tarsus in Cilicia (the south-eastern coastal region of Asia Minor, corresponding to the modern Turkish region of Çukurova). The main problem with this identification is that Tarsus is inland and thus unlikely to have a port.

A second group of interpreters maintains that Tarshish is a city in the western part of the Mediterranean, i.e. as far away from Nineveh as it is possible to reach by ship. The Antiochene theologian and bishop Theodoret of Cyrus (393–466 CE) identifies it with Carthage (cf. Lipiński 2004: 260, fn. 179), while Ibn Ezra suggests Tunis, as does Abarbanel. In the much later novel *Moby-Dick*, ch. 9, Father Mapple declares that Tarshish must be Cadiz in Spain, as is 'the opinion of learned men':

Because Joppa, the modern Jaffa, shipmates, is on the most easterly coast of the Mediterranean, the Syrian; and Tarshis or Cadiz more than two thousand miles to the westward from that, just outside the Straits of Gibraltar. See ye not then, shipmates, that Jonah sought to flee world-wide from God? (Herman 1851 / Richard Bentley / Public domain)

A third group suggests that Tarshish is not the name of an actual city but instead another word for 'the sea'. Targum Jonathan translates the term Tarshish consistently as 'sea' ('and Jonah rose to flee to the sea', cf. Targum Onkelos, Exod 28:20). Jerome is aware of this interpretation and cites Ps 43:8 and Isa 23:1 in support. In his view, Jonah had no desire to go to a specific place; he merely wished to flee *anywhere*. During the Reformation, Luther (German commentary to 1:3) adopts this interpretation. He points out that Hebrew has two words for 'sea'. Whereas

the Hebrew term *yam* may be used for either a lake (e.g. Gen 1:10) or the sea, the Hebrew term *tarshish* denotes only the sea, as can be gleaned from 1 Kgs 9:26–28; Isa 23:1; and Ps 72:10. Furthermore, like Jerome, Luther argued that the indefinite translation ‘sea’ is more in tune with the narrative, as Jonah had no reason to flee *to* a specific city; his only concern was rather to flee *from* Israel.

In parallel, the reference to Tarshish can be understood symbolically. The *Glossa Ordinaria* sees Tarshish as a reference to ‘joy’: the prophet hurries to Tarshish in order to experience the joy of rest and contemplation of beauty and the variety of knowledge. This interpretation is anchored to the biblical narrative through the reference to Yafo, which means ‘beauty’, in the same verse.

‘and he went down to Yafo’

Having decided to flee to Tarshish, Jonah ‘went down to Yafo’. Yafo/Jaffa/Joppa is an ancient port city that was settled already in the Bronze Age. Today it forms the oldest part of Tel-Aviv-Yafo. It is mentioned both in the Hebrew Bible (Jonah 1:3; Ezra 3:7; 2 Chron 2:16) and the New Testament (Acts 10:10–23; 11:4–17), and it is also known from the mythological story of Andromeda. As noted by Jerome, the city of Yafo is the place where Andromeda was chained to the rock and later saved by Perseus from being devoured by the sea monster (see below, commentary to Jonah 2:1).

The choice of Yafo as the port is bewildering, given that Jonah lived in Gath-Hepher (according to 2 Kgs 14:25). The Jerusalem Talmud (*y.Suk.* 5:1) asks pertinently why Jonah, if he came from the Northern Kingdom, went to Yafo in the south. Would it not have been better for him to flee to Akko instead? Rabbi Jonah solves the problem by claiming that Jonah had earlier gone down (to Jerusalem) to celebrate the festivals. This interpretation implies that Jonah, being a prophet of YHWH, was one of the few Northerners who rejected the temple in Israel and instead continued to worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

‘from the presence of YHWH’

Jonah fled ‘from before the presence of YHWH’. This statement raises several questions. On a literal level, some exegetes ask whether, in fact, there are places where God’s presence is not manifest. By an elaborated use of proof texts, it is conceivable to reach the conclusion that the sea is the one place on earth where God is relatively less present. As expressed by *PRE* 10 (Eng. transl. Adelman 2009: 224):

Rather, I will get up and flee from His Presence to the Sea, to the place where His glory is not said to be. But not to the Heavens! [About the Heavens it is said: ‘His glory

is above the Heavens' (Ps 113:4)]. And about the Earth it is said, 'His presence fills all the Earth' (Isa 6:3). No, I shall flee to the Sea, where His Presence is not said to be.

Jonah's decision to escape to the sea is thus a logical choice, the only remaining option after having eliminated all other possibilities. Refuting this line of interpretation, *Mekhilta to Rabbi Ishmael* (Bo, Tractate Passha 1) points out that Jonah's decision to flee in Jonah 1:3 may cause a person to infer (wrongly) that God's presence would not be found outside the Land of Israel. The *Mekhilta* accordingly proceeds to contest this interpretation step by step: God is found in heaven, in the netherworld, and at the end of the world (Ps 139:7; cf. Amos 9:2–4); God's eyes roam the entire earth (Zech 4:10), they are in every place (Prov 15:3), and there is no darkness where sinners can hide from him (Job 34:22). Reaching the same conclusion, albeit via a different route, the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 6:2 stresses Jonah's delusion, as he 'was frivolous enough, hoping to escape from the Creator of all'. God, however, initially allowed him to flee in order to demonstrate His power and thus to reproach the prophet and to make his proclamation to Nineveh more powerful.

Adhering to the same logic, God's less palpable presence at sea may, in turn, cause prophecy there to diminish. As expressed by Targum Jonathan, Jonah hoped that by fleeing he would be rendered *unable* to prophesy, an interpretation that is based on the belief that prophecy could only take place on the soil of Israel (Gordon 1982: 124–126). The mediaeval Jewish commentators later fine-tuned this interpretation. Rashi states that the word *tarshisha* indicates the sea (see above), namely a place outside the Land of Israel. As far as Jonah is aware, the Shechinah does not dwell abroad, yet God refutes him by highlighting that he has agents whom he can send after Jonah to retrieve him from anywhere. In Ibn Ezra's view, Jonah, of course, knew that God's presence is everywhere. The case here is rather Jonah's attempt to flee from *servng* God. To reach this interpretation, Ibn Ezra (commentary to Jonah 1:1) compares the statement in Jonah 1:3 with the similar one in Gen 4:16 where Cain departs 'from before the presence of YHWH' (Heb. *milifnei* YHWH). As this statement is negated by Cain himself in Gen 4:14 ('can I be hidden from your presence?'), Jonah is accordingly not trying to flee from God's presence but from standing *before* him in service. Following suit, Abarbanel postulates a difference between *mipnei* YHWH which denotes 'from YHWH's presence', i.e. his knowledge and his omniscience, and *milifnei* YHWH, which denotes 'from being before the presence of YHWH', i.e. in a position to receive prophecy. Jonah thus flees in order to avoid the burden of prophecy. Building on this line of exegesis, Malbim argues that prophecy requires an elevated degree of holiness that is only possible to obtain within the Land of Israel. Or, more exactly, given that a few cases of prophecy outside of Israel exist (Elijah prophesied on Mt Horeb [1 Kgs 19:9]; Ezekiel

prophesied in a foreign land), the sea route was by far the 'safer' place for not receiving prophetic inspiration. From a slightly different angle, Radak emphasizes that Jonah desired not to flee from God's presence but instead, motivated by his love for Israel and not wishing to see it destroyed, decided to flee from 'that which was before Him', i.e. prophetic inspiration, which, according to Jonah's belief, was only possible within the Land of Israel.

A few Christian exegetes also adhere to this way of thinking. Theodore of Mopsuestia argues that Jonah's fleeing from the face of the Lord should be understood to mean that he fled not from God himself – who is everywhere – but from the place where God made his appearance, i.e. the temple in Jerusalem. Focusing more on Jonah's failure to flee from before the Lord, the Roman poet and senator Paulinus of Nola (354–431 CE) suggests in his 'Poem 22' that it teaches us that 'sea and star are moved under God's control'.

A very different interpretation is found in the *Glossa Ordinaria*, where Jonah's flight is read mystically as a precursor of Christ taking on flesh, thus fleeing his home (heaven) to the 'sea of this world' (cf. above, where Tarshish is understood as a reference to the sea).

'and he found a ship coming Tarshish'

The statement 'and he found a ship coming Tarshish' is problematic because the Hebrew text lacks a preposition between the verb 'to come' and the name 'Tarshish'. As a result, it is unclear whether the ship came *from* Tarshish or was going *to* Tarshish. The problem is aggravated by the fact that the Hebrew verb for 'to come' is accented on the ultimate syllable as a participle and thus best rendered as 'coming'. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Jonah narrative, it makes the most sense to translate the phrase as 'going *to* Tarshish'. To solve this preposition issue, diverse suggestions abound. Targum Jonathan translates the phrase 'coming Tarshish' as 'sea-bound ship', implying a direction away from Yaffo towards the sea (see Cathcart and Gordon 1989: 105, fn. 4), whereas Radak argues that the ship is 'coming [to] Tarshish' i.e. it was going back and forth between Tarshish and Yaffo.

PRE 10 resolves the matter by combining both options. When Jonah arrived in Jaffa, the ship to Tarshish had departed two days ago. In order to test Jonah, God sent a storm which forced the ship to return to port in Jaffa. Jonah understood the divine intervention as a sign of divine approval of his plan (Eng. transl. Adelman 2009: 228):

Jonah went down to Joppa, but he could not find a ship to board. The ship that he eventually boarded was already at sea, a two-day distance away, in order to test Jonah. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He brought upon it a stormy

wind, and forced it to return to Joppa. When Jonah saw the ship, he rejoiced, saying to himself, 'Now I know that my path is justified before me.'

Other scholars argue that the boat was just returning *from* Tarshish. Malbim, for example, interprets the fact that Jonah had to pay 'its entire fare' (see below) as a sign that the boat had just returned (and thus was not ready to set out just yet, unless bought by Jonah). Malbim continues by postulating that Jonah wished to depart quickly: he wished for few passengers on board because (1) Jonah feared that the ship would be in danger due to his disobedience to God and (2) he did not wish to endanger more people than necessary. The same idea of innocent suffering because of Jonah's flight, although seen from the opposite angle, is taken up by Luther (German commentary, Jonah 1:4), as he comments that many people are obliged to suffer for the sin of an individual. Yet, according to Luther, we should not assume that the sailors were without sin, as nobody is sinless before God.

### 'and paid its fare'

Having found a ship, Jonah paid 'its fare' (*shecharah*). Once more, an intriguing textual issue has given rise to a wide range of interpretation. The object suffix ('its') on the noun 'fare', being f.sg., cannot refer to (the male) Jonah but must instead refer to the ship, i.e. the nearest preceding f.sg. noun. Thus, rather than paying his own fare, it appears that Jonah paid the fare of the entire boat. Among the mediaeval Jewish commentators, Rashi states that contrary to the usual custom of seafarers paying when disembarking, Jonah paid in advance as he was in a hurry to go. Not only that, he paid the fare of the whole boat rather than for his single seat. Ibn Ezra rejects this interpretation, however, and claims that Jonah only paid what was required for his own place.

