"Tov Moti M'chayai": The Turning Around of the Biblical Will to Live

Mari Chernow

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Advisors:
Dr. Rachel Adler
Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

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CONTENTS

I. SETTING OUT: INITIAL REMARKS

Preface and Acknowledgements

When I began this study, I set out to explore the reasons that Biblical characters consider taking their own lives. I wanted to understand what pushes a person beyond sufferable depression, anger, sorrow and grief into the deep void of hopelessness and suicidality, at least from the Bible's perspective. What I have discovered is that the Bible's drive toward life reaches even into those depths. Unable to preserve every life, the text nonetheless leans toward meaning and hope whenever possible.

I should no longer be surprised by this orientation in the Jewish tradition. It seems that whenever I set out to learn about death and despair, my compass turns itself around and I find myself wandering back in the direction of life. That tradition both acknowledges the daunting deluge of desperation and sends out even the smallest life raft is in large part, the reason that I seek to be a student of Judaism and the Bible.

What a fortunate student I have been! I am deeply grateful to Doctors Rachel Adler and Tamara Cohn Eskenazi. I cannot thank you enough for your thoughtful feedback and for your insights into both text and human nature. I am grateful for the meetings that took place at all hours and for the articles that mysteriously appeared in my mailbox. What I cannot express in words is what I have learned from you both over the past four years. For now, I will simply say that from phenomenal courses

and seminars to mentorship and advice, from thoughts that helped to shape papers to ideas that made sermons come to life, you have deeply enriched my time in Rabbinical school. Thank you for your insights into *textbooks* and for being, in Abraham Joshua Heschel's terms, *textpeople.*

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I am grateful to Dolores Robin Ribakoff for her insights into psychological processes and suicidality. What I have learned from Dolores and Ron Bielefelt over the years extends far beyond anything I could express in this thesis.

I am also thankful to "Team Kalsman" who understood when my thoughts were consumed as if I myself had been swallowed by a whale.

Finally, my gratitude to Kara Joy Thieleman is beyond words. Kara, you supported every aspect of the writing process - the endless runs for coffee, my monopolizing the computer, the piles of books on the floor and the incessant talk of Jonah. More importantly, though, you brought to the forefront of my mind the issue of life's worth and meaning, the very inspiration for this thesis. Thank you for probing into the nature of meaning and at the same time providing it.

Introduction

Alan Cooper opens his article, "In Praise of Divine Caprice: The Significance of the Book of Jonah"[1] with the comment, "The book of Jonah gives common sense a battering. At almost every turn, it seems to refute some unspoken assumption, something taken for granted about the way things work in the world." Cooper has astutely observed that the book of Jonah abounds with surprising twists in plot and atypical characterizations. Examples include a ship full of pagan sailors who pray and sacrifice to the Jewish God, a prophet who asks to be thrown into the sea and an entire city (including the livestock) that turns to repentance after a single warning.

Perhaps the most startling reversal in the Book of Jonah is Jonah's outcry of טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּי "Better is my death than my life." This statement is revolutionary in the Biblical narrative that tells numerous and variegated stories of the struggle for life. The first chapters describe of the creation of life and the very first commandment to human beings is to procreate (Gen 1:28). Biblical women and men throughout the text go to great lengths so that they may procreate[2] and preserve life.[3] In the dichotomies between blessing and curse, life and death, God unequivocally commands, "choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

Alternatively, human death is a source of great fear and sadness. Consider the story of Hagar, who could not bear to observe the death of her son (Gen. 21:16),

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1. Cooper, 144.
2. Sara of Genesis 16 and Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 are but a few examples.
3. Consider the story of Yocheved, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughters who conspire against Pharaoh's decree to save Moses (Ex. 1) and the story of Michal who jeopardizes relations with her father in order to save David (1 Sam. 19).

that of David who prayed, fasted and refused to rise in the hope that his son would not die (2 Samuel 12) and the many laws regarding the impurity that death threatens to spread (ex. Lev. 21).

Yet, embedded within this narrative of life are the stories of individuals who are driven toward death. Some experience a passing moment of doubting the value of life while others etch that impulse into permanence as they end their own lives. Several Biblical characters turn to God, the source of life in the Bible, to request the end of their lives. Jonah's cry, "Better is my death than my life" is perhaps the quintessential expression of this sentiment.

In this paper, I explore the meanings and consequences of *tov moti me 'chayai* in the book of Jonah. I focus on the interaction between God and Jonah that takes place in chapter 4. I probe into the nature of Jonah's crisis and the motivation behind his drastic plea. Equally important is God's response which on the surface sidesteps Jonah's outcry but upon closer inspection offers an alternative life-affirming perspective.

In addition, I examine other Biblical passages in which a person longs for death. These passages serve in part to highlight the distinct dynamics of Jonah, chapter 4. They also help to provide a more complete picture of the Bible's perspective on moments of despair and of God's insistence that human life is valuable.

Context of the Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah is the fifth among the books of the twelve "minor" prophets in the Hebrew Bible. It falls between the books of Obadiah and Micah. Several scholars[4] note a second century C.E. scroll that is nearly identical to the Masoretic text.[5] In this scroll, Jonah is placed the same literary context.[6] Two Greek codices, however, place Jonah as the sixth in the series of the twelve prophets.[7] In these codices, Micah is the third book rather than the sixth thus Jonah falls between Obadiah and Nahum. While Sasson comments that, "no single reason has satisfactorily accounted for the Hebrew or Greek sequences of the prophets among the Twelve..."[8] he does note that "An interest in Assyrian matters may well explain why Micah follows Jonah in Hebrew Scripture and why Nahum takes this place in the Greek sequence."[9] Indeed, the fate of Assyria, represented by its capital Nineveh, is quite relevant to Jonah as we shall see.

The book itself contains no reference to a specific time in history. As Sasson points out, Jonah is the only named character and no superscription precedes the narrative.[10] Scholars differ as to the dating of the composition of the book of Jonah. 2 Kings 14:25 refers to a "Jonah ben Amitai" who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam (8th century B.C.E.). Various theories have arisen that relate the dating of the book to the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E. Sasson notes that some have suggested

4. For example, Sasson 13-15 and Simon xlii.
5. Simon notes that there are 3 "minor" differences, xlii.
6. Sasson notes that the books of Hosea and Malachi are missing from this text. Therefore, this conclusion is based on scholarly conjecture. Sasson, 15
7. Sasson, 14. The codices are Vaticanus and Alexandrinus.
8. Sasson, 15.
9. Ibid.
10. Sasson, 21.

a date before 612 during "the period when Nineveh was an active metropolis."[11] Others argue that the description of Nineveh ("a great city... a walk of three days" 3:3) suggests a time delay between Nineveh's fall and the composition of Jonah.[12] Simon identifies "unmistakably postexilic elements" in the book's language.[13] While Simon, Sasson and Bolin refrain from narrowing down a date much further than the Second Temple period, Band notes that "most biblical scholars agree...[Jonah] was probably published in the late fifth century, B.C.E."[14]

Translation Notes

For most of the texts that are central to this study, I use my own translation, relying on recent scholarly translations which are cited in the footnotes. However, creating a detailed original translation of all necessary texts would be a project beyond the scope of this study. For example, for Job, chapter 3, I use Clines' translation and recommend his thorough and insightful notes. See Clines 67-105 for his comments on this beautiful poetic passage. For the Qohelet passages, I use Crenshaw's translation. Likewise, I recommend his notes and comments for a more comprehensive discussion of translation issues. For several other short passages, I use the NRSV translation. All of these are cited in the notes. In a few cases, however, I dispute with one or two choices of words. For example, I prefer "Adonai" to NRSV's "The LORD". In these cases, I make note of the changes.

Terms for God

I will begin by stating that I have found no ideal solution for the problem of

11. Sasson, 21.
12. Ibid.
13. Simon, xli.
14. Band, 179.

how to refer to God in Jewish scholarly work. When I first studied the Bible in an academic context, it was appropriate to use "Adonai" as an English approximation of the tetragrammaton. Based on my studies at the University of California at San Diego, I tend toward the literal in matters of translation and would ordinarily prefer to stay as close to the Hebrew as possible in any English rendering.[15]

However, I also profoundly value the Jewish tradition and the unyielding honor accorded to the name of God. This paper is a work inspired by and submitted to the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, an institution that knows both the tension and the profound satisfaction found in having one foot in the scholarly world and the other in the religious. On this particular matter, I opt in favor of the Jewish religious perspective. I thus refer to God as *Adonai*, recognizing that this term is an imperfect substitution, but among the better options that we have at this time.

Another matter that lacks a definitive solution is language that refers to the gender of God. Wherever possible, I have avoided pronouns that assign God a gender. In translation of the Bible, I follow the Hebrew where the pronoun used for God is masculine. An exception to the above is that in all quotations of scholarly work, I cite material exactly as it appears in the original.

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15. I am grateful to William Propp and Richard Elliot Friedman for initially introducing me to Biblical scholarship and teaching me to read Hebrew text as precisely as possible.

Translation of the Book of Jonah

Chapter 1

(1) And the word of Adonai was to Jonah, the son of Amitai, saying, (2)"Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great[16] city and call out to it, for its evil[17] has arisen before me." (3) And Jonah arose to flee toward Tarshish from before Adonai and he went down[18] to Jaffa and he found a ship that was going[19] to Tarshish and he paid the fare[20] and he went down to it to go[21] with them to Tarshish [away][22] from before Adonai. (4) And Adonai cast a great wind upon the sea and there was a great storm on the sea and the ship threatened[23] to break up. (5) And the sailors were afraid and they cried out, each one to his god and they cast[24] the cargo[25] that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter for them, but[26] Jonah went down into the recesses[27] of the vessel[28] and he lay down and fell asleep.[29] (6) And the captain of the sailors[30] approached him and said

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16. גדל appears 14 times in the book of Jonah. This term describes Nineveh (here, 3:2,3 and 4:11) wind (1:4 and 1:12), a storm (1:4) fear/awe (1:10 and 16), the fish (2:1), Jonah's unhappiness (4:1) and gladness (4:6), and is part of a merism describing the repenters in Nineveh (3:5). It appears as a verb as God chides Jonah regarding the plant that "you did not grow" in 4:10. In some cases, גדל describes a natural phenomenon that God manipulates (often in order to make a point to Jonah). In others, it modifies particular feelings (often associated with the natural phenomena). The message seems to be that God causes dramatic action on the earth which in causes human beings to experience strong emotions.
17. This term appears in other prophetic books, particularly in Jeremiah where it denotes either the misdeeds (ex. Jer. 1:16) or the troubles (Jer. 2:27) of the people.
18. ירד also appears in 1:23 and 2:7. It joins עלה, קום and טול in creating a motif of up and down motion.
19. Literally, "coming".
20. Literally, "gave its price".
21. Literally, "come".
22. Implied.
23. Here, I follow Limburg who captures the ambiguity of this phrase. The subject of this verb (literally "thought") is clearly the ship. Some translations neglect the this grammatical point (i.e., "one thought the ship was being wrecked" - Lacocque and Lacocque) while others overstate the personification i.e., "the ship expected itself to break up" - Sasson).
24. The same verb attributed to God in v. 4.
25. Usually, "vessels". I concur with Sasson, Simon, Limburg and others that the intended meaning appears to be "cargo". In addition, this may be an aural play with the word לְהָקֵל.
26. Literally, "and". Jonah's actions are in given in distinction to those of the sailors.
27. Simon (p. 9) points out that this is "the construct form of *yarkatayim* (as in 'And for the *rear* of the Tabernacle... for the corners of the Tabernacle at the *rear*' [Exod. 26:22-23]), which is the dual of *yarketah*...The basic meaning is 'the farthest end.'" I understand this to mean the deepest hold of the ship.
28. A hapax legomenon. Elsewhere, the term אֲנִיָּה is used. Here, the root is סִפֵּן, meaning "cover". Simon suggests that this means that the ship had a "full deck and covered hold." (p.9).
29. רדם indicates a particularly deep sleep, often associated with God, as in Dan. 8:18 and Job 4:13 and most notably, Gen. 2:21. Also a word play with ירד.
30. Literally, "the chief of the ropers". This is the only occurrence of חֹבֵל as a collective noun.

to him, "What is with you, falling asleep? Get up![31] Call to your god. Perhaps the god will think[32] of us and we will not perish. (7) And the people said to one another, "Let us cast lots and [then][33] we will know on whose account this evil is upon us." And they cast lots and the lot fell upon Jonah. (8) And they said to him, "Tell us now because of whom is this evil is upon us. What is your work? And from where did you come? What is your land? And from what people are you?" (9) And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew and I fear[34] Adonai the God of the heavens who made the sea and the dry land." (10) And the people feared a great fear and they said to him, "What is this you have done?" for the people knew that from before Adonai he was fleeing since he had told them. (11) And they said to him, "What shall we do to you so that[35] the sea will calm around us?" For the sea was growing more stormy. (12) And he said to them, "Lift me and cast me into the sea and the sea will quiet around you[36] because I know that it is because of me that this great storm is upon you." (13) However,[37] the people rowed to return to the dry land but[38] they were not able because the sea was growing more stormy around them. (14) And they called to Adonai and they said, "Please Adonai, let us not perish on account of the life of this man and do not put upon us[39] innocent blood because you are Adonai. Whatever you desire, you have done." (15) And they lifted Jonah up and cast him into the sea and the sea stopped its raging.[40] (16) And the people feared[41] a great fear of Adonai and they sacrificed a sacrifice to Adonai and they vowed vows.[42]

Chapter 2

(1) And Adonai appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish[43] three days and three nights. (2) And Jonah prayed to Adonai his God from the belly of the fish. And he said:

(3) "I called out of my distress[44] to Adonai and he answered me.
From the belly of Sheol I cried out, You heard my voice.