Based on the phrase 'paid its fare', the Jewish sages further concluded that personal wealth was a necessary quality for prophetic calling, alongside strength, wisdom, and humility. The Babylonian Talmud (*b.Ned.* 38a), for example, states:

Said Rabbi Yohanan, 'All of the prophets were wealthy'. How do we know it? From the cases of Moses, Samuel, Amos, and Jonah. Jonah: 'And he found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid the fare thereof and went down into it' (Jonah 1:3). And in this connection noted Rabbi Yohanan, 'He paid for the rent of the whole ship'. Rabbi Romanus said, 'The fee to rent the whole ship was four thousand gold denarii'.

This interpretation was later endorsed by, among others, Radak, who states that prophecy only falls on rich men.

The idea of Jonah paying for more than his own place on board the ship resurfaces in *Moby-Dick* (ch. 9). In his sermon, Father Mapple depicts the captain as a relatively corrupt man in whose ship ‘sin that pays its way can travel freely, and without a passport’. He charges Jonah triple the price for the journey, and when Jonah willingly obliges, the captain knows that his gut feeling, namely, that Jonah is up to no good, is correct, yet he still allows Jonah on board because of the money that he has paid.

‘and went down into It’

After going down to Yafo, Jonah goes further down into the ship. Modern scholarship has noted the significance of the downward and upward movements present throughout the Book of Jonah. Jonah ‘goes down’ to Yafo and ‘down into’ the ship (1:3). Later, Jonah goes down into the hold (1:6) and then ultimately down to the base of the mountains (2:7 [Eng. 2:6]). As pointed out by Halpern and Friedman, this downward spiral represents Jonah’s flight further and further away from God. In parallel, there is an upward movement: God brings Jonah up (2:7 [Eng. 2:6]), the *qiqayyon* goes up (4:6), and the sun goes up (4:7) at dawn. The interplay between the Hebrew roots *yarad* (‘go down’) and *‘ala* (‘go up’) is thus part of the narrative fabric of the text and has theological import (Halpern and Friedman 1980: 80–81; Sutscover 2014).

### *Jonah 1:4*

And YHWH hurled a great wind towards the sea, and there was a great storm on the sea, and the ship threatened to be broken up.

‘And YHWH hurled a great wind towards the sea’

The fourth-century poem *De Jona et Nineveh*, traditionally attributed to Tertullian but nowadays mostly assigned to Cyprianus Gallus or Pseudo-Cyprian, conveys the storm in magnificent words (lines 50–56):

With black encirclement; the upper air  
Down rushes into darkness, and the sea  
Uprises; nought of middle space is left;  
While the clouds touch the waves, and the waves all  
Are mingled by the bluster of the winds  
In whirling eddy. ‘Gainst the renegade,  
‘Gainst Jonah, diverse frenzy joined to rave.

Carissimi's oratorio *Jonas* from 1650, using the choir to emphasize the force of the wind, specifies that the winds that faced the ship were the south wind, the east wind, and even the African wind, accompanied by rain clouds, flooding, whirlwind, hail, thunderstorm, thunder, and lightning:

Much traditional Jewish scholarship envisages a local, albeit not less fierce, storm. The reasons are twofold: first, because God sent the storm, the storm was abnormal. Second, because God was responsible, the storm only endangered those who were guilty. According to *Gen.Rab.* 24:3, the storm in Jonah was one of the three most terrible storms that the world has ever seen. The other two were the storm in the days of Job (Job 1:19) and the storm in the days of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:11) (cf. also *y.Ber.* 9:2 and *Lev.Rab.* 15:1). This final storm in Jonah 1:4, however, was the most curious one. Noting the definite article on the Hebrew term *w'haoniyah* ('and the ship'), *Gen.Rab.* 24:3, citing R. Yudah, argues that the storm that came at the time of Jonah came against that ship alone. Only Jonah's ship was in danger of being shipwrecked; all the other ships were fine. The storm that killed Job's children was likewise a 'localized' storm as it destroyed only Job's oldest son's house. In contrast, the storm that Elijah experienced in the wilderness affected the whole world.

In Paulinus of Nola's poetic retelling of the Jonah narrative ('Poem 22'), Nature is a sentient being and God's faithful servant:

By vainly seeking to flee from God the controller of all things whom none can escape, he aroused the anger of both sky and sea. Nature, which belongs to the almighty Lord, realised that he was revolting and she was afraid to play conspirator by transporting the guilty man safely through her demesne; she chained the runaway with winds and waves.

The sea is also a sentient being in the modern ecological reading suggested by Jione Havea. Here, however, God commits an act of violence against the sea. First, as the creator, God is expected to protect and nurture the creation, rather than using its forces for his own personal vendetta. Second, storms disturb the seafloor and destroy the lifelines and homes of sea creatures, and it takes many years for marine life to recover from the devastation of a one-day storm (Havea 2020: chs. 2 and 8).

'and the ship threatened to be broken up'

The expression 'and the ship threatened' can be rendered literally as 'the ship thought'. It is noteworthy because of its use of the verb 'to think' with an inanimate object (i.e. the ship). Rashi explains this statement as figurative speech to express that it seemed as if the boat were going to break. Somewhat differently,

Ibn Ezra compares it with the notion in Ezek 14:13, where ‘the land’ is sinning (the land thus being used to represent its inhabitants). Radak agrees, stating that the verb ‘to think’ in Jonah 1:4 implies that the men on board the ship thought that the ship was going to break.

### *Jonah 1:5*

And the sailors were afraid and cried out, each to his own god, and they hurled the utensils, which were in the ship, into the sea to lighten [it] of them. And Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the boat, laid down, and fallen asleep.

Jonah 1:5 introduces readers to the sailors. The text sets up a deliberate contrast between the frantic behaviour of the sailors who, due to their fear of death, begin to toss the cargo overboard, and Jonah who is sound asleep in the ‘innermost parts of the ship’.

‘The sailors were afraid and cried out, each to his own god’

The claim that the sailors called out to their individual gods has given rise to two interrelated exegetical queries. First, given that they had different gods, readers are led to assume that they must have come from different places. This assumption is entirely reasonable, given that naval crews in all times have formed an ethnic ‘United Nations.’ Second, given the sailors’ diverse ethnicity, who were these deities to whom they cried out?

Seeking to respond to both queries, an influential rabbinic interpretation suggests that the sailors here represent the 70 nations, i.e. all the nations of the world. *PRE* 10, for instance, offers an extended version of Jonah’s time aboard the ship. The sailors are presented as worshippers of idols. Among them were representatives of all 70 languages/nations on earth, and each sailor worshipped his own idol that he had brought on board. This notion of (70) nations, which is not attested in the text of Jonah, stems from a conflation of Jonah 1:5 and Micah 4:5, the latter stating that ‘all the nations will walk, each man in the name of his god.’ In a sense, *PRE* 10 presents here the ship as the world in miniature (cf. Rashi).

Later readers of Jonah have also wondered when, in the Jonah narrative, these sailors ceased to worship these gods and instead began turning to the God of Israel. The biblical text indicates that the changes took place in Jonah 1:14, which states that they beseeched  $\Upsilon\eta\omega\eta$ . According to Targum Jonathan, however, their turning to the God of Israel happened earlier, as evidenced by

the addition in TJ at the end of verse 5. Having prayed, each man to his idol, TJ adds that ‘they saw that they were useless’. The sailors thus abandoned their beliefs in their own deities *prior* to both the calming of the storm and YHWH’s miraculous saving of Jonah through the fish.

Other readers have sought to establish the precise identity of these foreign deities, among them the fourteenth-century English homiletic poem ‘Patience’ (lines 164–167):

But each one cried to his god that availed him best;  
Some to Vernagu there vouched solemn vows.  
Some devout ones to Diana, and bold Neptune,  
To Mahomet and to Margot, the Moon and the Sun.

The apparent idolatry of the sailors especially caused the Protestant reformers to frown at them. In his Latin commentary to Jonah 1:5, Luther betrays his low opinion of the sailors. Although the sailors’ behaviour is natural, according to Luther, it is nevertheless idolatrous. Further, even though the sailors were not total atheists, their gods were of their own making. In his longer commentary to the same verse in German, Luther appears more charitable towards the sailors. Granting that the sailors did not have true faith in God, they nonetheless acknowledged God’s ability to respond in a situation of need.

‘And they hurled the utensils, which were in the ship, into the sea to lighten [it] of them’

The sense of the Hebrew text is clear, namely, that the sailors threw their cargo into the sea in order to make the boat lighter. The exact syntax is, however, less lucid. It is especially difficult to determine whether the m.pl. suffix of the preposition ‘from upon them’ (Heb. *me’alehem*) refers to the sailors (i.e. that the boat was lighter for [the sailors]), or to the utensils (i.e. that the boat was lighter without [the utensils]). Given the prevalent use of the preposition *me* with the meaning ‘from’ throughout the Book of Jonah, the latter sense is slightly more convincing.

Commenting on the sailors’ endeavour, Chrysostom, in his Homily 5:8, ‘On Repentance and Almsgiving’, notes that despite their effort to lighten their ship, the heaviest burden remained on board, namely Jonah’s sin, ‘for nothing is so heavy and onerous to bear as sin and disobedience’. In support of his interpretation, Chrysostom cites Zech 5:7, where sin is likened to a piece of lead.

Reading the Book of Jonah from an ecological perspective, Jione Havea faults the sailors for throwing their baggage, i.e. rubbish, into the sea (Havea 2020: ch. 8).

‘And Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the boat, laid down, and fallen asleep’

While the sailors were calling out, each to their own god, Jonah was otherwise busy. Rather than being among the sailors, he had instead withdrawn, presumably curled up in the bowels of the ship, where he was sound asleep.

The Hebrew text uses two verbs, ‘lying down’ (*wayishkav*) and ‘sleeping’ (*wayerdam*) to denote Jonah’s actions. In contrast, the LXX attests to a different reading (καὶ ἐκάθευδεν καὶ ἔρρηγγεν), namely, that Jonah was not only asleep but that he also *snored*. This reading has influenced several later traditions. In the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 9:3, for example, we read that the captain hears the snoring, and realizes that someone is asleep and thus not calling out to his deity (as he ought to be doing). *On Jonah* further declares that Jonah was not snoring ‘so much for a natural reason as due to the punishment imposed [on him] for the reproof of sinners’. Several of the Church Fathers also mention Jonah’s snoring (Jerome, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Cyril of Alexandria), as does the *Glossa Ordinaria* (‘his deep sleep resounds through raucous nostrils’). The fourth-century poem *De Jona et Nineveh* attributed to Tertullian portrays a calmly sleeping (and snoring) Jonah in lines 81–84:

Unconscious of all this, the guilty one  
 ‘Neath the poop’s hollow arch was making sleep  
 Re-echo stertorous with nostril wide  
 Inflated

Jonah’s rather surprising behaviour – sleeping rather than praying – has been noted by many commentators. Why did Jonah not pray alongside the sailors? Jerome offers several possible interpretations. Could it be that Jonah was so peaceful and that his spirit was so at rest that he had gone down to enjoy a peaceful sleep? Alternatively, could it be that Jonah’s sleep was unnatural and rather a sign of his worry? In other words, knowing himself to be a fugitive and a sinner, maybe Jonah had retired to his bed in order to hide from the world and the roaring waves. For Jerome, Jonah is like a man who has ‘fallen asleep from the drug of wickedness’ as he ignores the wrath of God. Along similar lines, the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 7:5 explains how Jonah, seeking complete oblivion, left the deck of the ship and descended into its belly. There he surrounded himself with oblivion and the sadness in his heart. Along similar lines, the *Glossa Ordinaria* suggests that Jonah sleeps out of melancholy, like the apostles in the Lord’s passion (Luke 22:45).