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31. The captain commands Jonah, using the same term that God uses is v. 2.
32. A hapax legomenon.
33. Implied.
34. Or "I am in awe of Adonai". I use "fear" here in order to relate this verse to the other appearances of יָרֵא in this chapter (ex. v.10)
35. Literally, "and".
36. Literally, "from you".
37. Literally, "and".
38. Literally, "and".
39. In other words, do not hold us accountable for the death of an innocent person. I keep this translation more literal in order to capture the sense that responsibility for the death of Jonah is a weight that the sailors do not want to bear.
40. Literally, "stood from its raging".
41. See note #33.
42. The doubling of terms adds a sense of emphasis.
43. Simon writes, "The feminine form *dagah* is normally a collective noun (as in "the *fish* in the Nile will die" [Exod. 7:18]). It is difficult to explain why it is used here. Perhaps it is simply a case of elegant variation..." (p. 19)
44. Literally, "distress to me".

(4) And you cast me [to][45] the depth, in the heart of [the][46] seas
And your streams surrounded me
All your breakers and your waves passed over me.
(5) And I, I said, 'I have been driven away from before your eyes.
But may I continue to look upon the sanctuary of Your holiness?'[47]
(6) Water enveloped me, up until death[48]
The deep surrounded me
Reeds twined around my head.
(7) I descended to the bases of the mountains[49]
The land, its bars[50] [locked] behind[51] me forever
Yet,[52] you raised my life from the pit, Adonai, my God!
(8) When my life was growing faint[53] I recalled Adonai
And my prayer came to You, to the sanctuary of Your holiness.
(9) Those who cling[54] to vapors of emptiness will abandon their favor.[55]
(10) However[56] I, in a voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you,
What I have sworn, I will complete. Deliverance belongs to Adonai!"
(11) And Adonai spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

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45. Implied.
46. Implied.
47. I concur with translations such as Sasson, Simon and NRSV which cast this as a question. This is in keeping with the tone of the remainder of Jonah's prayer.
48. נפש typically means "soul" or "life". Some translators read נפש as part of the body here. For example, Limburg writes, "Water closed in on me up to my neck" (p.64) and Simon argues that, "...*nefesh* also has the sense of mouth and throat (e.g., "Sheol has opened wide its *gullet* and parted its jaws in a measureless gape" [Isa. 5:14]; see also Ecc.6:7). Others read into this phrase a more abstract reference to life (ex. "Waters choked me to death," Lacocque and Lacocque, p. xix). I concur that עד נפש suggests death or near death.
49. Simon, Sasson, Lacocque and Lacocque and Limburg all translate קצב as "base". Simon explains that in the only two other occurrences of קצב as a noun (1 Kings 6:25 and 7:37), it refers to form or shape. He further connects the verb to both "cut" and "boundary," suggesting that קְצָבֵי הָרִים connotes the extremities (i.e., bases) of the mountains. He writes, "The Vulgate accordingly renders this phrase as 'to the edges of the mountains.' The reference seems to be to the foundations of the mountains, which in biblical cosmography reach all the way to the bottom of the sea..." (p. 22)
50. A possible word play with בָּרַח. בְּרִיחַ often refers to city gates (ex., Deut. 3:5, Ju. 16:3 and 1Sam. 23:7).
51. This phrase implies that the bars or gates have shut behind Jonah. בעד is used idiomatically with סגר to mean "shut behind" as in Ju. 3:23 and Isa. 26:20.
52. Literally, "and".
53. See La. 2:12 and Ps. 77:4 for examples of the use of הִתְעַטֵּף as "grow faint."
54. This is the only place in which שמר appears in the piel. I follow Simon's translation.
55. From God. Limburg translates, "abandon the one who loves them," though I do not find the evidence convincing evidence that חסד refers to the deity. Sasson translates, "give up their hope for mercy." I prefer "favor" which refers to a more general status. In addition, though "hope for" is implied, it is not found in the Hebrew text.
56. Literally, "and".

Chapter 3

(1) And the word of Adonai was to Jonah a second time, saying, (2) "Get up! Go to Nineveh, the great city and call out to it the message[57] that I am telling you." (3) And Jonah got up and he went to Nineveh according to the word of Adonai and Nineveh was a great city for God, a walk of three days. (4) And Jonah began to come to the city, a walk of one day and he called and he said, "Another forty days and Nineveh will be overturned." (5) And the people of Nineveh believed God and they called for a fast and they wore sackcloth from their largest to their smallest. (6) And the word reached the king of Nineveh and he got up from his throne, and he removed the cloak from himself and he covered [himself][58] with sackcloth and he sat upon the ashes. (7) And he proclaimed, declaring[59] in Nineveh, "By judgment of the king and his nobles[60] saying: The person and the beast, the cattle and the flock - do not taste a thing! Do not graze and do not drink water! (8) And people[61] and beasts shall cover themselves in sackcloth and they shall call out to God mightily. And people shall return from their evil ways and from the destruction that is in their hands. (9) Who knows whether God will turn and relent and turn back from his burning anger so that[62] we do not perish." (10) And Adonai saw their deeds that they turned from their evil ways and God repented[63] of the evil that he said he would do to them and he did not do it.

Chapter 4

(1) And this was evil[64] to Jonah, a great evil, and he burned with anger.[65] (2) And he prayed to Adonai and he said, "Please Adonai, was this not my word when I was in my land?[66] Because of this, I anticipated[67] to flee to Tarshish, because I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God,[68] slow to anger and abounding in kindness, and repenting of evil.[69] (3) And now therefore[70] Adonai, please take my soul from me

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57. Literally, "the call".
58. Implied.
59. Literally, "And he proclaimed. And he said."
60. Literally, "Great ones".
61. The nouns are collective.
62. Literally, "and".
63. For a discussion of this term see the analysis of chapter 4.
64. Bolin cites G.I. Davies who points out that "in the remaining two instances in the Old Testament where רעע *qal* occurs without a subject and it followed by ל or אל + noun or suffix, the subject is always an implied personal pronoun and רעע does not denote wickedness." (Bolin, 150)
65. See the analysis of chapter 4 for a discussion of Jonah's emotional reaction.
66. Sasson makes note of the rhyming assonance of this question:
67. Simon translates, "I hastened to flee" writing that קִדַּמְתִּי is "an auxiliary verb that serves an adverbial function." I concur with the grammatical point, but prefer to maintain the notion of expectation found in the root קדם.
68. See Exod. 34:6-7 and Nu. 14:18. See the chapter 4 analysis.
69. Rachel Adler renders this phrase, "indulgent of evil".
70. Literally, "and now". I have included "therefore" in order to indicate the consequential nature of וְעַתָּה. For other examples, see Gen. 3:22, 27:3 and Is. 36:8.

as better is my death than my life." (4) And Adonai said, "Are you [so][71] good and angry?"

(5) And Jonah went out from the city and he sat east of the city and he made for himself there a shelter and he sat beneath it in the shade so that[72] he would see what would happen in the city. (6) And Adonai-God appointed a ricinus plant[73] and it arose above Jonah to be shade upon his head and to save[74] him from his evil.[75] And Jonah was glad about the ricinus, a great gladness. (7) And God appointed a swallowing worm on the next morning and it struck the ricinus and it dried up. (8) And it happened when the sun set, and God appointed a quiet[76] east wind and the sun struck upon Jonah's head and he swooned[77] and he asked his soul to die[78] and he said, "better is my death than my life." (9) And God said to Jonah, "Are you [so][79] good and angry about the ricinus plant?" And he said, "I am so good and angry, I could die"[80].

(10) And Adonai said, "You cared about[81] the ricinus that you did not work for and you did not grow that one night it was here and the next[82] it perished. (11) And I, should I not care about Nineveh, the great city that has in it more than twelve myriads of people who do not know their right from their left, and many beasts?"

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71. Implied.
72. Literally, "until that". Some translators write "waited" (Sasson) or "waiting" (NRSV). While this may be the sense of the phrase, I suggest that it is implied rather than stated.
73. A castor oil plant found in Israel. The term קִיקָיוֹן has not been decisively defined, only appearing in this chapter of the Bible. Simon notes that "Targum Jonathan does not attempt to translate the Hebrew noun... and takes it over literally. The Septuagint renders it as 'pumpkin'...[the ricinus] has large palmate leaves and is characterized by extremely rapid growth" (p.42). NRSV translates "a bush". Trible renders, "a plant". Sasson leaves it as "a *qiqayon* plant". I follow Simon.
74. A play on words with צל.
75. Many translators (ex. Simon and Sasson) render "distress" here. I prefer to keep this key term consistent throughout the book. In addition, I will argue that the use of רעה here in conjunction with להציל suggests a state more severe than "distress".
76. I follow Simon who bases his translation on the root חרש which means to be silent or speechless. However, this is the only place in which (ת)חֲרִישִׁי appears as an adjective and its meaning is debated. Other possibilities are fierce (Sasson), stifling (Lacocque and Lacocque) and hot (Limburg). Sasson notes that "The phrase *ruah qadim harisit* consists of a feminine noun (*ruah*) separated from its feminine adjective (*harisit*) by a masculine noun with which it is in construct (*qadim*). Scripture has only one other equivalent phrase, at Exod 14:21, 'The Lord pushed the sea with a powerful east wind...' These attestations clearly indicate that whenever Hebrew narrators call upon the east wind, they are alerting readers to God's controlling presence." (p. 303).
77. This verb can mean either to wrap oneself or to swoon. The latter meaning is also found in Isa. 51:20, Ez. 31:15 and Am. 8:13.
78. Simon translates, "wished to die." Sasson translates, "longing to die." I prefer to retain the dialogic nature of the verb שאל. The use of את does imply that the dialogue is internal, even though God responds in verse 9.
79. Implied.
80. Literally, "until death".
81. I follow Simon here. Although חוס is more often translated as "have compassion" or "have mercy," the issue here is not Jonah's compassion or mercy about the plant, but rather his concern over its loss.
82. Literally, "between one night it was here and between one night it had perished."

II. TURNING OVER: ADVENTURES AND INVERSIONS IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

וְאֹמַר מִי־יִתֶּן־לִי אֵבֶר כַּיּוֹנָה אָעוּפָה וְאֶשְׁכֹּנָה׃

And I say, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest!"
- Psalm 55:7

Chapters 1-3

The first three chapters of the book of Jonah provide the immediate context and background for chapter 4. Here I review and discuss in brief several elements of chapters 1-3 in anticipation of our discussion of chapter 4.

Chapter 1

From the very first words in the book of Jonah, we are brought into conversation with the stories of other prophets. The call to prophecy of 1:1-2 is not unusual nor is Jonah's initial lack of enthusiasm to bring God's word to people. What is unusual is that God calls Jonah to prophecy to non-Israelites, perhaps an early indication that Jonah's story will not be quite like those of earlier prophets. Further, while Jonah is not the first to resist his task of carrying God's message, he certainly takes prophetic reluctance to a new height. Unlike Moses (Exod. 3:1-14) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6) who resist verbally, Jonah expresses his distaste for God's task by running away. God commands him to go east to Nineveh; he boards the first ship heading west (v.3). God likewise responds in deed rather than word, casting a life-threatening storm upon the sea (v.4). By the time we reach verse 5, there can be no doubt that Jonah is unlike any other prophet. While the sailors call out to their gods and jettison cargo in order to save their lives, Jonah retreats to the lowest compartment of the ship and falls asleep. He descends as far as he possibly can (or so

we think), avoiding responsibility and anyone who might hold him responsible. The captain of the ship, however, refuses to let Jonah off the hook (v. 6). The captain commands Jonah to call out to his God, borrowing God's words קום and קרא from verse 1 (v.6).[83] The sailors, having no luck at stabilizing the ship, suggest casting lots to find the party responsible for the storm. Not surprisingly, the lot falls on Jonah (v.7). The sailors inquire about Jonah's identity with four different questions (v.8). Jonah replies with the single answer, "I am a Hebrew and I fear Adonai the God of the heavens who made the sea and the dry land." (v.9). The sailors confront Jonah for bringing misfortune upon them (v.10) Holbert observes that they too borrow language from God. In this case it comes from Genesis 3:13 when God confronts Eve[84] over the matter of the forbidden fruit. Without waiting for an answer from Jonah, they ask what they can do to calm the seas (v.11). Jonah offers to be thrown into the sea in the hope that the raging storm will calm. (v.12). The sailors, unwilling at first to sacrifice Jonah's life for their own make one final attempt to escape the storm's destructive path, unsuccessfully trying to row to shore (v.13). The sailors then call out to God. They ask not to be punished for shedding "innocent blood" a concern that apparently had not occurred Jonah. They conclude their cry with an acknowledgement that God is omnipotent (v.14). While Jonah has referred to God in terms of creation ("the God of the heavens who made the sea and the dry land") back in verse 9, the sailors describe God's unyielding ability to act ("Whatever you desire, you have done"). The sailors, perhaps unknowingly, acknowledge what Jonah has

83. Holbert, 66.

84. I address the commonalities with the Garden of Eden stories in the "Comments on Chapter 4" section.

still failed to recognize. It is as if they are saying, "When you want your prophet to arise and go to Nineveh, that is exactly what he will do!" The sailors finally cast Jonah into the sea which does indeed calm down (v.15). In the final verse of the chapter, the sailors once again acknowledge God (v.16). They have adopted the fear of God of which Jonah speaks in verse 9 and demonstrate their newfound appreciation with sacrifices and vows.

Chapter 1 is an appropriate opening for a book full of reversals. Already, the story is upside down and backwards. God's prophet appears to be reckless and self-centered. In comparison, the sailors are responsible and pious, repeating words of God and seeming to understand the deity better than Jonah does.

With the exception of God's initial command, Jonah and God communicate with one another not in word, but in deed. When Jonah takes flight, God calls up forces of nature to chase him down (a phenomenon that has only just begun). As in Esther 3:7-8 and 1 Sam. 10:20-21 the casting of lots indicates that God continues to monitor and influence the turn of events.

In chapter 1 we also see the first indication of Jonah's possible death wish. His descent into the inner recess of the ship can be understood to be suicidal or at least a passive acceptance of death. His willingness to be cast into the sea also suggests readiness for death. The latter point, though, indicates that Jonah is at least ambivalent about dying. After all, Jonah does not hurl *himself* into the sea upon confirmation that he is responsible for the storm nor does he intervene while the sailors attempt to row to safety. On the other hand, Jonah does not attempt to bargain with God. He does not ask for relief for the innocent sailors or for his own life to be

spared. In fact, as far as we know, Jonah does not pray at all despite the captain's command.

In sum, chapter 1 describes a prophet who will heed neither divine nor human command. Jonah seeks to avoid virtually all responsibility until he finally volunteers to be cast into the sea, a gesture with several possible interpretations. We enter chapter 2 with Jonah sinking into the depths of a sea that has finally calmed.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 takes the book of Jonah from the realm of the unusual to that of the absurd. It opens with God appointing a great fish to swallow Jonah. He remains in the belly of the fish for three days and nights (v.1). In verse 2 Jonah finally opens his mouth and prays to God. Scholarly debate exists as to whether or not Jonah's prayer is original to the text or a later insertion.[85] The primary basis for suspicion of its originality is the content.[86] The prayer is closer to a psalm of thanksgiving than a plea for mercy or a confession of guilt as we might expect. In fact, it shares many phrases with the book of Psalms.[87] While "most commentators have agreed that it is a secondary intrusion into the book,"[88] Magonet argues that the author "...puts into Jonah's mouth certain pious affirmations, yet each comes out in a particularly ironic way in its context in the book."[89] Jonah's psalm, according to Magonet, is like his declaration in 1:9 and his accusation in 4:2 (see below). All of these are traditional

85. For discussions of this matter, see Simon xxxiii-xxxv and 15-18, Sasson 16-19 and Magonet 39-44.
86. Magonet, 39.
87. See Magonet, 50 and Lindburg 63-6. Magonet argues that "Even if one accepts the possibility of a deliberate borrowing from the psalter, it is difficult to prove the dependence of one text on the other." (p. 44).
88. Ibid.
89. Magonet, 52.

texts that Jonah "misuses"[90] and that point to a matter of irony in the text. In this case, for example:

> ...the [ironic] element is not hard to find, for where in Jonah's words is any mention of the mission he was supposed to fulfill? Where is his repentance for fleeing from God? The whole "psalm" is entirely restricted to the current situation in which the prophet finds himself, with no allusion to any previous event. Piously, he begins: 'I called out of mine affliction unto YHWH...' but why is he in affliction? Only because of something God has done! 'For Thou didst cast me into the depth, in the heart of the seas...'[91]

Whether or not the effect is intentional on the part of the original author, Jonah's prayer fits right into this narrative of surprise as we shall see. The prayer is filled with images of terror such as "Water enveloped me, until death. The reeds surrounded me. Reeds twined around my head" (v. 6) and "The land, its bars [locked] behind me forever." (v.7). It suggests a profound realization of the imminence of death and an equally profound gratitude for God's power to save as in "From the belly of Sheol I cried out, You heard my voice" (v. 3) and "When my life was growing faint, I recalled Adonai" (v.8). Jonah speaks as one who approaches God with subservience and humility: "But may I continue to look upon the sanctuary of Your holiness?" (v.5) and "I, in a voice of Thanksgiving will sacrifice to You." (v.10).

At face value, this would appear to be a "rock bottom" experience for Jonah. Like the alcoholic who reaches utter darkness and despair, Jonah plunges to the ultimate depth. As Catherine Keller has noted, the תהום that surrounds Jonah in verse 6 is the Bible's term for primordial chaos.[92] It is in the depths that the alcoholic

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90. Not Magonet's term.
91. Magonet, 52.
92. See Keller's "Pre/Face" (xv-xx) for an introduction to her reading of תהום.

finally decides to turn his or her life around, and we expect Jonah too to emerge with a new perspective. We anticipate that he, reborn into the living world, will surface illuminated, with a willingness to reevaluate his convictions. At the very least, we expect (perhaps God shares in this expectation) Jonah to integrate his newfound humility and appreciation for life. As Jonah demonstrates, however, clarity rarely comes easily. *Once he emerges* we would expect a prayer of thanksgiving or an actualization of the sacrifices promised in verse 10. Having been delivered, we expect him to integrate his own proclamation that "Deliverance belongs to Adonai!" Alas, Jonah's journey is not yet over.

A discussion of chapter 2 would be incomplete without a comment about humor in the book of Jonah. J. William Whedbee's artful chapter "Jonah as Joke"[93] identifies the comic vision in the book highlighting elements of parody, satire and caricature. Indeed, the book's humorous tone is apparent in chapter 2. For example, in a scene reminiscent of Balaam's encounter with the donkey (Num 22),[94] God speaks not to Jonah but to the fish, leaving us to wonder which species God deems the more intelligent life form. As far as we know, Jonah is silent for 3 days. When he finally finds his tongue, it only seems able to speak phrases familiar to the Jewish tradition but completely out of place here. The prayer evolves from exaggeration to hyperbole and as Tamara Cohn Eskenazi observes, as soon as Jonah's prayer gets sickeningly sweet, the fish vomits.[95] On the matter of the appropriateness of Jonah's psalm in its context, Whedbee writes, "...it is precisely the interplay between the fit

93. Whedbee, 191-220.
94. Whedbee, 204.
95. In conversation.

and no fit of psalm and story that feeds into a comic reading. In fact, the picture of the pious prophet yearning to see again the Jerusalem temple jars with the image of the fugitive who is trying to escape from God's presence, but the jarring of images is a way to heighten the parody."[96] Jonah's carrying on does bring him salvation, but in a thoroughly undignified manner. As Whedbee comments, "The graphically humorous expulsion of the prophet from the fish serves both as an amusing response to prayer and an ironic commentary on the utter freedom of Adonai to effect his will."[97] While this lesson may be evident to readers, we move on to chapter 3 wondering what, if anything, this wayward prophet has learned.

Chapter 3

Jonah's harrowing journey has brought him back to square one. God's word comes to him for a second time (v.1) commanding him to go to Nineveh (v.2). This time, Jonah obeys (v.3). However, as Simon notes, "...there is a hint to readers that the external compliance is accompanied by internal opposition."[98] Simon points out that the repetition of the command "highlights its need for reiteration".[99] Further, God's specification that Jonah "call to [Nineveh] the message that I am telling you" takes emphasis away from the content of Jonah's proclamation and places it rather on God's demand for obedience.[100]

The text highlights Jonah's compliance a second time in noting that Jonah "went to Nineveh according to the word of Adonai" (v.3) After describing Jonah's

96. Whedbee, 203.
97. Whedbee, 204.
98. Simon, 26.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.

physical journey, the text reports his short and seemingly simple message to the Ninevites: "Another forty days and Nineveh will be overturned." (v.4) Unlike any population that is the target of prophecy, the Ninevites immediately believe the prophet and begin to repent by fasting and donning sackcloth and ashes (v.5) The king of Nineveh participates in the contrition (v.6) and calls for a nation-wide fast and repentance (v.7-8). The humorous tone of the book is evident here and this time the joke is on the king. First, the people are already participating in the exact actions that he commands, pointing to a false sense of authority on his part.[101] Second, he calls for the animals of the kingdom (at least the beasts and the cattle) to participate in the fast, to cover themselves in sackcloth and to call out to God. We wonder what the sins of the beasts could possibly be and what their "atonement" could mean. The apparently fumbling king, however, seems to understand the severity of the matter as well as the real root of the city's troubles. He calls for what no one has yet suggested (least of all, Jonah!), that the people turn from their "evil ways" (v.9).

The king declares his motivation with the comment, "Who knows whether God will turn and relent and turn back from his burning anger so that we do not perish" (v.10). Whedbee observes that the king here demonstrates, "his keen insight into the ways of the deity, manifesting the proper blend of diffidence and fragile hope that divine mercy might be granted."[102] Indeed, God looks favorably upon the acts of the king and the city. As Whedbee notes, "Nineveh's massive repentance evokes from God an act of reciprocal repentance."[103] The chapter closes with God seeing the

101. Magonet *Subversive Bible*, 78. All other footnotes citing Magonet refer to *Form and Meaning.*
102. Whedbee, 206.
103. Whedbee, 207.

repentance of the Ninevites and God deciding not to destroy the city (v.10)

Jonah's oracle contains a brilliant pun that is detected at least as early as Rashi.[104] The surface meaning of the term הפך suggests that God will physically destroy the city. Jonah's speech, then, serves as a warning of what is to come. However, as Halpern and Friedman note, "..apart from meaning 'physical overthrow' the verb *hpk* denotes a change of character".[105] Thus, with the very words that are meant to foretell destruction, Jonah (unknowingly?) predicts salvation instead.

Chapter 3 brings the concept of repentance to the forefront of the plot line. Having noted that Jonah does not repent from the fish's belly, we now see that all of the inhabitants of Nineveh are quick to demonstrate their contrition. Interestingly, however, the term נחם does not appear in the book until it describes God's change of mind in 3:9. The matter of the Ninevites' repentance will be important to Jonah. The matter of God's repentance will be central to his struggle throughout the remainder of the book. It has been noted[106] that the book of Jonah could end after chapter 3. Were this primarily a story about a wicked city saved through repentance, the curtains could close with this happy ending. As we shall see, however, our prophet is far from happy.

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104. Rosenberg, 190.
105. Halpern and Friedman, 87. They cite 1 Sam. 10:6 and Exod. 14:5 (among others) as examples of this usage.
106. See, for example, Crouch, 105.

Chapter 4: Analysis

That life is worth living is the most necessary of assumptions
and were it not assumed, the most impossible of conclusions.

- George Santayana [107]

In Chapter 4, Jonah turns to confront God. He finally expresses what has been troubling him since the beginning of the book. As we shall see, it is this distress that prompts him to ask God to end his life and to cry out twice "Better is my death than my life."

Structure

I suggest the following structure for chapter 4 of the book of Jonah:

I. Jonah and God: Round 1 (4:1-5)
  A. Jonah's reaction [to the events of chapter 3] (4:1-3)
    1. Anger (4:1)
    2. Prayer (4:2-3)
      a. Explanation of flight to Tarshish (4:2a)
      b. Recitation of God's attributes as a critique (4:2b)
      c. Jonah's first call for death (4:3)
        i.. Wish: Jonah asks God to take his soul (4:3a)
        ii. Reason: טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּי (4:3b)
  B. God's poses a question (4:4)
  C. Jonah's physical response (4:5)
III. Jonah and God: Round 2 (4:6-9)
  A. God manipulates Jonah's surroundings (4:6-8a)
    1. Relieves him with the plant (4:6)
    2. Destroys Jonah's relief (through the plant) (4:7)
    3. Worsens Jonah's condition (through the wind and sun) (4:8a)
  C. Jonah's second call for death (4:8b)
    1. Wish: Jonah asks his soul to die
    2. Reason: טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּי
  D. God poses a question (4:9a)
  E. Jonah's reiterates anger and desire for death (4:9b)
  F. The final word (question): God speaks (4:10-11)

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107. As quoted in Solomon, 246.

In discussing structure for the chapter, Sasson aptly notes that:

> Chapter 4 gives us many opportunities to establish boundaries for the units. One method is by narrative changes: in *protagonists*, for example, when God begins talking, at v 4; in *scene*, for example, when Jonah moves out of the city, at v 5; in *countermove*, for example, when God arranges the first of three marvels, at v 6; in *narrative tone*, for example, when God defends Nineveh's redemption, at v 10.[108]

Sasson himself opts to breaks the chapter between verses 6 and 7 based on "the reversal of Jonah's mood."[109] I concur that Jonah moves from great gladness to great distress between these verses. However, his happiness is so fleeting that I would not build a chapter break around it. In addition, I suggest that verses 6-8 make up a cohesive sub-unit in which God manipulates Jonah's surroundings and Jonah responds. Jonah's switch, from gladness to distress is only one in a series of reversals. Magonet proposes the following structure:[110]

1)	2,3	Speech of Jonah
2)	4	Speech of God
3)	5	Act of Jonah
4)	6a,b	Act of God
5)	6c	Jonah happy
C)	7,8a	Act of God
V)	8b	Jonah "unhappy"
IV)	8b	Speech of Jonah
III)	9a	Speech of God
II)	9b	Speech of Jonah
I)	10,11	Speech of God

Magonet bases this structure on the symmetry found within the chapter, in particular between verses 2-3 and 10-11 (see below). Further, he argues that this structure captures the "interesting balance between words and deeds."[111] While this

108. Sasson, 271. Italics original.
109. Ibid.
110. Magonet, 57.
111. Magonet, 56.

structure is helpful in describing the type of interplay between God and Jonah, it neglects the content of those interactions.