From a different perspective, Abarbanel focuses on Jonah’s feelings of shame. Given that Jonah knew fully well not only the source of the storm but also its reason, to pray for its ceasing would have been both futile and insincere. Instead,

Jonah went down expecting to die. Along somewhat similar lines, Ibn Ezra's comment (to Jonah 1:6) seems to suggest that Jonah had entered the ship when the storm was already raging. Jonah is thus consciously hiding from the storm rather than being oblivious to it (cf. Bob 2013: 25). Some of the Church Fathers voice similar sentiments. John Chrysostom, in his Homily 5:8, 'On Repentance and Almsgiving', states that Jonah's sleep was the result of his sorrow and his faintheartedness due to his sin of disobedience. Luther likewise states in his German commentary that Jonah's sleep may be termed a 'sleep of death' that had come upon him shortly before he was doomed to die. Jonah had sinned but, as God's punishment tarried, 'Jonah felt secure and loses his fear, lies down, goes to sleep, and fails to see the disaster and the great storm gathered over him which will arouse him horribly' [...] 'There he lies and snores in his sin'. In contrast, the Geneva Bible follows the MT ('fast asleep').

Cyril of Alexandria finds Jonah's sleeping incompatible with what one might expect from a prophet. He, therefore, shifts the chronology of the narrative, a change made possible by the *qatal* form of the Hebrew verb *yarad* ('had gone down'), and positions Jonah's sleep earlier in the narrative before the storm began. In Cyril's view, Jonah's going down to the hold of the ship was a mark of one accustomed to being on his own; 'after all, it is always a preference and a concern for the saints to avoid hubbub, absent themselves from crowds, and be on their own'. In support of this reading, Cyril cites Lam 3:27 which he presumes to be written by Jeremiah. Jonah was thus dozing – not ignoring his duty – *prior to* the storm.

Looking at Jonah asleep on the boat from the perspective of Christian typology, Jonah 1:5 foreshadows Matt 8:24. To cite the Syrian Church Father Jacob of Serug (451–521 CE) (Eng. transl. Kitchen 2011: 34):

Our Lord slept and the sea was disturbed against the disciples  
And this type was demonstrated in the sleep of Jonah.  
That is, he was asleep and they woke him up as in the typology  
which was performed by the disciples to our Saviour. (13.387:13–18)

In some literary retellings, Jonah's sleep has turned into an expression of his fear of death or even a symbol of his death wish. In Melville's hands, Jonah's time in his room on board the ship is a premonition of his time inside the fish:

Jonah feels the heralding presentiment of that stifling hour, when the whale shall hold him in the smallest of his bowel's wards.

Even though Jonah is tired, he is afraid where he is lying in his berth. When he has no strength to be terrified anymore, he falls into a deep stupor, 'as over the man who bleeds to death, for conscience is the wound, and there's naught to staunch it' (*Moby-Dick*, ch. 9).

The notion that Jonah is asleep and wished to continue to sleep is picked up in the evocative poem ‘Tal vez me llame Jonás’ (‘Perhaps I am called Jonah’) by the Spanish poet León Felipe (1884–1968 CE). Felipe fought in the Spanish Civil War for the Spanish Republican Army and later left Spain in 1938 for a voluntary exile in Mexico, where he later died. The poet begins by identifying himself with ‘nobody’ (*Yo no soy nadie*) and ends by saying that he ‘is Jonah’ (*Yo soy Jonás*).<sup>2</sup> The poem is filled with echoes of the imagery of Jonah, such as a storm calling out to him, telling him to go to Nineveh, but also how the poet ignores the voice and flees, only to hear the voice yelling at him again, telling him to wake up. In response to the attempts to wake him, the poet claims that he is nobody and pleads to be allowed to sleep. One day, the poet is thrown into the abyss, where he proceeds to describe his experience in the water in words very similar to Jonah 2. The poet exclaims that he has been in hell (*Quiero decir que he estado en el infierno*) (cf. Jonah 2:2 [Eng. 2:3]). Even so, he refuses to preach destruction (*y no canto la destrucción*).

### *Jonah 1:6*

And the captain drew near to him and said to him: ‘How can you sleep! Get up, call to your God! Maybe God will consider us so that we will not perish.’

Jonah 1:6 contains the captain’s speech to Jonah. In the biblical narrative, the captain plays the role of Jonah’s better self, who seeks to convince Jonah to do his duty towards his fellow travellers on board the ship. In doing so, the captain attributes power to Jonah’s God and conveys the impression that Jonah holds the fate of the ship in his hands.

This impression is strengthened in the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 9:5, where the shipmaster not only tells Jonah to get up and call to his own God but also indicates that he is aware that Jonah is at fault and the cause of the storm:

Do you not see those who were sailing safely before you got on board the ship, and that they have been at peril since you have boarded?

The *Zohar* goes one step further in its depiction of the captain as the voice of Jonah’s conscience. In its metaphorical retelling of the Book of Jonah, the *Zohar* depicts Jonah as a symbol of the human soul. Just as Jonah goes down into the ship and later into the fish, so the human soul descends first into a human being and later into the grave. While in the human world, the soul is exposed to trials and tribulations. A human being sins and flees from his Master, but God

sends a storm to persecute him and demands his punishment, yet the soul lies sick. In this retelling, the captain is identified with the 'good inclination' (*yetser hatov*) that calls upon the soul to repent:

Zohar 83: Who is the shipmaster? The Good Inclination that guides everyone.

The Gentile shipmaster has thus come a long way from his pagan origin insofar as he now represents the God of Israel. At the same time, despite its Jewish flavour, there is something both timeless and universal about the depiction in the Zohar. True to its genre of Jewish mysticism, the shipmaster in the Zohar is neither Jew nor Gentile; he is the good intention in every human being. As such, the Jonah story in its entirety is turned into a treatise about the universal conditions of humanity.

Significantly less complimentary, Luther compares the captain with his contemporary Catholics (Latin commentary). In times of crisis, it is human nature to turn not to God directly but to another human who, they believe, can save them through their intercessions. Thus, when pressed in their conscience by sin and thus seeking consolation, the sailors turned to Jonah in the same way that people around Luther would turn to a monk.

### *Jonah 1:7*

And one man said to his fellow man: 'Let us cast lots so that we will know on whose behalf this evil is' and they threw lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

This verse tells how the sailors decided to cast lots in order to determine on whose behalf the storm raged.

### A Matter of Narrative

The story line demands that Jonah leaves 'the innermost of the ship' after being commanded to pray by the shipmaster (v. 6) and before the throwing of lots (vv. 7–8), yet the biblical text omits any reference to Jonah joining the sailors on deck. Seeking to fill this narrative gap, the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 10:1 describes how Jonah woke up and ascended to deck, where he saw the waves and heard the wailing of men and the crying of children. (So far in the sermon, the audience has not encountered these children: where did they come from and what were they doing on board the ship? The sermon does not answer these questions.) Later, in 10:2–3, the sermon makes the salient point that Jonah was consoled when he saw the misfortune of the others, 'for human

beings are accustomed to enduring pain more easily when many people are involved; this creates equality, and each one derives a consoling remedy for his pain from the misfortune of others’.

According to the biblical narrative, the sailors then cast lots (Jonah 1:7). As the lots fall on Jonah, the sailors proceed to ask him a series of questions, although none of them touch upon the reason for the storm (Jonah 1:8). Instead, the discussion in verses 8–9 is concerned only with Jonah’s origin, occupation, and ethnicity. The reader learns only later (v. 10b, ‘because Jonah had told them’) that Jonah at one point must have informed the sailors about his flight from God. It would, however, make narrative sense for Jonah to have mentioned this matter already in verse 7, i.e. immediately after the lots had revealed his culpability.

To resolve this chronological issue, the sermon *On Jonah* 11 changes the sequence of events here. Presumably for reasons of narrative cohesion, the sermon seeks to establish when exactly the sailors realized that Jonah was responsible for the storm. Thus, as soon as Jonah appears on deck, the sailors ask him from whence he came etc. (cf. Jonah 1:8). Already at this point, the sailors seem to be aware of Jonah’s situation, as they tell Jonah that ‘You are small in stature but a burden for the boat, and we are afraid that with the load of your deeds you are going to sink the ship’ (*On Jonah* 11:3). Jonah, however, only mentions to the sailors such things as are for his own benefit, such as being a servant of ὙΗΩΗ, while keeping silent about his flight. It is at this point that the sailors decide to cast lots, through which God reveals to them beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jonah is indeed guilty (Jonah 1:7).

‘let us cast lots’

Many commentators have explored and evaluated the sailors’ action of ‘casting lots’. Viewing the action positively, *On Jonah* portrays the sailors as pious people. As to the reasons behind this portrayal, Siegert suggests that the author of the sermon lived in a multicultural setting, and his audience probably included Gentiles, as well as Jews with liberal leanings (Siegert 1994: 52–58). The lot throwing is thus portrayed as a very pious endeavour, in the sense that the sailors allowed God to be the judge rather than a human being, who might have been swayed by ulterior motives.

By contrast, several Christian commentators focus on the vice of lot casting. The *Glossa Ordinaria* argues that in the case of Jonah and Matthias (Acts 1:26), the outcome was due to the power of God. When this is not the case, however, we should not trust in or use lots. Luther, in his Latin commentary, does not take kindly to the casting of lots in Jonah 1:7. It is evil to cast lots in order to

tempt God; it is not evil, but still not ideal, to do so in a case of real distress (such as that of Jonah and the sailors). Luther tempers his views somewhat in his German commentary, where he distinguishes between casting lots and tempting God. The former may, in fact, be 'a real act of faith', unless it is misused to arbitrarily satisfy one's own inquisitiveness. Ultimately, 'it is fitting that Christians abstain from casting lots in a spirit of levity'.

Luther (Latin commentary) also holds Jonah's participation in the lot casting against him. He scathingly states that Jonah knew that he was guilty, yet nevertheless took part in the enterprise in the hope that he would somehow escape. Thus, he cannot be excused from sin. Luther (German commentary) further compares Jonah with Adam: if God had not come upon Adam and Eve, they would never have paid any attention to their sin. But, as God approached, they hid from him. Luther thus castigates Jonah for his cowardly hiding:

He is not pious enough to come out into the open and confess his sin, but he lets these poor people endure such terror and danger and distress for his sake until he is betrayed by the casting of lots and God wrests a confession of his sin from him. That is also one of the tender virtues of sin: it renders people mute. It conceals itself; it is ashamed.