Trible proposes a structure as follows:[112]

A. Episode Three (4:1-4 and 5)
    1. Jonah and Yahweh (4:1-4:4)
        a. Jonah's reaction (4:1)
        b. Jonah's prayer (4:2-3)
        c. God's question (4:40)
    2. Jonah Alone (4:5)
B. Episode Four (4:6-11)
    1. Yahweh's appointments with Jonah (4:6-8)
        a. Plant (4:6)
        b. Worm (4:7)
        c. Sun and Wind (4:8)
    2. Conversation between God and Jonah (4:9)
    3. Yahweh's Question to Jonah (4:10-11)

I concur with Trible for the most part. I find a break between verses 5 and 6 more compelling than those proposed above. This division lends itself to reading the chapter in two sections, each of which is a round of dialogue between God and Jonah (Trible's "episodes"). The first round begins and ends with Jonah while the second begins and ends with God.[113] This division also reflects Jonah's move from an unnamed space within Nineveh to a camp outside of the city. Verse 5, then, could arguably be the beginning of round 2 rather than the end of round 1. As Trible notes, it "relates to [the episodes] variously as conclusion (4:1-5), transition (4:5) and introduction (4:5-11)."[114] I have followed her lead in keeping it in round 1 as it is a response to God's question of verse 4 (see below).

Jonah's sudden move out of the city has led commentators to question the

112. See Trible, chapter 9. This outline fits into her structure of the book as a whole.
113. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi.
114. Trible, 195.

placement of verse 5. They have wondered why, according to the text, Jonah remains in Nineveh as long as he does and why he leaves in the midst of a conversation with God. Sasson has summarized the ways in which scholars have attempted to deal with this verse.[115] As he notes, some have suggested reconstructing an earlier form of the text. In the early part of the 20th century, Budde and Brewer propose that the verse as we have it simply does not belong in the narrative. Around the same time, Winckler suggests instead that it was mistakenly placed here and actually belongs after 3:4. Others, such as Wolff read it as a flashback.[116] The latter is not a new theory. Ibn Ezra suggests, "[Scripture] returns to mention the matters of Jonah and what happened to him before the lapse of forty days."[117] Simon cites a similar argument found in commentary of Tanhum:

> This verse should come before 'This was a great evil to Jonah.' Because, however, it is not good to separate the story of what happened to them and his resulting vexation, the narrator first completed that thread and only then went back to recount what happened to him after he delivered his message, namely, that he left the city.[118]

Magonet successfully resolves what he sees as the two major problems of verse 5. The first is the primary issue for the commentators cited above, namely, the timing of Jonah's exit. Magonet suggests in response that, "the act of Jonah in leaving the city is a direct answer to God's question whether Jonah is right to be angry."[119] The second problem for Magonet is the fact that God provides a source of shade for Jonah (the plant) when he already appears to have one (the shelter).

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115. Sasson, 287-290.
116. Sasson, 288.
117. Rosenberg, 193.
118. Simon, 39.
119. Magonet, 58.

Magonet resolves this problem by explaining that plant serves primarily as God's counterresponse to Jonah. We have seen in earlier chapters that God and Jonah have a tendency to communicate in deed rather than in word. Thus, Magonet's solutions are consistent with the rest of the book. In sum, I concur that "4:5 should be retained here as in its correct position."[120]

Round 1: 4:1-4:5

Verse 1 is a direct continuation of chapter 3. The final verse in that chapter notes the evil ways of the Ninevites and the evil of God's promised decree (both described as הָרָעָה). As these two forces wane, the evil only increases for Jonah. The Ninevites repent, God relents and (in the opening of chapter 4) Jonah resents.

At this point, a discussion of Jonah's emotional state will prove useful since the way in which we read חרה affects our interpretation of the entire chapter. Simon,[121] Craig,[122] and NRSV are among the many who translate חרה as "anger". However, Bolin argues that Jonah's reaction is more likely one of grief. He writes that, "The only ancient version to read Jonah's reaction as anger is Jerome's Vulgate," and suggests that those who read anger in the verse follow a tradition of vilifying Jonah as one who "represents an ethnocentric, selfish, narrow-minded Israel of the post-exilic era."[123] Sasson agrees that the term "anger" is unwarranted.[124] He cites Gen. 4:5-6, Num. 16:15, 1 Sam. 8:18, and 2 Sam.13:21, 19:43 as examples of cases in which חרה "can also denote depression, chagrin, annoyance." In these

120. Magonet, 60.
121. Simon, 36.
122. Craig, 17.
123. Bolin, 150. According to Bolin, "The LXX reads Jonah's reaction as distress and grief....Similarly, Tg. Ps.-J. emphasizes extrememe displeasure." See also Bolin, chapter 1.
124. Sasson, 274-5.

examples, however, I see no reason that the other emotions should preclude anger. Can Sasson be certain that anger is not among Cain's reactions in Genesis 4:5-6? The events of these verses are the trigger (or so most Biblical readers deduce) that lead to the Bible's first murder! Can we rule out an angry Moses as Dathan and Abiram bring their bitter accusations (Num. 16:15) or an angry David as he hears of the rape of Tamar? Sasson puts forth 1 Sam. 8:18 as a particularly strong indication that חרה need not mean anger. In this scene, Saul witnesses the women rejoicing at David's return and proclaiming, "Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands". Sasson claims that anger on Saul's part would be "psychologically not very cogent."[125] His argument is that:

> ...anger is a relatively healthy emotion, much less corrosive than dejection, despair or depression. Moreover, because it is usually highly public, anger normally dissipates quickly. Not so is depression, when it transforms into self-deprecation and laceration. Thus, whenever Saul comes out of his brooding long enough to vent his frustration, he turns unattractively whiny and meek.[126]

Sasson's conclusion that anger is not likely here does not appear to be backed by either psychological or Biblical evidence. However, he is accurate in observing that Saul has a propensity for irrational behavior (see, for example, 1 Sam 18:10-12 and 1 Sam 19:24). It would be more useful to include rage as a possibility for חרה rather than to rule anger out.[127] In addition, depression is associated with anger.[128] Sasson's characterization of Saul, then, does not preclude anger, but rather supports it. The term חרה is so closely associated with anger in most appearances that I would

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125. Sasson, 275.
126. Ibid.
127. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi.
128. See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 4th ed., s.v. "Mood Disorders."

be reluctant to exclude anger in these cases or in Jonah's. Some examples are Judah's plea that Joseph not be angry (Gen. 44:18), Moses' reaction upon seeing the golden calf (Ex. 32:19) and David's response to Nathan's parable (2 Sam. 12:5). Finally, I would argue that Jonah's anger need not serve as evidence testifying against his character. That he is angry at God is clear, though anger does not make Jonah selfish and narrow-minded[129].

Verses 2-3 contain Jonah's most lengthy speech in this chapter, to be matched only by God's final question (see below). The narrator tells us that Jonah's utterance is a prayer, which brings it into conversation with Jonah's prayer in chapter 2. Sasson compares Jonah's prayer in these verses to the cry to God of the sailors in 1:14. As he notes, these pericopes begin with similar phrases with just one telling difference. The narrator describes the act of the sailors: וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ (similarly, the king of Nineveh commands that the inhabitants call out to God - וְיִקְרְאוּ אֶל־אֱלֹהִים). Of Jonah, however, the text states: וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר. In chapter 2, the text also uses וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל. Jonah's prayers, then, are unmatched by the outcries of any other character in the book. Trible notes that, "The *hitpael* form of the verb *wayyitpallel*, connotes a complaint song or lament. Unlike [Jonah's] first prayer, this one matches the genre and fits the narrative setting."[130] Sasson suggests that the idiom (וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל) "is usually reserved for entreaties made to God."[131]

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129. Bolin claims that historically, the "picture of Jonah/Israel as bitter, narrow and petty has resulted from an overemphasis on and misinterpretation of Jonah's anger in ch. 4" (Bolin, 59). While I agree that misinterpretation and overemphasis on anger may well have distorted Jonah's characterization, I do not find this to be a compelling reason to remove the anger entirely.
130. Trible, 199.
131. Sasson, 154.

Given the above, it is interesting to note that here Jonah opens this prayer with the same words that the sailors use in chapter 1, אָנָּה יְהוָה while in chapter 2, Jonah launches immediately into his message (קָרָאתִי מִצָּרָה...). The words אָנָּה יְהוָה are supplicative in nature and indicate that Jonah probably plans to ask for the same relief that the sailors requested. As Sasson aptly notes, "We are quickly disabused of that notion, however, for Jonah presently launches into a harangue."[132] Here we find the first in a series of reversals in chapter 4. The sailors had asked that their lives be spared (1:5). As we shall see below, Jonah not only turns to conflict rather than supplication, but when his request comes in v. 3, it is quite the opposite of the sailors' prayer for life.

Indeed, Jonah turns immediately to his position of confrontation. His question הֲלוֹא־זֶה דְבָרִי עַד־הֱיוֹתִי עַל־אַדְמָתִי makes apparent a gap in the telling of this story. As readers, we may consider two narrative possibilities: that Jonah did or did not make this statement previously. The narrator either reveals information after the fact or adds an additional dimension to Jonah's character by having him retrospectively put words in his own mouth. Simon asserts, "Jonah does not quote an earlier statement that is now being verified, because silence was an essential part of his rebellion..."[133] Bolin suggests that the current quotation refers back to 2 Kings 14:23-25 where Jonah appears and "...highlights Yahweh's temporary forgiveness of a foreign king."[134] Trible writes, "The narrator uses the strategy of delaying

132. Sasson, 276.
133. Simon, 37.
134. Bolin, 151.

information."[135] Sasson speculates, "Or could it be that Jonah, perhaps due to his depressed and irked state, is consoling himself by inventing an 'I told you so' to soothe his wounded heart?"[136] The Biblical author leaves this matter to speculation, creating a (deliberate?) sense of ambiguity.

What is clear is that Jonah's alleged earlier statement is meant to shed light upon his flight from Tarshish. Jonah explains, עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה, and his tone is worth exploring, particularly as it relates to the previous phrase. For Sasson, the two comprise a "justification"[137] together, though elsewhere he refers to the הֲלוֹא phrase as an "excuse"[138] and to this one as an "apologia".[139] Trible labels the first a "rebuke" and the second a "justification".[140] Simon suggests that Jonah's purpose here is to justify "his acting in accordance with his own word/thought and against 'The word of the Lord' (1:1)"[141] Perhaps including traces of all of the above, Jonah's comment is his declaration of motive. This phrase prepares us for what follows. Jonah's opportunity for reproach has arrived and he wants God's undivided attention. He says, in essence, "Listen up. I'm going to tell you what my problem is that led us both on this wild adventure. This is what I ran from in the first place and this is what infuriates me now."

Indeed, Jonah makes the precise nature of his critique clear in the next phrase: כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֵל־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה. We should

135. Trible, 200.
136. Sasson, 296.
137. Ibid.
138. Sasson, 277.
139. Sasson, 296.
140. Trible, 199.
141. Simon, 37.

notes Jonah begins his reproach with a statement about himself (יָדַעְתִּי). Sasson points to the rhymes of verse 2 (הֲיוֹתִי, אַדְמָתִי, קִדַּמְתִּי, יָדַעְתִּי) as evidence that the focus of the narrative has narrowed onto Jonah.

Jonah claims to understand God's nature. His description of God is his most brilliant and daring piece of rhetoric. It is filled with double meaning and dripping with sarcasm. It is a variation on Exodus 34:6-7 and contains fragments that appear in many other Biblical citations. Yet, Jonah turns the words of Exodus 34 into a sharp critique. He finds God's mercy unacceptable. He fled, he implies, so as not to take part in it. Now, having learned that there is no fleeing from God, Jonah opts for confrontation. He chooses for his fighting words a virtual mantra of Biblical praise. The other pericopes that use similar language to describe God are[142]:

Citation	Text
Exod 34:6-7	וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל־פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת׃ נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לָאֲלָפִים נֹשֵׂא עָוֹן וָפֶשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנַקֵּה לֹא יְנַקֶּה פֹּקֵד | עֲוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְעַל־בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל־שִׁלֵּשִׁים וְעַל־רִבֵּעִים׃
Num 14:18	יְהוָה אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד נֹשֵׂא עָוֹן וָפֶשַׁע וְנַקֵּה לֹא יְנַקֶּה פֹּקֵד עֲוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים עַל־שִׁלֵּשִׁים וְעַל־רִבֵּעִים׃
Deut 4:31	כִּי אֵל רַחוּם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא יַרְפְּךָ וְלֹא יַשְׁחִיתֶךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁכַּח אֶת־בְּרִית אֲבֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם
Joel 2:13	וְקִרְעוּ לְבַבְכֶם וְאַל־בִּגְדֵיכֶם וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כִּי־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה׃ יִד מִי יוֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וְנִחָם וְהִשְׁאִיר אַחֲרָיו בְּרָכָה מִנְחָה וָנֶסֶךְ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם׃
Jon 4:2	וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמַר אָנָּה יְהוָה הֲלוֹא־זֶה דְבָרִי עֹד־הֱיוֹתִי עַל־אַדְמָתִי עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֵל־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה

142. Based on the chart provided by Sasson, 280.

Citation	Text
Nah 1:3	יְהוָה אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וּגְדוֹל [וּגְדָל] כֹּחַ וְנַקֵּה לֹא יְנַקֶּה יְהוָה בְּסוּפָה וּבִשְׂעָרָה דַּרְכּוֹ וְעָנָן אֲבַק רַגְלָיו׃
Ps 78:38	וְהוּא רַחוּם	יְכַפֵּר עָוֹן וְלֹא יַשְׁחִית וְהִרְבָּה לְהָשִׁיב אַפּוֹ וְלֹא־יָעִיר כָּל־חֲמָתוֹ׃
Ps 86:5	כִּי־אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי טוֹב וְסַלָּח וְרַב־חֶסֶד לְכָל־קֹרְאֶיךָ׃
Ps 86:15	וְאַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֵל־רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת׃
Ps 111:4	זֵכֶר עָשָׂה לְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם יְהוָה׃
Ps 112:4	זָרַח בַּחֹשֶׁךְ אוֹר לַיְשָׁרִים חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם וְצַדִּיק׃
Ps 116:5	חַנּוּן יְהוָה וְצַדִּיק וֵאלֹהֵינוּ מְרַחֵם׃ ו שֹׁמֵר פְּתָאיִם יְהוָה דַּלּוֹתִי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ
Ps 145:8	חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם יְהוָה אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וּגְדָל־חָסֶד׃
Neh 9:17	וַיְמָאֲנוּ לִשְׁמֹעַ וְלֹא־זָכְרוּ נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ עִמָּהֶם וַיַּקְשׁוּ אֶת־עָרְפָּם וַיִּתְּנוּ־רֹאשׁ לָשׁוּב לְעַבְדָתָם בְּמִרְיָם וְאַתָּה אֱלוֹהַ סְלִיחוֹת חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרֶךְ־אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד [חֶסֶד] וְלֹא עֲזַבְתָּם׃
Neh 9:31	וּבְרַחֲמֶיךָ הָרַבִּים לֹא־עָשִׂיתָם כָּלָה וְלֹא עֲזַבְתָּם כִּי אֵל־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אָתָּה׃
2 Chr 30:9	כִּי בְשׁוּבְכֶם עַל־יְהוָה אֲחֵיכֶם וּבְנֵיכֶם לְרַחֲמִים לִפְנֵי שׁוֹבֵיהֶם וְלָשׁוּב לָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת כִּי־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלֹא־יָסִיר פָּנִים מִכֶּם אִם־תָּשׁוּבוּ אֵלָיו׃

With the exception of Jonah's statement, all of the above pericopes are laudatory in nature. However, they deal with the matter of God's mercy in various ways. Exodus 34:6-7 notes the tension between Divine justice and mercy. God is אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם "slow to anger" and נֹשֵׂא עָוֹן וָפֶשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin". At the same time, however, God וְנַקֵּה לֹא יְנַקֶּה פֹּקֵד | עֲוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְעַל־בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל־שִׁלֵּשִׁים וְעַל־רִבֵּעִים "surely does not clear [the guilty],[143] visits iniquity of parents upon their children and upon their children's

143. Implied.

children to the third and forth generation." In God's own words, then, God is both forgiving and just. While graciousness and mercy are highlighted here, God does not refrain from punishing those who sin. Numbers 14:18 and Nahum 1:3 echo these sentiments. Alternatively, Psalm 78:38 and Neh 9:17 and 31 place particular emphasis on God's granting of forgiveness to those who sin. Of the variations on the Exodus 34 quotation, only Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:13 include the final attribute named here by Jonah, וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה.

The verb נחם often implies a 180-degree turn around.[144] Thus, it means comfort for those who are in pain (as in Gen. 24:67, Ezek. 14:22, and most notably Isa. 40:1) and repentance for those who have sinned (as in Judg. 21:6 and Jer. 31:19). Jeremiah 18 demonstrates that נחם denotes various types of reversal as there it applies to both רעה (8) and טובה (10). God is often the subject of the verb, both as comforter (ex. Isa. 49:13 and 51:3, Ps. 86:17) and as repenter (ex. Gen. 6:6, 1 Sam. 15:35 and Jer. 26:13). In fact, it is not unusual for the text to describe God relenting from an action that is specified as רעה (ex. 2 Sam. 24:26, Jer. 26:19 and 1 Chron. 21:15).

Still, it is significant that only Joel and Jonah include this attribute in their descriptions of God. Joel offers the sinful people a chance at forgiveness, using the term to urge them to repent. He has warned of the darkness and gloom that will be their punishment; but God, he proclaims, might relent from evil. Jonah on the other hand packs the final punch with this attribute. God does not, as in Exodus 34 and

144. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi.

elsewhere, hold the wicked accountable. Further, the Joel text includes an important subtlety that Jonah excludes. Joel asks מִי יוֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וְנִחָם "Who knows, whether he will turn and relent?" The Ninevites, too, wonder in 3:9: מִי־יוֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וְנִחַם הָאֱלֹהִים "Who knows whether God will turn and repent...?" Jonah, however, expresses a measure of certainty, replacing מי יודע with ידעתי in 4:2.[145]

Cooper observes that the Exodus 34 text continues with the term אמת while Jonah moves immediately to נחם על הרעה.[146] The God who was once described as "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and truth" is in Jonah's mind "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and repenting of evil." In other words, Jonah replaces God's quality of reliability with God's tendency to be (in his mind) unnecessarily forgiving. It is yet another reversal, in which Jonah accuses God of undermining faithfulness! The text validates Jonah's claim to know the truth with his very name, יוֹנָה בֶן־אֲמִתַּי.

Rachel Adler offers an alternate translation that highlights Jonah's possible intent. She renders the phrase, "indulgent of evil"[147] suggesting an even harsher indictment of God on Jonah's part. God is so deeply committed to repentance that even the truly wicked go unpunished, an idea that is contemptible to Jonah.

Meir Sternberg's method of reading the text gap-by-gap underscores nature of Jonah's complaint as a reversal. He reminds us that the narrator does not initially give a reason that Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh. He writes, "...apparently... the

145. Pointed out by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and J. William Whedbee.
146. Cooper, 154.
147. Adler, 329.

reason is self-evident: Jonah is too tender-hearted to carry a message of doom to a great city. He obviously protests against a wrathful God not with words, like Abraham or Moses or Samuel, but with his feet."[148] Frolov, too, suggests that "the author obviously tries to make the book look like yet another Sodom and Gemorrah story."[149] If so, then Jonah's actual grievance would catch the reader completely off guard. While I do not read the buildup to 4:3 exactly as Sternberg and Frolov do, their comparison of Jonah to earlier figures is quite valuable. Where the usual Biblical hero refuses to take part in destruction, Jonah, will not take part in redemption!

Until now, I have argued that Jonah speaks with contention to the deity. There can be no question of his negative spin by the time we reach verse 3. The attributes listed above are the very cause of Jonah's (first) request to die: וְעַתָּה יְהוָה קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּי. Here I suggest that Jonah's request is (at least in part) a continuation of his complaint against God. I do not imply that it lacks sincerity completely. After all, anyone engaged in verbal sparring match with the deity must use request for death sparingly as a tool. Still, the development of Jonah's argument suggests that this too is a jab. Having cited the motivation for his protest he now illustrates its magnitude. The very meaning of his life (at this moment anyway) boils down the point he makes. Jonah dares God to agree that his life has no other value.

In fact, Jonah denounces the sanctity of life that God has honored throughout

148. Sternberg, 318.
149. Frolov, 100.

this book. After all, this is a story of those who would die, if not for the mercy of God. The sailors, the Ninevites and Jonah himself could have joined the ranks of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gemorrah[150] (cities of evil), Uzzah[151] (well meaning bystanders who nonetheless transgress) and Lot's wife[152] (killed for disobedience) as casualties of the God who at times values justice over mercy. In our story, however, (and throughout much of the Biblical narrative) God demonstrates a desire to go to great length to preserve life. The tempestuous storm claims not a single sailor. Jonah neither drowns nor is he digested by the fish. The moment the Ninevites repent, God grants them another chance to live. Jonah flings this effort back at God as he decries the value of his own life.

As Rachel Adler points out, God reacts to Jonah like "the perfect therapist".[153] Responding to the emotional message behind Jonah's outcry, God asks, "Are you good and angry?" God, it seems, will not take Jonah's dare. God will not concur that Jonah's life depends on the validity of his position, demonstrating instead remarkable interest in his state of mind.

Just when the dialogue gets heated between God and the prophet, Jonah once again leaves town. The master of flight (perhaps aptly named after a bird) leaves Nineveh for a place outside of the city. He makes a shelter for himself and settles down in the shade to watch what will happen to the city. At this point, round 1 ends. The lights suddenly dim on the stage with the lonely prophet in his camp and with God's (first) question looming in the air unanswered.

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150. Gen. 18.
151. 2 Sam. 6:3-7.
152. Gen. 19:17 and 26.
153. Adler, 329.

Round 2: 4:6-11

We begin our discussion of round 2 with some speculation about the end of round 1. The question is: What exactly does Jonah plan to see in Nineveh? The prophet plans to watch *something* happen from a distance. Does Jonah hope that God will change God's mind once again and destroy the city after all? Does the prophet fantasize that his own anger and despair may have caused a Divine change of mind? Alternatively, does Jonah intend to torture himself by watching the Ninevites thrive in a fully-functioning city? Does he plan to witness for himself the full extent of his prophetic "success" which is for him, an unbearable defeat? Or, does he watch so that he will see how long the city will remain "repentant"?[154] Does he wait for his opportunity to say "I told you so" as the Ninevites return to their old ways?

Whatever Jonah sees in Nineveh is outside of our view as readers. The camera once again zooms in on Jonah and we lose sight of Nineveh and the future implications of its repentance. For the third time, God calls upon forces of nature to interact with Jonah. God appoints the *kikayon* plant for the specific purposes of providing Jonah with shade (צֵל) and saving (לְהַצִּיל) him from his troubles. The latter term emphasizes the severity of Jonah's distress as it most commonly appears in the Bible in relation to dire situations.[155] For example, Reuben pleads with his brothers not not spill Joseph's blood as he secretly plans הַצֵּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהָשִׁיבוֹ אֶל־אָבִיו - "to save him from their hand to return him to his father." (Gen. 37:22). In Exod. 3:8, God explains that he has come לְהַצִּילוֹ | מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם - "to save [the people] from the

154. Sasson, 289. Sasson discusses traditional Jewish commentaries that suggest this interpretation.
155. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi.

hand of Egypt" (Gen. 3:8). The prophets often speak of God's power to save the people from the onslaught of nations (ex. שָׁם תִּנָּצְלִי שָׁם יִגְאָלֵךְ יְהוָה מִכַּף אֹיְבָיִךְ in Micah 4:10 and לְהוֹשִׁיעֲךָ וּלְהַצִּילֶךָ in Jer. 15:20). The narrator implicitly compares Jonah's state to situations that have threatened the very nation. We can infer, then, that the evil that Jonah experiences is no small matter of discomfort. Likewise, the plant is a significant saving measure on God's part.

In response to this attention from God, Jonah surprises us once again by feeling happy. In fact, the end of verse 6: וַיִּשְׂמַח יוֹנָה עַל־הַקִּיקָיוֹן שִׂמְחָה גְדוֹלָה parallels verse 1: וַיֵּרַע אֶל־יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה. Jonah's happiness over the plant matches the distress he felt not long ago over Nineveh.

Alas, Jonah's happiness is short-lived. God once again calls upon nature to intervene. This time, a swallowing worm accompanies the first rays of dawn. With four short words, the worm obliterates the plant that was Jonah's source of happiness. His condition then goes from bad to worse as God continues to manipulate nature: the wind and sun attack Jonah and he, like the *kikayon*, withers in the desert heat. We reach the climax of round 2 as Jonah longs to die and repeats his phrase: טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּי. Sasson comments, "For someone who has recently affirmed that 'rescue is from the Lord' (2:10), Jonah seems to forget that death, no less than life, is God's to dispense".[156] God once again responds with a question. This time, God repeats the query into Jonah's emotions but adds an interpretation, "Are you good and angry *about the kikayon*?" This time, Jonah replies with words, reiterating his interest in

156. Sasson, 317.

death, "So angry I could die."

The Final Word?

The final section of the chapter and the entire book is God's relatively lengthy speech. Focusing on Jonah's feelings about the plant, God compares it to the city of Nineveh. God may be making several points:

(1) An entire city deserves at least as much compassion as a single plant. God notes that plant sprang up over the course of a single night. The implication is that a city takes infinitely more care and investment. Therefore, its destruction would be infinitely more devastating.

(2) The city contains innocents. The fact that those who do not know their right hand from their left are in the city seems to suggest that many of Nineveh's inhabitants are innocent or child-like. God does not specify that the innocent should not be punished with the wicked, but a trace of this ethic may be contained in God's statement.

(3) Jonah does not have much right to complain about Nineveh's fate (implied). God merely hints at this point by noting that Jonah did not even "work for" or "grow" the plant, let alone Nineveh. In contrast, God has the right to care about Nineveh. The answer that God invites with a rhetorical question is, "Yes, you should care about Nineveh."