Calvin, following suit, states that the sailors' lot casting was a sign of weakness and doubt. Calvin is initially more positive than Luther, deeming it to be a lawful undertaking in certain (but not all) circumstances, such as the one in which the sailors found themselves. In this case, God ruled over the outcome. Even so, the sailors do not completely escape Calvin's criticism. In his view, all men are guilty of offence, yet the sailors did not own up to their fault, and none of them confessed any sin (Lecture 73).

Some retellings of the Jonah narrative detect in Jonah 1:7 an allusion to the soldiers casting lots for Jesus's clothes (John 19:23–24), thus emphasizing how aspects of Jonah's life make him a type for Christ. The drama-oratorio 'Jonah ging doch nach Ninive' by the Russian/Swiss composer Wladimir Vogel (1896–1984 CE) provides an interesting example. Although Vogel based his text on Martin Buber's translation (rather than on a Christian translation) and made hardly any alterations to the overarching storyline, he nevertheless included several Christian allusions through his music. Among them, the depiction of the sailors casting lots in Part One is, to cite Geiger, 'an obvious allusion to the chorus of soldiers casting lots for Christ's raiment in Bach's St. John Passion' (Geiger 2001: 12).

A few Muslim exegetes also comment on the sailors' lot casting in their commentaries to the Quran. In his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* to Q21:87–88,

drawing from Q37:141 ('Then he [agreed to] cast lots, and he was among the losers'), Ibn Kathīr states that the sailors cast lots not only once but three times, in an attempt to avoid having to toss Jonah overboard:

Yunus, meanwhile, went and travelled with some people on a ship, which was tossed about on the sea. The people were afraid that they would drown, so they cast lots to choose a man whom they would throw overboard. The lot fell to Yunus, but they refused to throw him overboard. This happened a second and a third time.

As we shall see shortly, this interpretation is reminiscent of the tradition in *PRE* 10 where the sailors 'dip' Jonah into the water several times (see below, Jonah 1:13).

'so that we will know on whose behalf this evil is'

This rather curious statement, explaining the reason for the casting of lots, suggests that the sailors suspected that the storm was due to someone on their ship. As asked poignantly by Radak, why did the sailors think that someone on *their particular ship* was responsible for the storm? Were there no other ships in the sea? This train of thought caused early Jewish and Christian exegetes, among them Theodore of Mopsuestia, to argue that *only* the ship on which Jonah was aboard was afflicted by the storm (cf. above, Jonah 1:4). In the words of *PRE* 10:

They had travelled one day's journey, and a mighty tempest on the sea arose against them on their right hand and on their left hand; but the movement of all the ships passing 'to and fro' was peaceful in a quiet sea, but the ship into which Jonah had embarked was in great peril of shipwreck, as it is said, 'But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken' (Jonah 1:4).

Many of the mediaeval Jewish commentators follow suit. Rashi, for instance, states that the other boats were travelling peacefully while the ship that held Jonah was breaking apart.

The fourteenth-century English homiletic poem 'Patience' goes beyond the biblical text, having the sailors declare that whoever is found guilty will be tossed overboard (lines 168–174):

Then spoke the readiest, almost in despair:  
 'I believe some traitor is here, some lawless wretch,  
 Who has grieved his god and goes here among us! Do!  
     All sink in his sin, and for his guilt perish.  
 I propose that we lay out lots on each man.  
 And whosoever the loss falls on, fling him overboard.'

In contrast to the biblical narrative, the retelling by the Swedish poet and post-humous Nobel prize laureate in literature (1931) Erik Axel Karlfeldt (1864–1931 CE), in his poem ‘Jone havsfärd’ (Eng. ‘Jonah’s sea travel’) portrays the drunk captain as eager to throw the pale, fat, and sickly looking prophet overboard to calm the storm. Jonah pleads with them to take another man, yet the sailors claim that he is a good choice as he is so fat that he will float (my translation).

And they place their hand upon Jonah,  
but he pleads: ‘Please, spare,  
Because I am a spiritual man and a venerable prophet’  
But they responded: ‘If you have the throne,  
then you can tread water, Jonah,  
Though you probably float on the speck, o prophet, fat like a parson.’

### *Jonah 1:8*

And they said to him: ‘Tell us, please, on whose behalf this evil is. What is your occupation and where are you from? What is your country and from what people are you?’

The sailors ask a series of questions. From a narrative perspective, however, it is unclear why they need to know so many details about Jonah – profession, place of origin, ethnicity – at this point in the story. Both Jewish and Christian exegetes have therefore explored possible reasons behind their inquisitiveness. According to Cyril of Alexandria, for example, the sailors, being pagans, wished to figure out *what exact* deity Jonah had offended. John Chrysostom, in his Homily 5:8, ‘On Repentance and Almsgiving’, focusing more on the sailors’ manner of questioning, argues that the sailors established a court of justice on board the ship. They charged Jonah but also allowed him to defend himself. Chrysostom is in fact very impressed by the sailors and points out that they were far from eager to charge and convict Jonah, even though they knew that he had committed a sin (in contrast to Chrysostom’s implied readers who unfortunately act in the opposite manner).

Looking more specifically at the questions that the sailors asked Jonah, Rashi suggests that the sailors suspected Jonah to have sinned in his profession, that there was a decree against the people in his place of origin, or that his people had sinned. Radak, in his commentary to Jonah 1:7, expands on this issue by suggesting that the sailors asked Jonah whether he had swindled someone or been violent and thus was going to be charged. Objecting to this line of interpretation, Ibn Ezra points out its logical flaws: if God had

indeed decreed death to a certain people, God would surely have been able to single out an individual from that guilty people and not included innocent bystanders in his punishment. The sailors would accordingly have had no reason to fear. Given that they did fear, however, another interpretation must be sought. In Ibn Ezra's view, it was simply the custom that most people had a trade. To ask about that trade would inevitably provide vital clues to the reason behind their actions and could thus explain why they happened to be in a certain place. Ibn Ezra's interpretation was to some extent already anticipated by Jerome, who argued that these types of questions would shed light upon the reason for 'the wickedness.'

In sharp contrast to the biblical portrayal, the sailors are depicted as being exceedingly rude in Dominick Argento's choral work *Jonah and the Whale*:

Chorus:

What the devil have you done, doltish wretch?  
 What do you seek on the sea, sinful shrew?  
 Would you destroy us all with your wicked works?  
 What country do you come from, do you call your own?

This impression persists throughout the work, emphasized by the later description of how the sailors accused Jonah of being sinful and how they threw Jonah *roughly* into the sea (unsupported by the biblical text of Jonah 1:15):

Chorus:

Have you no governor, guardian, or god to call upon?  
 Where in the world were you wanting to go?  
 See, how your sins have sealed your fate!  
 Give glory to your god before you go further!

Narrator:

Roughly they took him by top and by toe,  
 And into the tumultuous sea he was thrown.

It is possible that this negative portrayal stems from Argento's other key source of inspiration, namely, the depiction of Jonah and the sailors in Härkeberga Church, Sweden, where the sailors are treated as a type for the Jews who crucified Jesus (see Jonah 1:13)

### *Jonah 1:9*

And he said to them: 'I am a Hebrew and I fear YHWH, the God of the heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land.'

‘And he said to them “I am a Hebrew”’

Jonah states that he is ‘a Hebrew’ in Jonah 1:9. This is an unusual statement insofar as the word ‘Hebrew’ is seldom attested in the Hebrew Bible; it is far more common for the expression ‘people of Israel’ to denote Israelite ethnicity. Its rare use explains Ibn Ezra’s need to explore the origin of the term ‘Hebrew’ (*i’vri*). He derives it from Gen 10:21, which states that Shem was the father of all the children of Eber. It may also explain the ‘modernizing’ attempt in Targum Jonathan, where Jonah states that he is ‘a Jew’.

The LXX preserves a different reading, namely, that Jonah is a ‘servant of the Lord’ (δοῦλος κυρίου). It is possible that this reading preserves a misreading of the Hebrew text where the orthographically similar letters *resh* and *daleth* have been mixed up.<sup>3</sup> The Greek translator may have read the Hebrew expression עבד־י as עבד־י (‘servant of YHWH’), where the final *yod* was understood as an abbreviated reference to YHWH.

In later interpretations, Jonah’s Hebrew/Jewish identity conjures up notions of exile and estrangement. Already Jerome connected Jonah’s words in Jonah 1:9 with Ps 39:13 [Eng. 39:12], where the psalmist states that he is ‘a stranger with you, a dweller like all my fathers’. The notion of Jonah being a foreigner is later picked up in literature. The novel *Die Antwort des Jona*, written by the German-Israeli author Schalom Ben-Chorin (1913–1999 CE), uses Jonah’s declaration in Jonah 1:9 as its starting point. For Ben-Chorin, Jonah is a symbol of the Jews and his flight from God representing the Jews’ eternal struggle to deal with their position as God’s chosen people and their calling to be God’s witness in the world. Jonah is the stranger and the eternal outsider who remains a Jew. He can never fully assimilate and become German or French etc. This is true even though he believes in the God who is the God of the entire universe (Ben-Chorin 1966: 13–22; see further Liptzin 1985a: 247–248).

The notion of the Jewish people carrying a burden and having a responsibility towards God and towards the Gentile world is expressed poignantly by the Russian-Jewish author Kadia Molodowsky (1894–1975 CE) in the Yiddish poem ‘Jonah’ (1965). It expresses in a heart-breaking manner the Jewish experience through the lens of Jonah’s calling (see further Liptzin 1985a: 248–249):

[...]

You will lie in the ditch, pelted with stones,  
There, with flesh wounds, burns, plagues, you will stay.  
Still, God will mark you with fire in your bones:  
Go to Nineveh,  
And what I command you, – say.

[...]

You are chosen for mercy and for pain,  
Go to Nineveh,  
And purify its sin.

In a very different manner, James Bridie's play *Jonah and the Whale* has Jonah denying who he is. On board the ship bound for Tarshish, Jonah is recognized by the commercial traveller Bilshan. In a scene not unlike the one where Peter denies Jesus (Matt 26:33–35/Mark 14:29–31/Luke 22:33–34/John 13:36–38), Jonah denies being Jonah and he denies his mission to Nineveh (Act I).

Bilshan: [...] You're the local Prophet, aren't you?

Jonah: I'm not Jonah. I – I think I know the man you mean. We are often mistaken for one another. But I assure you, you are wrong.

Bilshan: I should think you're a true prophet all right. You could never have made much of a reputation at lying. Let me see ... let me see...Oh, you ... Aren't you in the wrong boat?

Jonah: No ... no. I hope not.

Bilshan: The usual route to Nineveh is to go up to Damascus and to cross the desert by caravan. This is precisely in the opposite direction.

Jonah: I know that. I have no intention of going to Nineveh. I – I never had.

Modern interfaith dialogue has appealed to Jonah's encounter and interaction with the sailors. For example, the Anglican minister Rev. Geraldine V. Wiliame, in her interfaith work in Fiji, has used Jonah's declaration as an example of maintaining one's own identity yet respecting that of the 'Other' when seeking to bridge the gap between different religious groups (Wiliame 2005; cf. Tie-meyer 2017a).

### 'Who has made the sea and the dry land'

The *Glossa Ordinaria* connects this expression with the details about Jonah's flight in Jonah 1:3. Building on the common interpretation that Tarshish symbolizes 'the sea' (cf. above, v. 3), Jonah is here referring to the origin of his flight ('the dry land') and the destination of his flight ('the sea'). A few modern scholars have also connected the notion of 'the dry land' with the creation narrative in Gen 1:1–2:4 (see, e.g. Kamp 2003: 205–209).

*Jonah 1:10*

And the men feared greatly and they said to him: ‘What is this that you have done?’ because the men knew that he was fleeing before YHWH for he had told them.

## ‘And the men feared greatly’

The Hebrew verb *yareh* = ‘fear’ can mean either to worship, as in ‘fearing YHWH’, or to be afraid. In verse 9, it is reasonable to assume that the sailors would have understood Jonah’s statement ‘I fear YHWH, the God of heaven’ to mean that he ‘worships’ him. In contrast, when the same verb is repeated in verse 10, now with the sailors as its subject, the sense is that the sailors ‘feared greatly.’ Due to this repetition of the verb *yareh*, although with a change of subject (Jonah *versus* the sailors), commentators have wondered not only in what way the sailors ‘feared’, but also, in retrospect, in what way the sailors understood Jonah’s statement that he ‘feared’ YHWH. A few commentators suggest that the sailors in fact misunderstood Jonah to have said that he was *afraid* (of God’s retribution). As a result, the sailors also ‘feared’ in the sense that they became frightened. Abarbanel, for example, interprets Jonah’s confession in Jonah 1:9b that he fears YHWH as an acknowledgement that he had sinned against him.

## ‘And they said to him: “What is this that you have done?”’

Cyril of Alexandria asks how, upon hearing that Jonah was a Hebrew, the sailors knew that he was fleeing from God. He concludes that Jews were not permitted to leave the country that was allotted to them, to visit foreigners, or to enter cities given over to idolatry. As the sailors saw Jonah outside the borders of Israel, they accordingly deduced that he must have repudiated life within the Law and thus would be fleeing from God.

Speaking more generally about the sailors’ assumption of Jonah’s guilt, Ben-Chorin ponders the reasons and the responsibility for the storm and the resulting plight of the ship. Is Jonah guilty, as the seamen would argue (‘what have *you* done [to cause this storm]’)? The answer must be ‘yes’ if we take God’s role in the story into account. Jonah is trying to flee, and God is trying to stop him. Ben-Chorin further applies the interplay between Jonah and the seamen as a lens through which to view the interaction between Jews and Gentiles over the past 2000 years. Gentiles make the Jews (the eternal foreigners) into scapegoats for the problems in the world. The Gentiles cast lots to find the guilty one, and the lot falls on the Jew (Jonah 1:7). In this way, according to Ben-Chorin (*Die*

*Antwort des Jona*, pp. 14–15), the Gentiles demand to know the reason for the Jews' existence (Jonah 1:8) as they assume that there is a correlation between that and their own misfortune (my translation):

They ask him as the foreigner, the primal foreigner, and they ask him immediately about their own misfortune. He, the persecuted one, should tell them why they are experiencing evil. He, the foreigner, must have the key to the misfortune of the nations. They themselves also flee from their fate and from God. They do not ask themselves, they do not look inside themselves, but they approach the sleeping Jew, the foreigner, and ask him.

From a different angle, Hesse and Kikawada detect here an allusion to Gen 3:13, where God asks Eve 'what is this that you have done?' (Hesse and Kikawada 1984: 12) This allusion emphasizes anew the assumption of guilt.

'for he had told them'

The idea that Jonah had already told the sailors that he was fleeing from God is seldom commented upon (but cf. *On Jonah*, above). One rare example of giving words to Jonah is found in the fourth-century poem *De Jona et Nineveh* attributed to Tertullian (lines 99–104):

He avows himself  
A servant, and an over-timid one,  
Of God, who raised aloft the sky, who based  
The earth, who corporally fused the whole:  
A renegade from Him he owns himself,  
And tells the reason.

In the modern choral work *Jonah: A Musical Morality* by William Mathias, Jonah explicitly admits his sin at this moment (rather than at an earlier moment): 'I have defied my God. I have defied my God.'

### *Jonah 1:11*

And they said to him: 'What should we do to you so that the sea will quieten for us?' because the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

In this verse, the sailors ask Jonah what they should do with him, given that the storm was getting rougher and rougher. In short, should they save Jonah,

or should they save themselves? In the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah 12*, the sailors elaborate on this question, declaring that their single overarching aim is to survive. To do so, they need to get rid of the storm. If there is a way for them to accomplish this without harming Jonah, then let him, by all means, suggest it. If, however, by seeking to save Jonah's life they will all die, 'then for us the salvation of many is preferable to one man's death' (*On Jonah 12:3*, cf. *Jonah 1:14*).

According to the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the sailors put the responsibility for any decision-making upon Jonah: Jonah, as the author of the sin that caused the storm, ought to come up with the solution. The sailors knew that if they killed him (by tossing him overboard), they would ease God's anger, yet it is up to Jonah to command them to do so.

For Calvin (Lecture 74), who has so far been rather critical of the sailors, they grow in his opinion as the narrative proceeds. Calvin lauds their behaviour in *Jonah 2:11*. Rather than throwing Jonah overboard and thus saving themselves – now that they know that Jonah brought about the storm – they are restrained by their fear of God.

The final part of verse 11 speaks of the sea. For Chrysostom, the sea is a sentient (female) subject who has found Jonah, recognized him, and wants him. She thus threatens to sink the entire ship if the sailors will not surrender Jonah to her (*Homily 5.3.8*, 'On Repentance and Almsgiving').

### *Jonah 1:12*

And he said to them: 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea and the sea will quieten for you, because I know that it is because of me that this great storm is upon you.'

*Jonah 1:12* forms the epigraph of Albert Camus's short story *Jonas, ou l'artiste au travail*. This epigraph, together with the name of the main character (Gilbert Jonas), invites the reader to make a connection between the short story and the biblical narrative. One of the more poignant allusions to the biblical Jonah can be found in one of its final images, when Jonas is sitting alone and motionless in his loft, trying to paint, after a prolonged time of what might be called 'painter's-block' caused by his own success. The darkness in the loft is restful and he listens to the silence within himself. He describes himself as being at work although his canvas remains blank, apart from a word in the centre of the canvas, written in very small letters, which could read either *solitary* or *solidary*. The story ends with Jonas collapsing, although the doctor assures his wife that Jonas will soon recover.

‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea’

Several traditions see Jonah’s willingness to be thrown into the sea as the ultimate sign of Jonah’s love for Israel. Not only was Jonah prepared to sin (by running away), he is now ready to sacrifice his life in order to save Israel. The Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* is a case in point. The sailors approach Jonah and ask him to leave the ship and go to another ship so that the storm would leave their own ship in peace. In response, Jonah offers a long soliloquy wherein he declares that the sailors’ confidence in his ability to do the right thing should not be put to shame: ‘I will justify your confidence to my last breath’ (*On Jonah* 13:4). He realizes that he should not seek his own salvation but instead show himself to be a God-fearing prophet; to save the human beings on the ship, Jonah thus ‘threw himself into the wavy sea’ (14:3). Siegert, in his commentary to the sermon, argues that although the notion of sacrificing your life to save humanity could be understood as an alternative (and competing) reference to Jesus’s teaching, it is more likely to be part of a shared Hellenistic ethical-religious ideal of self-sacrifice so that others might live (Siegert 1992: 134).

The idea that Jonah committed suicide on behalf of others is alluded to also in *Mekhilta Attributed to R. Ishmael* I.III (7–8):

7.A. R. Nathan says, ‘Jonah went only to commit suicide in the sea

7.B. as it is said “And he said to them,

“Take me up and cast me forth into the sea” (Jonah 1:12)’.

8.A. And so you find that the patriarchs and prophets gave their lives for Israel.

[...]

8.D. Lo, in every passage you find that the patriarchs and prophets gave their lives for Israel.

Jerome is likewise impressed by Jonah’s resolve and willingness to confess his sins here. Jonah is neither evasive nor tries to hide his guilt; rather he graciously accepts his punishment. Moreover, he would rather die than let the innocent sailors die. Along similar lines, Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem (313–386 CE) holds up Jonah’s readiness to die as an example for people to confess their sins and take their due punishment (‘Catechetical Lecture’ 6:26):

Ought then he, who shared the guilt of murder, to be worshipped? Ought he not to have followed the example of Jesus, and said, If ye seek Me, let these go their way? Ought he not to have said, like Jonas, Take me, and cast me into the sea: for this storm is because of me? (Jonah 1:12)

More neutrally, Josephus (*Ant.* 9:10) states that ‘[Jonah] persuaded them to cast him into the sea.’ Although they did not want to do so at first, they were in the end ‘animated to do it by the prophet himself’.

From a different perspective, Ibn Ezra argues that Jonah's desire not to be the instrument of Nineveh's repentance was so strong that he desired and requested to die, yet he did not state this openly in case the sailors took him to Nineveh. Abarbanel, following suit, maintains that Jonah's gesture was his saving grace. Jonah chose to stifle his soul and die in the depths of the sea to avoid going to Nineveh and thus to save Israel from being destroyed by the Neo-Assyrians (cf. above, Jonah 1:3). In contrast, other classical Jewish texts interpret Jonah's behaviour in Jonah 1:12 more negatively. *PRE* 10, for example, depicts Jonah as a sacrifice, but he is not the one who offers himself up. Rather, in line with the biblical account, he pushes the burden and responsibility of the sacrifice upon the sailors (Adelman 2009: 231).

The Babylonian Talmud connects Jonah's death by drowning with his refusal to prophesy. According to *b.Suk.* 53b, the form of death for withholding prophecy is asphyxiation (but it does not mention Jonah – rather, the example given is David). On this basis, so the argument goes, by drowning, Jonah was made to suffer the appropriate death sentence.

Other, predominantly Christian, commentators maintain that Jonah's willingness to die in Jonah 1:12 was a great sin. The fourth-century poem *De Jona et Nineveh*, attributed to Tertullian, describes the event with a focus on Jonah's despair and lack of hope in God (lines 109–117):

Words prompted by the Spirit of the Lord:  
'Lo! I your tempest am; I am the sum  
Of the world's madness: 'tis in me', he says,  
'That the sea rises, and the upper air  
Down rushes; land in me is far, death near,  
And hope in God is none! Come, headlong hurl  
Your cause of bane: lighten your ship, and cast  
This single mighty burden to the main,  
A willing prey!'