(4) God is truly asking. Perhaps the question is not rhetorical at all.[157] God demonstrates ambiguity over how to deal with a nation in Hosea 11:8, asking: אֵיךְ

אֶתְּנְךָ אֶפְרַיִם אֲמַגֶּנְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵיךְ אֶתְּנְךָ כְאַדְמָה אֲשִׂימְךָ כִּצְבֹאִים נֶהְפַּךְ עָלַי לִבִּי יַחַד

157. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi.

אֵיכָכָה אֶתֶּנְךָ אֶפְרַיִם אַמְגִּנְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל - How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?[158] Perhaps God expresses similar uncertainty about the mercy granted to Ninevites.

These points are not developed in the text. God hints at them without making complete arguments. Taken at face value, God's final point appears fraught with logical flaws. For example, is the plant truly comparable to Nineveh? Jonah's perspective is that Nineveh ought to be destroyed due to its wickedness. It would be quite absurd to discuss whether or not the plant should survive based on its morality. Further, Jonah's concern for the plant has to do with his own self-interest. The text explains that the purpose of the plant was to provide Jonah with comfort. Jonah, at first glance, appears to be upset about losing the plant because he also loses physical relief. Finally, as Sasson notes, God's argument

> ...so readily draws us into its inner logic that we may easily neglect to question its basic premise. God forces Jonah to focus on the *qiqayon* plant as the source of his dejection, when his despair actually comes from a combination of circumstances, the withering plant being only one of them.[159]

Sasson resolves this issue by suggesting that the plant is meaningful for Jonah as it represents God's care. "Its demise," he writes, "no less miraculous than its birth, brings Jonah's self-doubts back to full force, and he again turns to death as a solution to his psychological impasse. It is in this sense, then, that Jonah answers God's question affirmatively."[160] In other words, Jonah assumes that God understands the symbolic value that the plant holds for him. Thus, when the plant is destroyed, for

158. NRSV
159. Ibid.
160. Ibid.

Jonah, God's tenderness toward him likewise withers.

Sheldon Blank offers an alternative interpretation. He expands God's words, suggesting that the full intent is:

> You are terribly upset about that plant, which cost you no pains at all, which you did not cultivate, which grew overnight, and faded overnight, and should I not be distressed concerning this teeming great city, Nineveh, which, be it noted, cost *me* no end of toil, which I did care for - and not for one night either but for many long years.[161]

In other words, God responds in this manner because God understands Jonah's pain so poignantly and in fact relates to it. Blank suggests that this is one of a handful of passages in which God responds to human grief with a statement of Divine grief. Parallel pericopes include Jeremiah 45 and 8:18-23, Hosea 11:8, Isaiah 42:14 and Job 40:9-14. He writes, "Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do the 'personhood' of God and his entanglement in the human situation stand out more clearly revealed than in this recurrent pattern".[162]

Rachel Adler offers yet another explanation of God's response.[163] Perhaps the episode with the plant is a sort of "behavior modification plan" that God creates for Jonah. Up until this point, Jonah has advocated for justice for Nineveh at the price of compassion and salvation. That is, he has rejoiced over impending death and mourned over the pardon that saves lives. With the *kikayon*, God creates a situation in which Jonah's inappropriate behavior is reversed so that he rejoices over life and mourns over death. This interpretation will be explored further below.

Chapter 4 ends in a draw between God and Jonah. We never read of Jonah's

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161. Blank, 30. Italics Blank's.
162. Blank, 41.
163. In conversation.

response to God's question. Sassson[164] has detected a feature that highlights the narrator's refusal to declare a victor in the debate between Jonah and God: The text allocates an equal number of words to Jonah and God during the course of their dialogue. The speech breaks down as follows:[165]

Speaker	Verses	Number of Words
Jonah	2-3	39
God	4	3
Jonah	8	3
God	9	5
Jonah	9	5
God	10-11	39

Bolin writes, "Each side is given 'equal time' as it were, to set for its position, but in the end the topic remains insoluble."[166] Sasson writes, "This symmetry in apportioning words is much too developed and obvious to be accidental".[167] He continues:

> I can suggest that this balance and harmony are intended to keep us aware that God's responses are countermoves to Jonah's utterances. If so, we are encouraged to *limit* the application of the lesson we derive from Jonah's last chapter to the unusual conditions that forced the confrontation between God and a displeased prophet. In other words, we are invited to perceive Nineveh's good fortune as uncommon and not easily reproducible; on future occasions, when populations sin badly enough to deserve divine punishment, God might not prove as charitable.[168]

Sassson's suggestion is a possibility, though the text itself does not draw this conclusion. The fact that God's response to Jonah makes up the final lines of the book suggests that God holds in the upper hand in the debate. Either by God or by

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164. Sasson, 317.
165. Based on Sasson's table, 317.
166. Bolin, 149.
167. Sasson, 318.
168. Ibid, italics Sasson's.

the narrator, the prophet is quieted. Still, the fact that God's response is a question suggests an ending that is less clear-cut.

Indeed, scholarly debate continues as to the ultimate message of the author. Many exegetes have suggested that the answer to God's final question is "yes". Alan Jon Hauser, for example, concludes that readers are "receptive to the writer's basic point that Jonah's anger and vindictiveness are inappropriate in the light of the forgiving nature of God."[169] John C. Holbert gauges that Jonah "...is the object of the satiric attack of the book... Jonah is a Hebrew prophet disobedient and hypocritical, angered by God's will to save, yet claiming to affirm God's power to do so... Jonah is thus an attack on Hebrew prophetic hypocrisy."[170]

Serge Frolov, however, argues against those who condemn Jonah and his quarrel with God. He contends rather that readers are meant to sympathize with Jonah throughout the book and would answer God's question with "no". He argues that "For the Israelites, *yona* was first and foremost a sacrificial species... it is consistently recognized as a valid *guilt offering*," and he thus represents "a suitable animal for the atonement of sin."[171] Jonah's rebellion, according to Frolov, is based on his refusal to play that role for the Ninevites.

Frolov continues:

> Taxed out of their lives so that Nineveh or its successors could prosper and occasionally robbed and raped by Mesopotamian invaders, [intended readers] will view themselves as Jonahs. Knowing that the Northern Kingdom has been destroyed by Assyria (or if one dates the book to the period preceding the fall of Samaria, is being politically pressed and economically exploited by it), they will hardly help applauding the

169. Hauser, 37.
170. Holbert, 75.
171. Frolov, 97. Italics Frolov's.

prophet's determination to save his country rather than its mortal enemy.[172]

Frolov, who attributes his reading in part to his life as a "former Soviet national" and "a Jew born after World War II," contends that a text or society that teaches "sacrifice of an individual for the sake of the collective" inevitably leads to "oppression and terror".[173] He argues that many post-exilic Jews would share his perspective. Like them, he concludes that given the opportunity to suffer as the atonement for the sins of others, "I would rather go to Tarshish."[174]

I would conclude that the text provides no definitive answer to the question of whether Jonah is a hero or an anti-hero. The text, once again, creates an ambiguity that should not be dismissed. Indeed, the inconclusive ending leaves it ultimately up to the reader and interpreter to answer the question, "Should God care for Nineveh?"

172. Frolov, 100-101.
173. Frolov, 104.
174. Frolov, 105.

Chapter 4: Comments

[Javert's] ultimate anguish was the loss of all certainty. He felt uprooted. His code was no longer anything but a stump in his own hand. He was dealing with scruples of an unknown species...a mysterious justice according to God going counter to justice according to men. In the darkness he could see the fearful rising of an unknown moral sun; he was horrified and blinded by it.

- Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables*[175]

The Nature of Jonah's Crisis

As Simon has noted, "It is particularly difficult to identify the central theme that unites all the elements of the [Jonah] story into a literary and conceptual whole."[176] Magonet deals with the thematic complexities of the book by presenting four polarities that represent tensions running throughout the story. Noting that they "must necessarily overlap" he investigates these distinct but interrelated themes:[177]

(1) Knowledge of God / Disobedience of God
(2) Particularism / Universalism
(3) Traditional Teaching / New Experience
(4) The Power of God / The Freedom of Man

Similarly, Simon identifies four major themes through which traditional and modern exegetes have read the book of Jonah (some of which overlap with Magonet's).[178] They are:

(1) Atonement versus Repentance
(2) Universalism versus Particularism
(3) Prophecy: Realization versus Compliance
(4) Compassion: Justice versus Mercy

Simon concludes that the first three do not encapsulate or reflect the book in

175. Hugo, 1323.
176. Simon, vii.
177. Magonet, 90.
178. Simon, vii - xiii.

its entirety.[179] He concludes that the forth theme, justice versus mercy "...is compatible with the entire narrative from beginning to end and encompasses most of its elements."[180] Before evaluating his conclusion, I will briefly discuss each of these proposed thematic elements.

Atonement versus Repentance: This theme is centered around the fact that the Ninevites, perhaps the the embodiment of wickedness after the fall of the kingdom of Israel, repent. Further, their repentance is accepted by God. Consider the description of Nineveh in Nahum 3:1: הוֹי עִיר דָּמִים כֻּלָּהּ כַּחַשׁ פֶּרֶק מָלְאָה לֹא יָמִישׁ טָרֶף ("Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty - no end to the plunder"). The Ninevites, by their very nature, push the concept of repentance to its outer limit. Andre and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque ask, "Who would opt for leaving one's city in shambles and mourning its dead, in order to become, in the very city that committed the crime, the instrument of its forgiveness and salvation?"[181] Do the inhabitants of the "city of bloodshed" have the right and capacity to repent? Further, if they reprent, should they be forgiven? How far can forgiveness go? God and Jonah find themselves at odds with one another over this question.

Whether or not God's sparing of Nineveh is a direct result of their repentance is a matter of deliberation. Simon contends that, "Nineveh merits its Creator's protection, not because of its citizens' remorse but because it is a great metropolis, teeming with children who have never sinned and with many beasts as well."[182]

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179. Ibid.
180. Simon, xiii.
181. Lacocque and Lacocque, 68.
182. Simon, xiii.

Cooper also argues that the sparing of Nineveh is not the result of repentance, but he argues for an alternative reason, namely, that "God is free to save whomever he pleases, in whatever manner he chooses."[183]

The concept of repentance makes two additional significant appearances in the book of Jonah. First, God is described by both Jonah and the narrator as נִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה. As discussed above, this is not the only Biblical reference to God's turning from an act of evil or "repenting". However, it is particularly significant here as it is at the root of Jonah's distress. Second, the text subtly calls into question the meaning of repentance as the beasts of Nineveh participate in acts of contrition. We can deduce from Jonah's complaint that he does perceive much difference between the "atonement" of the beasts and that of their human counterparts.

Universalism versus Particularism: This veil relies on the assumption that Jonah protests God's mercy based on his loyalty to the people Israel and his refusal to let them fall to a nation of foreigners and idolaters. Israel's particularistic viewpoint, however, is challenged as, in Magonet's words, "the pagans are 'good' and Jonah is, if not thoroughly 'bad' at least highly problematical."[184]

Simon rejects this proposition since it lacks textual evidence from within the book. As he observes, "...the people of Israel and the kingdom of Assyria are not even mentioned in the book. Nineveh is described as a wicked city like Sodom, whose inhabitants deal unjustly with one another... The narrator makes no mention of its

183. Cooper, 8. Cooper argues that this concept would be especially critical for the post-exilic author of Jonah for whom, "...divine freedom manifests the only tolerable sequel to the failed covenant..." (p.. 6).
184. Magonet, 94.

citizens' worship of idols.."[185] In addition, Simon notes that Jonah risks his life in order to save the sailors who, like the Ninevites, are foreigners and idolaters. This act would be inconsistent if the prophet were primarily concerned with Israelite exclusivism.

Magonet agrees that "...the message conveyed here cannot simply be, 'look how nice the pagans are,' for presented on so simplistic a level, it becomes an insult to the bitter experience of Israel following the destruction and exile."[186] Noting that the sailors are more neutral than the extremes represented as "wicked Nineveh/holy Nineveh" he suggests a more nuanced message that "teases the reader out of a conventional attitude into a re-thinking of relationships."[187]

We have seen that Cooper and Frolov also contend that the story pits Israel (Jonah) against Assyria (Nineveh) though these readings differs from the traditional "universalism / particularism" argument. Cooper argues that the exiled readers would find hope in the notion that the God who saved (and eventually destroyed) Nineveh would at some time return the already-destroyed Israel. Frolov suggests that the readers would sympathize with Jonah and his case that the innocents (Israel) ought not to be sacrificed in order to expiate for the wicked (Assyria).

Prophecy: Realization versus Compliance: The thrust of this concept is that Jonah refuses to prophesy against Nineveh for fear that he will lose credibility when the decree is reversed. His anger at God, then, is based on his own loss of face. Simon gauges that "...there is no real sign in the Book of Jonah of the prophet's

185. Simon, x.
186. Magonet, 99.
187. Ibid.

anguish that the prediction did not come to pass, nor anything like this elsewhere in the Bible."[188]

Frolov's case, however, is built in part upon this tension. Contra Simon, he argues that the backdrop for Jonah's story is Deut. 18:21-22. That text distinguishes true from false prophecy. Jonah, identified as a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25, would thus be aware of the Deuteronomy's criterion:

וְכִי תֹאמַר בִּלְבָבֶךָ אֵיכָה נֵדַע אֶת־הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־דִבְּרוֹ יְהוָה׃ כב אֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר הַנָּבִיא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה הַדָּבָר וְלֹא יָבֹא הוּא הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־דִבְּרוֹ יְהוָה בְּזָדוֹן דִּבְּרוֹ הַנָּבִיא לֹא תָגוּר מִמֶּנּוּ

You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that Adonai has not spoken?" If a prophet speaks in the name of Adonai but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that Adonai has not spoken.