Even more sharply, Luther, in his Latin commentary, asks how Jonah could want to die, knowing that God was angry with him and knowing that he would be responsible for the death of the men around him. This is an instance, all too common, of one ungodly person causing an entire state and whole nation to perish and be in great misery. Luther's views are somewhat more nuanced in his German commentary where he, in fact, states that Jonah's willingness to die demonstrates the power and effect of a pure heart's faith. Jonah realizes that he alone is culpable, while the others are blameless. This insight, in turn, prompts him to accept and bear the burden of sin, reconcile himself with his fate, even pronounce his own verdict, and submit in agony to the punishment. All these things combined fall upon Jonah, drive him to utter despair of God's grace, and ultimately urge him to depart from faith.

In Calvin's view, although Jonah's offer to be thrown overboard was definitely a sign of his despair, his willingness to die nonetheless shows his awareness of his guilt and his patient submission to God's punishment. In fact, he 'willingly bears his charged guilt and his punishment' (Lecture 74).

### *Jonah 1:13*

But the men rowed to return [him] to the dry land, but they did not manage because the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

Verse 13 depicts how the sailors pay no heed to Jonah's offer to be thrown into the sea but instead attempt to row back to dry land. Several commentators have commented positively on their endeavour to save both themselves and Jonah. Abarbanel, for example, argues that the sailors decided to row back in order to remove Jonah from their boat and to send him on his mission to Nineveh. God, however, wanted Jonah to repent by choosing this path freely; he therefore did not grant the sailors success. Chaim Dov Rabinowitz (1909–2001 CE), in his commentary to Jonah in *Daat Soferim*, provides a different explanation. The sailors realized that if Jonah drowned, any remaining possibility for him to carry out God's command would be utterly lost. Thus, fearing God's fury and ensuing punishment if they let Jonah drown, the sailors sought to save him with all their might.

*PRE 10*, exaggerating the positive impression that the biblical account gives, paints these sailors as men of compassion and love. Although they by now had identified Jonah as the source of the storm, the sailors nonetheless initially refused to throw him overboard and instead tried alternative solutions in order to save his life. They lowered him to the knees in the water whereupon the sea calmed. When they took him out of the water, the storm commenced again. After repeating this effort twice more, each time putting more of Jonah in the water, with the same result, they saw no other way out than to throw Jonah into the water, whereupon the storm abated. This whole exercise emphasizes the sailors' righteousness, but it also, as Adelman points out, depicts them as 'foils to Jonah in his anti-mission. They pity the prophet [...] while Jonah, wishing to abort the salvation of the Ninevites [...] risks all his shipmates' lives in the storm' (Adelman 2009: 232–233).

Many of the Church Fathers are very appreciative of the sailors. In his Homily 3.8, 'On Repentance and Almsgiving', John Chrysostom encourages his audience to be like the sailors, who, in Jonah 1:12–13, 'neither despise a single soul nor neglect a single body'. He further stresses that the sailors were not eager to condemn Jonah. Rather than throwing the prophet into the water after discovering that he had sinned and thus being responsible for the calamities facing them, they tried to save him. 'They demonstrated tolerance and constraint'. Theodore of Mopsuestia is somewhat less enthusiastic about the sailors, simply stating that they thought it would be dangerous to cast out into the sea a man who was close to God.

At times, the Christian appreciation of the sailors has been combined with anti-Jewish sentiments. Several Christian exegetes have compared the sailors with the Jews at the time of Jesus, to the detriment of the latter. As Jerome writes:

They refused to shed blood, preferring rather to die than kill. O how changed are they now! The people that had served God (Deut 10:12) saying, ‘crucify him, crucify him’ (Luke 23:21).

This type of anti-Jewish polemic is systemic to much of Jerome’s Jonah commentary (cf. below, Jonah 1:14).

Another, significantly smaller, group of Christian retellings, equally anti-Jewish in their outlook, cast the sailors in the Book of Jonah in a bad light. Behind this interpretative move is the desire to reinforce the typology of Jonah and Jesus. The sailors are depicted as brutal men, in direct opposition to their presentation in the biblical narrative. Moreover, they are painted as Jews rather than Gentiles.

For example, in the illustrations (see Figure 1) of the Jonah narrative in Härkeberga Church (Sweden) by the mediaeval German-Swedish painter Albrekt Målare (Latinized as Albertus Pictor) (1440/45–1509 CE). Medieval paintings of Jonah and the whale by Albertus Pictor.



**FIGURE 1** Illustrations of the Jonah narrative in Härkeberga Church (Sweden) by the mediaeval German-Swedish painter Albrekt Målare (Latinized as Albertus Pictor) (1440/45–1509 CE). Medieval paintings of Jonah and the whale by Albertus Pictor. Source: Xauxa Håkan Svensson. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

painter Albrekt Målare (Latinized as Albertus Pictor) (1440/45–1509 CE), the sailors are portrayed as cruel men with grotesque noses and conical hats, both associated with European mediaeval Jewry (cf. Jonah 2:11) (see further Malmberg; Melin 2009).<sup>4</sup> The sailors are thus here depicted as Jews, or rather what a person in the mediaeval ages would have associated with Jewry (Friedman 1988: 128). The onlookers would, as a result, have interpreted Jonah 1:13 as a precursor to the passion narrative: the sailors/Jews killed Jonah/Jesus.

### *Jonah 1:14*

And they called to ὙΗΩΗ and said: ‘Please, ὙΗΩΗ, may we not perish for the sake of this man, and do not bring upon us innocent blood. For you are ὙΗΩΗ. As you have wanted, you have done.’

In verse 14, the sailors’ prayer to ὙΗΩΗ emphasizes his power, authority, and omnipotence. Again, we note the Christian proclivity for appreciating the sailors. Jerome, for example, in his *Against the Pelagians*, 2.23, highlights the sailors’ faith in God. Despite not knowing the reasons as to why Jonah, a prophet of God, needed to be punished, the sailors nevertheless justified God and trusted in his character as a just judge. In his Jonah commentary, Jerome goes one step further and contrasts the sailors’ strong faith and their willingness to die on behalf of Jonah with the Jews who in response to Pontius Pilate stated that Jesus’s blood might be upon them and their children.

This seems to be the confession of Pilate, as he washes his hands and says, ‘I am clean of the blood of this man’ (Matt 27:24). The Gentiles do not want Christ to die, and affirm that it is innocent blood. And the Jews say, ‘let his blood fall upon us again and on our son’ (Matt 27:25).

The idea of saving the many while sacrificing a single man is also found, although in a non-judgemental manner, in the Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 12:3 (cf. Jonah 1:11). It later reappears in the fourteenth-century poem ‘Patience’, where the sailors state (line 172) that ‘Do! All sink in his sin, and for his guilt perish’. As Andrew points out, this is in all likelihood a conscious echo of the High Priest Caiaphas’s words in John 11:50 (‘You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish’). Later in the same poem (lines 225–228), the sailors cry out:

First they pray to the Prince that prophets serve,  
That He give them the grace to grieve Him never,

Because they mingle their hands in blameless blood,  
Though that man were His that they here killed.

Andrew argues that we again hear an echo from the Gospel, this time from Pilate's words in Matt 27:24 (cf. above). This echo does not equate Jonah with Jesus, however, but serves instead to emphasize the *difference* between Jesus's innocence and Jonah's deserved treatment (Andrew 1973: 231–232).

### *Jonah 1:15*

And they lifted Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

‘And they lifted Jonah and threw him into the sea’

To jump or not to jump – that is one question that is debated in the reception history of Jonah 1:15. Did Jonah jump or was he thrown into the water? Further, if he was indeed thrown, did Jonah comply without a fight or did he resist the sailors? The biblical text states unequivocally that the sailors lifted Jonah and threw him overboard. This, however, has not restrained interpreters from envisaging other scenarios. The Hellenistic-Jewish sermon *On Jonah* 14:3 offers the unusual viewpoint that Jonah threw himself into the sea, yet there is also an alternative textual variant of the sermon where Jonah was thrown. It is possible that this variant was written because some people objected to Jonah's apparent suicide (Siegert 1992: 134). The same idea – that Jonah not only volunteered to be tossed into the sea but actually jumped willingly – is also attested in a few Muslim traditions. In his *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, commentary to Q21:87 (but commenting on Q37:141), Ibn Kathīr states that ‘Yunus stood up, removed his garment, and cast himself into the sea.’ In his subsequent commentary to Q37:139–148, Ibn Kathīr writes that Jonah ‘took off his garment so that he could throw himself into the sea, and they tried to stop him.’ Jerome, staying closer to the Hebrew text, maintains that the sailors were responsible for Jonah ending up in the water. This act, however, was carried out in a most gentle manner. According to Jerome, the choice of words in Jonah 1:15 shows that the sailors ‘took’ him rather than ‘seized’ him or ‘threw’ him, which in turn indicates that the sailors did not discharge Jonah into the sea with repugnance. It further indicates that Jonah went of his own accord. Jerome's commentary here is not in line with the Hebrew text; instead, as the next Hebrew word makes clear, the sailors did indeed ‘throw’ Jonah into the sea (*wayetiluhu*).

Jonah 1:15 forms the pinnacle of the sixteenth-century set of sermons on the Book of Jonah by the English Protestant reformer (and later martyr) John Hooper (1495–1555 CE). In these sermons, Jonah represents a wide array of dissenting (Catholic) elements ('Jonases') in society that seek to disrupt the ship of state that is England. Although this group contains representatives of all classes, the unruly masses form the greatest threat. Hooper's advice to the young (and ill) King Edward VI, to whom the sermons are preached, is to get rid of these dissenting Jonases, either by death or enslavement (1831: 115, 125, 127):

Among the common people ye shall also find many Jonases [...] and so displeases the majesty of God, that he will never cease from sending tempests, till those Jonases are amended, or cast into the sea

[...]

Is it possible to sail or live quietly with so many obstinate Jonases? Nay, doubtless. What remedy then? Let them be cast all into the sea [...] whom the king's majesty must cast into the sea, or send to the gallies.

[...]

The sloth and idleness, the impatience and rebellion of the people, must be punished and amended, or else they will cast the ship, the shipmaster (that is the king and his council), yea, and themselves also, into the sea, and bring this realm to desolation and utter destruction.

Jonah 1:15 thus illustrates how the worthy men of England's 'ship of the commonwealth' toss the Jonases that are 'rocking the boat' overboard. Hooper's reading of the Book of Jonah thus encourages a social system of 'docile bodies' accepting the authority of the King, Word-Magistrate, and (Protestant) Preacher (Sherwood 1997: 379–388, eadem 2000: 39–42. See also Gane 1981: 100; Staffell 2008: 489–492).

A few retellings omit any reference to the sailors' act. The dramatic cantata *The Whale: A Biblical Fantasy*, composed by John Tavener (1944–2013 CE) between 1965 and 1966 and first performed by the London Sinfonietta and the London Sinfonietta Chorus on 24 January 1968, skips over Jonah 1:13–16. Likewise, the sung part of the modern choral work *Jonah: A Musical Morality* by William Mathias, jumps from Jonah 1:14 to 1:16, thus omitting the sailors throwing Jonah overboard. In the music, there is a long silence (a bar's rest) between the two verses, causing the listeners to 'fill in the blank'. When the singing recommences, the choir states: 'And the blood of Jonah was not upon their hands'.

*The Sailors' Violation of the Code of Hospitality*

The sailors ultimately decided to save themselves by throwing Jonah into the sea. In many ways, their behaviour violates the code of hospitality. In the words of the Romanian-born writer, Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1986), and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (1928–2016 CE), the sailors (Wiesel 1981: 141):

dispose of a helpless passenger in order to save their own skins [...] Although Jonah is not one of their own, he is their guest, their passenger. Don't they know that a ship's crew is duty-bound to save the lives of the passengers before their own? And remember: Jonah is not a stowaway; he has, after all, paid his fare.

The sailors' violation of the code of hospitality has been a topic in several fictional interactions with the Book of Jonah. The novel *The Strange Nation of Rafael Mendes* (*A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes*) by the Jewish Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar (1935–2011 CE) is inspired by the biblical Jonah narrative (see also Jonah 4). The main character Rafael appears again and again throughout history in different incarnations. The Rafael Mendes who lived during the Inquisition is a 'New Christian'. After imprisonment and prolonged torture, Rafael and his companion Afonso manage to escape, only to end up on a ship run by Jew-hating sailors. Near the coast of Brazil, the weather suddenly changes. The sailors blame the two 'descendants of Christ's killers' on board:

'Divine punishment has befallen us,' muttered the sailors, 'for we are harbouring two heretics, two descendants of Christ's killers.' Tension kept mounting, and one night Rafael and Afonso woke up with shouts and the clangor of swords. [...] 'Save yourselves,' the captain shouted at them, 'jump into the sea.' (p. 126)

In the penultimate incarnation, Rafael Mendes seeks to return to Spain to fight with the Republicans. He does not reach Spain but instead dies aboard the ship and, like Jonah, his body is thrown into the sea (Barr 1996: 43). The characters in the Book of Jonah are thus read and interpreted through the lens of the last 2000 years of Jewish persecution. Rafael Mendes has a much clearer understanding of the Jewish relationship with the Gentile world than the biblical Jonah ever had. As a result, Scliar does not have the strength, or possibly the patience, to treat the sailors as upright, decent men; instead he reads the past Jewish encounters with the Gentile world into his depictions of the sailors (Tiemeyer 2017a: 259–279). Norma Rosen expresses the same sentiments in her modern midrash on Jonah, where the fish has told the prophet what is to come: inquisitions, expulsions, ghettos, pogroms, death camps, and crematoria (Rosen 1992: 93).

Melville's *Moby-Dick* likewise employs the character of Jonah as a type for the downtrodden and enslaved. In Chapter 93 ('The Castaway'), Pip, a cheerful, young, black ship's boy, is washed overboard when they chase the whale.

Now upon the second lowering, the boat paddled upon the whale; and as the fish received the darted iron, it gave its customary rap, which happened, in this instance, to be right under poor Pip's seat. The involuntary consternation of the moment caused him to leap, paddle in hand, out of the boat; and in such a way, that part of the slack whale line coming against his chest, he breasted it overboard with him, so as to become entangled in it, when at last plumping into the water. That instant the stricken whale started on a fierce run, the line swiftly straightened; and presto! poor Pip came all foaming up to the chocks of the boat, remorselessly dragged there by the line, which had taken several turns around his chest and neck. [...] 'Damn him, cut!' roared Stubb; and so the whale was lost and Pip was saved. [...] Stubb suddenly dropped all advice, and concluded with a peremptory command, 'Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I won't pick you up if you jump; mind that. We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama.' (Herman 1851 / Richard Bentley / Public domain)

This passage emphasizes how Pip is saved, yet the other sailors stress his meagre value and his dispensability. Later, in the same Chapter 93, Melville highlights further the parallels between Jonah and Pip. In his hands, Pip becomes an inverted Jonah who, through his ordeal in the abyss, is saved; yet his sanity is lost (see further Pardes 2008: 71; Sprang 2011: 455–357):

By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.

The Polish-British novelist and mariner Joseph Conrad (1857–1924 CE) wrote several novels that feature life at sea. In his works *Lord Jim* (1899–1890) and *Typhoon* (1902), Conrad uses a scenario that echoes that of Jonah 1:6–15 in

order to explore a seaman's responsibility towards not only his crew but also his passengers. In both novels, a moment of stress provides a moment of insight that their human cargo is different from the bales of hay and the bolts of cloth that they also have on board. The Arab pilgrims and the Chinese coolies respectively are human beings for whom the captain and his crew have an obligation (Masback 1961: 329).

In *Lord Jim*, the captain fears that the boat *Patna* is about to sink. He and his crewmen, including the seaman Jim, get into the lifeboats while leaving the 800 Muslim passengers to their fate. A few days later, they learn that their ship was brought safely to shore after all. An investigation begins into the circumstances that led the crew to leave the passengers in the lurch, with the result that the crew is vilified for abandoning the ship and its passengers for the sake of saving their own lives. Jim spends the rest of his life wracked by guilt. Speaking with hindsight about his thoughts when he believed that the ship was going to sink (ch. 7), Jim muses:

'You must remember he believed, as any other man would have done in his place, that the ship would go down at any moment; the bulging, rust-eaten plates that kept back the ocean, fatally must give way, all at once like an undermined dam, and let in a sudden and overwhelming flood. He stood still looking at these recumbent bodies, a doomed man aware of his fate, surveying the silent company of the dead. They were dead! Nothing could save them! There were boats enough for half of them perhaps, but there was no time. No time! No time! It did not seem worthwhile to open his lips, to stir hand or foot.'

[...]

'He protested he did not think of saving himself. The only distinct thought formed, vanishing, and re-forming in his brain, was: eight hundred people and seven boats; eight hundred people and seven boats.'

Turning to the novella *Typhoon*, the opposite situation occurs. Captain MacWhirr steers the ship *SS Nan-Shan* into a typhoon when sailing on the Chinese Sea. As they fear that the ship is going to sink, questions arise concerning what to do with the Chinese passengers on board:

A minute passed. Some of the stars winked  
rapidly and vanished.  
'You left them pretty safe?' began the Captain  
abruptly, as though the silence were unbearable.  
'Are you thinking of the coolies, sir? I rigged  
lifelines all ways across that 'tween-deck'.  
'Did you? Good idea, Mr. Jukes'.  
'I didn't ... think you cared to ... know', said  
Jukes – the lurching of the ship cut his speech

as though somebody had been jerking him around while he talked – ‘how I got on with ... that infernal job. We did it. And it may not matter in the end’.

‘Had to do what’s fair, for all – they are only Chinamen. Give them the same chance with ourselves – hang it all. She isn’t lost yet. Bad enough to be shut up below in a gale –’

‘That’s what I thought when you gave me the job, sir’, interjected Jukes, moodily.

‘– without being battered to pieces’, pursued Captain MacWhirr with rising vehemence. ‘Couldn’t let that go on in my ship, if I knew she hadn’t five minutes to live. Couldn’t bear it, Mr. Jukes.’

Conrad’s *The Shadow Line* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus* stand even closer to the Book of Jonah. In both cases, the ship is in great danger due to circumstances that appear almost supernatural and to have been caused by just one man. Just like Jonah, that man (Mr Burns/Jimmy Wait) is not part of the crew. He, again like Jonah, is isolated and does not respond well to the crew’s kindness. As Masback highlights, each of these two novels feature six motifs that are each reminiscent of the Book of Jonah: (1) both ‘Jonah types’ appear suddenly and disconcertingly and disrupt the normal order on board the ship, (2) both ‘Jonahs’ are fleeing from something in their past, (3) both ‘Jonahs’ are set apart from the rest of the people on board the ship, (4) both ‘Jonahs’ seem to anticipate that they will be sacrificed, yet the crew show them only compassion, (5) there are reasons to believe that both ‘Jonahs’ are actually, at least to some extent, responsible for the calamity that is facing the ship, and (6) both ‘Jonahs’ are involved in putting an end to the calamity: Mr Burns appears on deck, returned to health, and the heat that has faced the ship is eased by a strong breeze; Jimmy Wait dies, and his body is consigned to the sea with the result that the wind begins to blow and the ship can journey further. Despite these parallels to the Book of Jonah, however, these two narratives form a marked contrast to the biblical narrative. First, neither crew forsakes the afflicted man. Second, it is implied that the ship survives *thanks to* the crew’s charitable behaviour towards the man. For Conrad, according to Masback, ‘the only hope for man is to act out of courage, out of a conviction of the solidarity of the human race’. In this manner, Conrad shames the sailors in the Jonah narrative, who acted out of cowardice and who were willing to assign Jonah to his death in order to save themselves (Masback 1961: 331–333).

In yet another novella by Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*, the Jonah narrative meets the Cain and Abel narrative. The character Leggatt is a man on the run. Like Cain, he has murdered a fellow crew member on board his ship. He is spotted by the captain, who is on board another ship, while swimming away from his ship and thus fleeing from justice. The captain takes him on board, hides him, and eventually drops him back into the sea so that he can swim to freedom. Leggatt is both a type for Cain and a type for Jonah, fused together by their shared wandering and their flight from justice/God (cf. Jonah 1:3; 4:4) (Leiter 1960: 159–175).

‘and the sea ceased from its raging’

The sailors’ action caused the sea to calm, with the result that the remaining crew on board the ship was safe. Christian literature commonly expands upon the notion that Jonah is cast into the sea to *save* the sailors: Jonah, the single man who dies for the sake of redeeming the many, is understood as a type of Jesus’s death upon the cross. This interpretation conflates Jonah’s willingness to be thrown overboard to save the sailors’ lives (Jonah 1:12) and Jesus’s willing sacrifice on the cross. Jacob of Serug, for example, observes that the sailors bound Jonah, wished him peace, and expressed their belief that they would be saved by his atoning blood (26.411–12). Later in the same poem, the typology is made between the sailors and Pontius Pilate (Eng. transl. Kitchen 2011: 34–35):

Jonah stood before the sailors while being  
questioned  
Just as also our Lord was tried by Pilate.  
The sailors implored God on account of Jonah  
Lest they be destroyed by the blood of a man  
who was righteous.  
The judge too washed his hands on account  
of our Lord  
Lest he be defiled by the holy blood which was  
innocent. (28. 413.4–9)

Another similar approach, lines 111–112 of the fifth-century poem ‘Hymnus Ieiunantium’ (‘Hymn for those who fast’) by the Christian poet Prudentius, read:

The man whose guilt the urn declares  
Alone must die, the rest to save.

Augustine expresses this typology explicitly in his *Letter* 102, section 34 (question 6), where he reads Jonah through the lens of Matt 12:39–40:

As, therefore, Jonah passed from the ship to the belly of the whale, so Christ passed from the cross to the sepulchre, or into the abyss of death. And as Jonah suffered this for the sake of those who were endangered by the storm, so Christ suffered for the sake of those who are tossed on the waves of this world.