Necessary for Frolov's position is a rejection of the significance of the wordplay on נהפכת in Jonah's speech. He argues, "If there is a wordplay in 3.4, it is exceedingly subtle and most probably accidental: the author could not expect it to be grasped by the audience without explanations (which are never supplied)."[189] Halpern and Friedman, as well as Whedbee, however, demonstrate the multitude of meaningful puns and artfully selected words in the book. I would thus be reluctant to discount the either the author's intentionality or the reader's comprehension of double entendre.

Knowledge of God / Disobedience of God: Magonet's suggested theme also relates to Jonah's refusal to comply with God's wishes. He wonders, "How Jonah, knowing God, can attempt to disobey."[190] For Magonet, though, the theme is not only

188. Simon, xi.
189. Frolov, 91.
190. Magonet, 90.

related to Jonah's loss of credibility but also to God's relationship with Israel despite the history of continual disobedience. The book tells a story of a prophet who knows exactly what God wants, yet refuses to carry out God's will . At the same time, it questions whether or not anyone (including Jonah) can truly know God's will. The people Israel, he claims, "in turn identify with Jonah the prophet who can act in the full knowledge of what God requires in a given situation, yet is prevented by his own private desires from doing so; and with the far more uncertain (but "realistic") sailors and Ninevites...who surrender their own desires to what little they can perceive of God's desires."[191]

Traditional Teaching / New Experience For evidence of this theme, Magonet points to abundant material in the book that is quoted from elsewhere in the Bible. As he notes, Jonah tends to use formulas found in the tradition whenever explaining himself (ex. 1:9 and 4:2). In fact, Magonet contends that "The only statement that [Jonah] makes which is independent of his past is the request to be thrown overboard." Magonet argues that these quotations serve at once to evoke the tradition and to highlight the ways in which Israel (represented by Jonah) must adjust to circumstances that are quite different from those of their past. Israel must "break out beyond traditional positions and limitations in the light of a new demand by God." Jonah, says Magonet, demonstrates this message through frequent alteration and apparent misappropriation of quotations. "On several levels, 'Jonah' forces us to re-read the tradition."[192]

191. Magonet, 94.
192. Magonet 102.

The Power of God / The Freedom of Man As Magonet summarizes, "God creates and rules the world according to His own plan. He is free to act as He wishes, is ultimately responsible for all that happens and can force mankind to do His will - and yet in certain circumstances, man can himself successfully oppose God's decree".[193] This tension, argues Magonet, is apparent in the contrast between the futility of Jonah's attempt to flee and the success of the Ninevites in averting God's decree. Further, he writes, "As an ironic aside Jonah has even been incidentally responsible for the full-scale conversion of the sailors to the fear of YHWH - Jonah's very rebelliousness can be turned to serve God's purpose!"[194] Magonet contends that God's final message with the plant is that "..if man is to try to imitate the 'feelings' of God, let it not be the 'anger' of God, which is God's prerogative alone, but rather His pity...[Jonah] must come to understand the inner quality of that very pity in God that can forgive, overcoming his own willfulness in the process. Then the freedom of man will come to accord with the will of God."[195]

Indeed, if the book of Jonah is any indication of when human beings can and cannot influence Divine decisions, it would seem that God is more likely to be moved by repentance (as in the Ninevites) than by rebellion (as in Jonah).[196]

Compassion: Justice versus Mercy Simon concludes that this theme "...is compatible with the entire narrative from beginning to end and encompasses most of its elements."[197]

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193. Magonet, 107.
194. Magonet, 107.
195. Magonet, 110.
196. Ibid.
197. Simon, xiii.

Jonah, Simon argues, believes in strict justice, and takes issue with God's merciful stance. He writes, "To the advocate of strict justice it is clear wickedness abounds not only because of the viciousness of evildoers, but also because the Judge of all the earth does not treat them with the full severity of the law."[198] Apropos of this view is Rachel Adler's translation of נִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה as "indulgent of evil". Jonah's accusation is that God is complicit in allowing evil to happen. Simon argues, "Jonah fled to Tarshish, instead of delivering the prophecy against Nineveh, because he was aware of the Lord's predisposition to mercy, so that the true purpose of the terrible verdict he was to proclaim to the inhabitants of the sinful city was to stimulate them to repent."[199] Jonah would prefer that the Ninevites answer for their wickedness and suffer appropriate punishment than repent. The remainder of the book, then, is the continuing struggle between the prophet who rejects mercy upon sinners and the God who is merciful nonetheless.

Simon has indeed captured what I believe to be a central theme of the book, and a theme which is most relevant to our discussion of chapter 4. However, I would recast Simon's conception slightly and argue that the text points to a modified version of the struggle between justice and mercy. The Bible, after all, includes many narratives that articulate the tension between Divine justice and mercy. Consider, for example, the stories of Sodom and Gemorrah (Gen. 18), the golden calf (Ex. 32) and the prayer of Nehemiah 9. This third passage provides a litany of the ways in which the people have rebelled, highlighting above all God's merciful responses. The very

198. Simon, xii.
199. Simon, 35.

history of the people Israel and their relationship with God is a history of the tension between Divine mercy and Divine compassion.

Jonah's story differs from these in its focus on the individual prophet. It does address the matter of the proper balance between justice and mercy. More precisely, though, it is the story of the individual whose concept of that balance collides head-on into God's. Jonah faces the inverse of a more common personal existential crisis. Individuals typically wonder at the balance between Divine justice and mercy when the scale seems to tip too heavily toward the side of "justice".[200] Yet, the book of Jonah turns *everything* on its head. It is Jonah's crisis that appears to be *nehephach.* Rather than a protagonist who is bulldozed by "justice" we have one who is utterly distraught at the thought of mercy. What is unique about the book of Jonah is not God's mercy, but Jonah's extreme discomfort with God's mercy.

After all, within the Jonah text, it is not the people of Israel who stand to suffer but Jonah himself. Even the punishment of the Ninevites, presumed horrendous in the mind of the reader, is described with just two words: וְנִינְוֵה נֶהְפָּכָת ("And Nineveh will be overturned"). In comparison, the narrator goes the great length to depict the suffering of this individual prophet. As we will see below the attention to Jonah's personal feelings is quite unusual in the Bible.

Sasson also detects a deeply personal crisis in Jonah's protests. He writes about 4:2-3:

Jonah's message, therefore, would be serving double duty: we may think it is

200. Here I should note that I mean "justice" in a particularly broad sense. I mean to include the notion on the part of the sufferer that the suffering is unwarranted and the assumption that it must be based on some system of justice.

> about Nineveh, but Jonah above all means it to be about himself... "Even as you were sending me to this god-awful city," Jonah is asserting, "I planned my escape to Tarshish; and I put this plan into effect because I have always known the truth about you: that when it comes right down to it, you will forgive and you will not punish: not Nineveh for its sins; not me for disobeying you. Even as the seas were raging, even as I was falling into the gaping mouth of a fish, I knew you to be full of bluster; when eyeball to eyeball, as usual you blinked first!" And now comes the challenge, whether delivered from an irked or from a dejected mind, "God, now that you know how I really feel about this whole experience, you can go ahead and kill me; erase, if you dare, that miracle you performed in the sea for me.[201]

Whether or not the text supports Sasson's specific conclusions about Jonah's protest, it does indicate that the focus is on Jonah and his reaction to God's decisions. We have noted Sasson's observation of the many verbs that Jonah uses to describe *himself* in 4:3 (הֱיוֹתִי, אַדְמָתִי, קִדַּמְתִּי, יָדַעְתִּי). In addition to these four verbs, the words נַפְשִׁי, מֵחַיָּי, מוֹתִי, מִמְּנִי, דְּבָרִי are inflected with a first person singular suffix. Jonah, at least, is singularly concerned with himself. It may be just this self-centered quality in Jonah that has contributed to a comic reading of the book. The prophet takes himself so very seriously that we cannot help but draw out a measure of levity.

It is not only Jonah, though, who focuses on himself. The text itself also points to Jonah through the many references to his feelings. The Bible is typically quite reticent about the emotions and motivations of its characters.[202] Yet, the following five pericopes (out of a total of eleven verses in chapter 4) are clearly about Jonah's feelings:

> v.1 And he burned with anger.
> v.4 Are you [so] good and angry?
> v.6 And Jonah was glad about the ricinus, a great gladness.
> v.9 Are you [so] good and angry?
> v.9 I am so good and angry, I could die

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201. Sasson, 297.
202. Many scholars have noted this. See, for example Alter's chapter "Characterization and the Art of Reticence." (114-130).

The text also notes that the plant saves Jonah מֵרָעָתֹו (from his evil/distress). While this is not a direct reference to his feelings, it is another glimpse into his state of mind.

Finally, consider the care that God gives to this individual prophet. As we have noted, God calls up forces of nature to bring Jonah back to his mission (the storm), to save and then entrap him (the fish), to provide shade (the plant) and then to make a final point (the worm). God follows him from Israel toward Tarshish to the depths of the ocean to Nineveh and then outside of the city. God engages him in conversation, even asking twice about his feelings. In sum, Jonah, the narrator and God all contribute to a primary focus on Jonah and his state of mind.

The Implications of Jonah's Crisis

While I have argued that Jonah's is in large part a personal story, I do not mean to suggest it is only the story of single human being. That both the text and God pay such attention to Jonah's protest suggests that more is at stake than his experience. Jonah raises questions that are global in nature and extend far beyond his personal narrative. As we have noted, Jonah brings up his own version of theodicy, an issue with universal relevance. The book asks, in effect:[203]

Is life worth living when the system of justice in the world is incomprehensible?
Can one / should one affirm life apart from justice?
Is the goodness of life contingent upon matters of justice?

Jonah takes the position that life's value is deeply enmeshed with issues of justice. However, the text as a whole takes the opposite stance. Jonah says, in effect, "If these are the rules of this world, count me out!" Yet, both God and the narrator

203. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi.

refuse to do so, suggesting that Jonah must find another means of coping.

After all, the two instances in which Jonah asks to die are not the only references to death in the book. In fact, they serve as a climax of a book in which impulses toward life and death vie for prominence. The following outline traces life and death images in the book of Jonah:

CHAPTER 1
v. 4 The ship threatens to break up. [death]
v. 5 Sailors take life-saving measures. [life]
Jonah does not, but rather goes into a deep sleep. [death]
v. 6 The captain commands Jonah to call to his god, explaining that they praying so that "...we will not perish". [life]
v. 12 Jonah is willing to sacrifice himself, "Lift me and cast me into the sea..." [death to save life]
v. 14 The sailors ask God, "Do not let us perish [life] on account of this man's life... do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person" [death]

CHAPTER 2 [As a whole, reflects Jonah's drive for life]
v. 1 fish swallows Jonah [saves him from death while also threatening death]
v. 3 the belly of sheol, images of drowning [death]
v. 5 hopeful image of rising to life [life]
v. 6 more images of drowning [death]
v. 7 "you brought my life up from the pit" [life]
v. 8 "my life was ebbing away" [death]

CHAPTER 3
v. 4 "Nineveh will be overthrown" [death]
v. 5-7 fasting and sackcloth - emulating the dead [death with the hope of life]
v.9 The king of Nineveh hopes that "we do not perish" [life]

CHAPTER 4
v. 3 take my soul, better is my death than my life [death]
v. 7 ricinus plant withers [death]
v. 8 longs to die, better is my death than my life [death]
v.9 so angry I could die [death]

Looking at chapter 4 and at the book as a whole, we might conclude that death wins out in this narrative. However, not only does Jonah live in the end, but *no one*

dies in the entire book. As Eskenazi points out, Ezra-Nehemiah is the only other narrative in which no one dies.[204] Whedbee also notes that no one dies in Song of Songs.[205] Remarkably, this book in which every human character's life is threatened ultimately affirms life. In addition to all of the thematic elements discussed above, a motif running through the narrative is the preservation of life.

Good and Evil in the Book of Jonah

As we have seen, God takes great interest in the issues that Jonah raises. One key to understanding God's message may lie in the frequent allusions to the Garden of Eden narrative of Genesis 1-3.[206] Jonah, it seems, invites us to consider and revisit the Garden. Particularly compelling are the references to ידע, טוב and רע which together comprise a key theme in Genesis.

Our reading of Jonah will depend in part on how we understand the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis. Note that in Genesis 1, God sees that nearly every step of creation is טוב (Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,31). The term רעה only appears in reference to the "knowledge of good and evil" (2:9, 2:17, 3:4, 3:22) Thus while "evil" remains an abstract concept, the narrator defines "good" in the eyes of God: Creation is good. Generation of life is good.