Early Christian art often presents the scene when Jonah is being thrown into the sea to still the storm as a prototype for the crucifixion. In some cases, the symbolism is spelled out; in others it is not. For example, a third-century mosaic 'Jonah and the Fish' and a fourth-century sarcophagus, both found under St Peter's Basilica in Rome, depict how the sailors toss Jonah overboard. Likewise, the Catacomb of Saint Peter and Saint Marcellino in Rome preserves a (probably fourth-century) depiction (see Figure 2) of the sailors throwing Jonah overboard, notable not least because of the rather charming and very non-fishlike fish:

Looking at depictions of Jonah in early Christian art more broadly, a 'Jonah cycle', consisting of three key episodes, can be observed: (1) Jonah being tossed overboard by the sailors and swallowed by the fish (Jonah 1:15–2:1 [Eng. 1:17]), (2) Jonah being vomited out of the fish (Jonah 2:11 [Eng. 2:10]), and (3) Jonah reclining under the *qiqayyon* (Jonah 4:6–7). A good example can be found on



FIGURE 2 The Catacomb of Saint Peter and Saint Marcellino, Rome, Italy. Picture of the prophet Jonah being thrown into the Sea. Public Domain.

the wall painting from the catacomb of Callixtus, Rome (see further Davis 2000: 78 [Codex Palatinus Latinus 871, fol. 15 r.]). The iconography concentrates on those elements that convey the central Christian message, and these three motifs are selected because they represent key Christian tenets of faith. The tossing of Jonah overboard and his subsequent re-emergence carry the dual function of symbolizing Jesus's own death and resurrection and, by extension, also Christian baptism, whereby a Christian is understood to die and rise with Christ (Jensen 2000: 51, 78, 85). The Jonah story thus reminded viewers that baptism is a type of death and rebirth (Jensen 2000: 87–88). Other elements in the biblical narrative, such as the sins of Nineveh, are seldom depicted (Davis 2000: 72–83; Jensen 2000: 69, 75, 93).

The three scenes, right to left, are clearly seen on the sarcophagus in the Lateran Museum in Rome (fourth-century CE; see Figure 3).

There are also other sets of scenes that capture the typology between Jonah and Jesus. In the *Biblia Pauperum* ('Paupers' Bible'), a type of illustrated Bible that aimed to visualize the typological correspondences between the Old and New Testaments, Jonah is often depicted alongside Jesus being placed in the tomb. Along similar lines, Codex Palatinus Latinus 871, fol. 15 r., a manuscript from 1425 to 1450 and preserved in the Vatican Library, offers a threefold comparison. On the right, Jonah is put into the mouth of a whale that waits for him in the sea; in the centre, Jesus is placed in his coffin; and on the left, Joseph is cast into the pit.

The German pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945 CE) alludes to the last line of Jonah 1:15 in his poem 'Jonah,' written from his prison cell on 5 October 1944. The poem ends with the words 'Da stand das Meer,' a literal translation of the Hebrew expression *waya'amod hayam*. It is likely that Bonhoeffer penned this poem, which conjures up a vivid image of fear and trembling, at the very moment when he gave up hope of escape and instead accepted the likelihood of death (Plant 2013: 66).

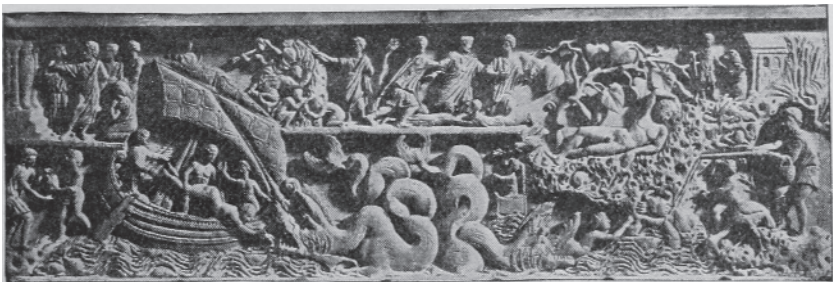


FIGURE 3 Sarcophagus, The Lateran Museum, Rome.

They screamed in the face of death, their  
 frightened bodies clawing  
 at sodden rigging, tattered by the storm,  
 [...]
   
 And Jonah spoke: "Tis I!  
 In God's eyes I have sinned. Forfeited is my life.  
 'Away with me! The guilt is mine. God's  
 wrath's for me.  
 The pious shall not perish with the sinner!  
 They trembled much. But then, with their  
 strong hands,  
 they cast the guilty one away. The sea stood still.

Bonhoeffer uses the Jonah story as a hidden criticism of the Third Reich and its narrow nationalism. Through its interaction with the Jonah narrative, the poem targets those who are indifferent to the fate of a people other than their own. Jonah himself, however, realizes the plight of others and refuses to let them die (cf. Liptzin 1985a: 242–244). Jonah committed a sin when he refused to go to Nineveh and call the Ninevites to repentance. This sin cannot be changed, yet in the present, when Jonah confesses his sin and places his life humbly before the judgement of God, then God alone can still the storm and calm the sea (Plant 2013: 60). Jonah's acknowledgement of his guilt and his instruction to the sailors to cast him overboard indicates that he has given up any attempt to justify himself; instead he has chosen to take responsibility for his guilt and in parallel also take responsibility for the lives of others (Plant 2013: 69–70). As to the sailors, Liptzin argues that they symbolize the German people in their hour of distress on board a German ship of state (Liptzin 1985a: 244).

### *Jonah 1:16*

And the men feared  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$  greatly and they sacrificed sacrifices and vowed vows.

Verse 16 tells how the sailors, having thrown Jonah into the sea, feared  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$  greatly and offered sacrifices to him. The second part of this claim has caused predominantly Jewish interpreters some concerns. Sacrifices to  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$  should only be offered in the temple in Jerusalem (e.g. 2 Chron 7:12); what the sailors were doing in the middle of the sea was therefore wrong. As a result, many interpreters rewrite the text or at least seek to explain the sailors' unorthodox (and also impractical) behaviour.

Josephus is responsible for what is probably the most extreme modification. In sharp contrast to the biblical account, Josephus nowhere depicts the sailors praying to the God of Israel. They also never make any vows and they most certainly never

offer any sacrifices. In fact, God is largely missing from Josephus's account of Jonah's adventures (*Ant.* 9:10) (Feldman 1992: 10). The 'missing' fear of YHWH and the 'missing' sacrifices, evident in the biblical text of Jonah 1:16, is, according to Feldman, likely to be the result of a conscious strategy employed by Josephus to assure his Roman target readers that the Jewish community did not seek to proselytize. The proselyting movement in Rome was at its peak when Josephus was writing his *Antiquities*, yet it was frowned upon by certain circles in Rome. Josephus thus had to tread carefully lest he offend his Roman hosts. He accordingly downplayed all references which could be (mis)-understood as propagandizing for proselytes (Feldman 1992: 22–24). Some modern retellings follow this trend of omitting verse 16. Notably, the paraphrase 'Der Prophet Jona' from 1896 by the German poet and dramatist Otto Erich Hartleben (1864–1905 CE) adheres to the plot of the Book of Jonah carefully with this one exception: it excludes any mention of the sailors' vows and sacrifices.

To solve the theological issue raised by the ban against performing sacrifices outside the Jerusalem temple, many rabbinic texts relocate the sailors' sacrifices into the future. Targum Jonathan, followed by many of the mediaeval Jewish commentators, translates Jonah 1:16 as 'and [the sailors] *promised* to offer a sacrifice before the Lord'. This reading is inspired by the extended meaning of the Hebrew verb *nadar* = 'to vow', i.e. 'to promise'. Radak, following suit, claims that the sailors *promised* to make (future) sacrifices before God (in the temple in Jerusalem), whereas Ibn Ezra simply states that the sailors sacrificed 'after they had left the ship'. By pushing the sacrifices into the future and by changing their location, this line of interpretation solves the problem of having Gentiles offering sacrifices to YHWH outside the temple in Jerusalem (Cathcart and Gordon 1989: 106, fn. 29; see further Sasson 1990: 139). The sacrifices are no longer random sacrifices taking place in the middle of the Mediterranean; they are proper, cultic sacrifices carried out in the central sanctuary in Jerusalem.

*PRE*, at the end of Chapter 10, attests to a variant of this interpretation of Jonah 1:16 (see further Smolar and Aberbach 1983: 123, who suggest that TJ forms the basis for the midrash preserved in *PRE*). As the sailors saw all the miracles that God performed for Jonah (i.e. his salvation by and adventure together with the fish; see below), they abandoned their idolatry, returned to Yafo, went up to Jerusalem, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins. As Friedlander comments, the term 'sacrifice' here is reinterpreted to refer to the sacrifice of the blood of the covenant that is shed during circumcision (cf. Adelman 2009: 233, fn. 57). Accordingly, when the sailors sacrificed and made vows, they were really converting (to Judaism). *PRE* 10 ends with a reference to the thirteenth blessing of the *Amidah* (the central prayer in Jewish liturgy, consisting of nineteen blessings), i.e. to pray for the welfare of the righteous converts (Adelman 2009: 234, fn. 60). Along similar lines, Rashi maintains

that the sailors vowed to *convert* (to the worship of the God of Israel). As demonstrated by Adelman, the conversion of the sailors in *PRE* 10 likely formed part of an overarching anti-Christian polemic in *PRE*. The sailors serve as a counterpoint to those Jews mentioned in Matt 12:39 who do not become followers of Jesus: the sailors of Jonah 1 do not become Christians; they become Jews. Furthermore, the satirical depiction of Jonah targets the Christian use of Jonah as a type for Christ. Indirectly, *PRE* 10 thus offers a veiled critique of Jesus as a messianic figure (Adelman 2009: 236).

Although the Church Fathers do not share the same theological concern as the rabbinic interpreters, many nevertheless comment on the sheer impracticality of performing sacrifices on board a ship. Jerome argues that, given that the sailors were in a boat at sea, any physical sacrifice would have been out of the question. Instead, the sailors offered a sacrifice of praise and vows to the Most High (cf. Ps 50:14; Isa 19:21 where sacrifices are offered by Gentiles) (cf. Timmer 2013). Theodore of Mopsuestia likewise considers it unlikely that the sailors performed actual sacrifices at sea; rather they completely abandoned their idols and instead devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the worship of God, promising to join his service and to make due sacrifices to him in the future.

A few commentators take the text at face value. Luther, especially, is full of admiration for the sailors. In his view, the sailors must have thought that Jonah had drowned and was dead. Furthermore, they must have felt that they had been instrumental in killing him, although reluctantly and only in compliance with God's will. They now become pious and true servants of God; all their previous gods have been forgotten (German commentary, Jonah 1:17). By contrast, the Geneva Bible Notes to Jonah 1:16 express doubts regarding the sailors' sincerity. Rather, the sailors' worship of the one true God 'was done for fear, and not from a pure heart and affection'.

### Notes

- 1 In a *tafsīr*, the complete qur'anic text for comment is cited (lemma) and accompanied with comment (Calder 1993: 101).
- 2 I am grateful to my friend Laura Giancarlo, Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, Buenos Aires, who kindly translated this poem for me.
- 3 This possibility was pointed out to me by my insightful Hebrew student, Dorothy Plummer.
- 4 For the demand that Jews wear tall, conical hats as a distinguishing mark, in accordance with the decrees of the fourth Lateran Council (1215), see Gottheil and Deutsch 1906.