This phrase "knowledge of good and evil" in Genesis may be (and has been) interpreted in many ways. Richard Elliot Friedman summarizes:

> ... This may mean knowledge of what is morally good and bad, or it may mean qualities of good and bad in all realms: morality, aesthetics, utility, pleasure and pain, and so on. It may mean that things are good and bad in themselves and that when one eats from the tree one

204. In conversation.
205. Whedbee, 217.
206. See appendix 1 for a more complete list.

> acquires the ability to see these qualities; or it may mean that when one eats from the tree one acquires the ability to make *judgments* of good and bad.[207]

Sarna suggests one possibility not included by Friedman: "It is more satisfactory, however, to understand 'good and bad' as undifferentiated parts of totality, a merism meaning 'everything'.[208]

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi suggests an alternative meaning that may shed light on Jonah.[209] She notes that the highly unusual term for God, יהוה אלוהים appears in both Jonah 4:6 and Genesis narrative (see for example, Gen 2:15 and 3:1). Eskenazi proposes that "knowledge of good and evil" refers to experiential rather tha theoretical knowledge. After eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, the man and woman begin to *experience* the world in ways previously unknown to them. Immediately after eating the fruit, "the eyes of the two of them were opened" (וַתִּפָּקַחְנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם - Gen. 3:7). The first thing that happens is they *know* that they are naked (וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֵירֻמִּם הֵם - 3:7). They, of course, have been naked all along. What has changed is that they now *experience* nudity and all that it entails (ex. fear in verse 10). Further, the results of their eating from the tree include a variety of future experiences - they will come to know sorrow (vv. 16 and 17), desire (v.16) and toil (v. 19 - literally "the sweat of your brow"). Emotions, both good, and bad are an integral part of their lives. They are now full participants in the experiences that the world has to offer.

Likewise, Jonah begins our story with a plenitude of theoretical knowledge.

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207. Friedman, 17. Italics are Friedman's.
208. Sarna *Genesis*, 19.
209. In conversation.

As Magonet observes, nearly every time that Jonah opens his mouth, he draws from the wisdom of his tradition. Keenly aware of "knowledge" from his people's past, he "knows" about creation (1:9), about prayer (2:3), about insincere devotion (2:9) and about deliverance (2:10). What we learn in 4:2 is that Jonah's motivation for fleeing is his "knowledge" about God. So certain is he, and so opposed to God's viewpoint that he travels to the depths (literally) in order to avoid his role in carrying out God's command. Jonah's "knowledge" is twofold. (1) He knows that God will relent (this turns out to be accurate) and (2) He "knows" that God is "wrong" to do so. The latter point is implied rather than stated outright. Still, Jonah acts and speaks with the certainty of someone thoroughly behind his convictions.

Further, Jonah purports to know good from bad. In the book, טוב does not appear until 4:3, yet רעה has appeared by then nine times. The following subjects are deemed "evil" (see below for a discussion of the final reference):

Citation	What is evil?	In whose eyes?	In whose words?
1:2	Behavior of Ninevites	God	God
3:8	Behavior of Ninevites	King of Nineveh	King of Nineveh
3:10	Behavior of Ninevites	God	narrator
1:7	Storm at sea	sailors	sailors
1:8	Storm at sea	sailors	sailors
3:10	Punishment	narrator	narrator
4:2	Punishment	*not* Jonah	Jonah
4:1 twice	Forgiveness of Nineveh	Jonah	narrator
[4:6	Jonah's experience	Jonah	narrator]

For the other characters in the book, destructive forces are "evil": the wickedness of the Ninevites, the storm at sea and God's punishment that would wreak havoc on a people. For Jonah, however, only the forgiveness and Nineveh is "evil" and the text emphasizes his reaction with the repetition of the word in 4:1. In

addition, Jonah's critique of God as נִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה, highlights that, unlike Moses (Exod. 32:12), Jeremiah (Jer. 26:3), Joel (Joel 2:13) and the narrator of this book, he does not find God's destructive anger to be evil. Indeed, it is compassion that is a problem for Jonah.

In 4:3, the first "good" that Jonah sees is not the salvation of the innocent sailors or his own salvation from the whale but rather the prospect of his own death! Jonah would reverse the very meaning of "good" from day one of the world's existence. Not only is death "good" for Jonah but it is "better than my life". In fact, the only appearances of the root טוב are when Jonah refers to his own death (4:3 and 4:8) and when God or Jonah refer to Jonah's anger (4:4 and 4:9 twice).

It is significant that God initiates the use of "good" in reference to Jonah's anger. The threefold repetition of the connection between anger and goodness indicates that it is central to our story. God asks Jonah to evaluate his reaction and also implies that Jonah's convictions are worth a second look. Anger is generally considered a frightening and destructive force (see the examples above) in the Bible. The only other reference to anger in this narrative comes in the King of Nineveh's hope that God will turn from the anger that would mean ruin for the city (3:9). The narrator highlights the Biblical perspective by deeming God's punishing reaction רעה in the following verse. As we have seen, Jonah takes the opposite perspective that forgiveness (at least in this case) is evil and that anger would be good.

God, then, urges Jonah to reconsider. An alternative translation of God's question could read, "Is anger [both yours and mine] so good to you?" This question

is reminiscent of the one that God poses to Cain in Gen. 4:6: לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ - "Why are you angry and why has your face[210] fallen?" In both cases, God is attentive to human anger and aware of the potential that it has for destruction. God's care comes in the form of questions that encourage reflection and awareness. God urges Jonah to rethink what he "knows".

God also provides the *experience* of salvation and mercy for Jonah. Despite his journey in and out of the fish's belly, Jonah has not yet integrated the message of salvation's goodness. Thus, God provides the plant. The narrator specifies that the purpose of the plant is to "save [Jonah] from his evil." As we have seen, the term להציל attests to the severity of Jonah's condition and to the Divine investment in its improvement. Thus, we must consider the precise meaning of רעה in this case. As Magonet and Sasson have suggested, the plant represents far more for Jonah than shelter from the blazing heat. Perhaps's Jonah's "evil," as God sees it, is the rigidity of his thinking and his certainty of "knowing". Perhaps, a la Adler's "behavior modification plan," God challenges Jonah's black-and-white notions of justice and mercy, asserting instead that nuance and inconsistency are called for at times.

In sum, when Jonah asks for death, God answers with an alternative. As with Cain, God suggests that one way to cope with imperfect circumstances is a shift in perspective. In this case, God illustrates what it would mean for Jonah to shift and refine his absolute definitions of good and evil. We cannot know whether or not Jonah heeds God's message. In keeping with the tone of the book, the implications of

210. Or "countenance".

Jonah's final words are perfectly ambiguous. Indeed, he resolutely states, "I'm so good and angry, I could die." On the one hand, we can read this to mean that Jonah, once again not getting what he wants, reverts to an immature means of provoking the deity. On the other hand, if Jonah is angry about the destruction of the plant (as God suggests), this could be an entirely new anger for this prophet. Perhaps Jonah surprises even himself with his violent reaction to loss and destruction. Perhaps, having experienced God's capacity to grant him joy with the creation of life, he now faces another variation of his life turning *nehephach*. Difficult as it was for him in chapter 1 to realize that God's perspective is at odds with his, perhaps Jonah now experiences the utter chaos that comes as his own certain convictions begin break down.

Whether or not Jonah ultimatlely agrees, God suggests to Jonah that he ought to rethink his "knowledge". As painful as it is, says God, "Your life is better than your death."

III. WALKING A WORN PATH: JONAH JOINS A BIBLICAL CHORUS

Jonah is not the only figure in the Bible who asks for death or longs for the end of life. In this chapter, I compare Jonah to other characters who do so. I have organized them according to similarities in their outcries. Elijah and Moses express sentiments quite similar to that of Jonah. They are the three characters who directly ask God to end their lives. Jeremiah and Job do not speak to the deity but rather utter maledictions that reflect their situations of agony and their desires for nonexistence. Rebecca and Rachel reach brief moments of despair in the midst of familial struggles. Qohelet's reflections upon life's injustices occasionally lead him to doubt the value of living. In each section, I discuss the elements that lead these individuals to call for death as well as the responses of God and fellow human beings to their cries of despair.

The final section of this chapter is a brief study of those characters who take measures to end their lives. Ahitophel, Saul, Samson, Abimelech and Zimri all cause or hasten their deaths. Their motivations are varied as are the degrees to which they participate in their own deaths. The Bible does not censor these stories out of the narrative. They highlight the fact that Jonah (and the others) maintain, and reject, the option to end their lives.

Reaching Up: Elijah and Moses

I went down to the place where I knew she lay waiting
under the marble and the snow.
I said, "Mother, I'm frightened; the thunder and the lightening;
I'll never come through this alone."
She said, "*I'll be with you, my shawl wrapped around you,*
my hand on your head when you go."
And the night came on; it was very calm;
I wanted the night to go on and on,
but she said, "*Go back, go back to the world.*"

- Leonard Cohen in "The Night Comes On"[211]

Elijah and his plea to end his life have much in common with Jonah and his story. The Elijah scene takes place after Elijah has slain the prophets of Ba'al and Jezebel has threatened his life. Elijah flees to Be'er Sheva and interacts with God in the wilderness, as Jonah does. 1 Kings 19: 4 and 5 closely parallel the Jonah material. Here, the matching language is underlined:

ד וְהוּא־הָלַךְ בַּמִּדְבָּר֙ דֶּ֣רֶךְ י֔וֹם וַיָּבֹ֕א וַיֵּ֖שֶׁב תַּחַ֣ת רֹתֶ֑ם אֶחָ֣ת [אֶחָ֔ד] וַיִּשְׁאַ֥ל אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ֙ לָמ֣וּת
וַיֹּ֕אמֶר | רַ֥ב עַתָּ֖ה יְהוָ֑ה קַח־נַפְשִׁ֗י כִּ֤י לֹא־טוֹב֙ אָנֹכִ֔י מֵאֲבֹתָֽי׃ ה וַיִּשְׁכַּ֖ב וַיִּישַׁ֣ן תַּחַ֔ת רֹתֶ֖ם אֶחָ֑ד
וְהִנֵּה־זֶ֤ה מַלְאָךְ֙ נֹגֵ֣עַ בּ֔וֹ וַיֹּ֥אמֶר לוֹ֙ ק֣וּם אֱכֹֽל׃

And he went to the desert, a day's journey, and he came and he sat underneath one broom plant, and he asked his soul to die and he said, "Enough! Now therefore Adonai, take my life because I am not better than my ancestors." And he lay down and he slept underneath the one broom plant and behold! This was an angel touching him and he said to him, "Get up! Eat!"

Verses 3 and 8 of Jonah chapter 4 read:

ג וְעַתָּ֣ה יְהוָ֔ה קַח־נָ֥א אֶת־נַפְשִׁ֖י מִמֶּ֑נִּי כִּ֥י טוֹב֙ מוֹתִ֣י מֵחַיָּֽי

211. Cohen, 345.

ח וַיְהִי | כְּזָרֹחַ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיְמַן אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ קָדִים חֲרִישִׁית וַתֵּךְ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ עַל־רֹאשׁ יוֹנָה וַיִּתְעַלָּף
וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ לָמוּת וַיֹּאמֶר טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּי׃

The linguistic similarities between these pericopes are striking. The unusual phrases "Take my life" and "And he asked his soul to die" create a strong association in the minds of the reader. These are profound expressions of desperation directed both externally (the former) and internally (the latter).

Scholars have noted further parallels between the prophets. For example, many point out the symbolic number 40, which appears in Jonah's warning to the Ninevites (עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוֵה נֶהְפָּכֶת - 3:4) and in Elijah's journey to mount Horeb (אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לָיְלָה - 19:8).[212] Magonet also points out, "Elijah walks one day into the desert, Jonah walks one day into Nineveh."[213] Several scholars[214] note that both prophets seek shade in the wilderness underneath a plant.

Magonet compares the sleep of the two characters.[215] In chapter 1 of Jonah, while the sailors pray to their gods and cast out cargo, Jonah retreats to the recesses of the ship, וַיִּשְׁכַּב וַיֵּרָדָם (v.5). So too, we read of Elijah: וַיִּשְׁכַּב וַיִּישָׁן (v.5). For Magonet, the common use of וַיִּשְׁכַּב, combined with the two *differing* words for sleep, shed light on the Jonah text. He concludes that, "two prophets, both fleeing, both faced by imminent death, lie down and sleep; but whereas one sleeps a normal sleep, the other sleeps a 'deep sleep' which is already cut off from contact with the world about him, a sleep which is itself already close to death."[216] תַּרְדֵּמָה is indeed

212. For example, see Magonet, 69 and the Lacocques, 95.
213. Magonet, 69.
214. For example, see Magonet, 68.
215. Magonet, 68.
216. Magonet, 68.

associated with a death-like state. It is also associated with communications with God. It is the sleep of the adam as God removes a rib (Gen 1:21) and the sleep associated with אֵימָה חֲשֵׁכָה גְדֹלָה (a terror, a great darkness) that falls upon Abraham immediately before the *Brit Bein Hab'tarim* (Gen.15:12) It is the trance-like state of visions (Dan. 8:18 and 10:9), the sleep of dread and trembling (Job 4:13), and the utterly immobilizing sleep with which God stills warriors (Ps. 76:7). These citations support Magonet's claim that Jonah's sleep is especially deep and that it is a state that approaches death. However, we should not write off Elijah's sleep as a mere nap. 1 Kings 19:5 continues וְהִנֵּה־זֶה מַלְאָךְ נֹגֵעַ בּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ קוּם אֱכֹל - "And behold, this was an angel touching him and he said to him, 'Get up! Eat!'" Thus, even though Jonah's sleep appears to be more intense, Elijah encounters a Divine being where Jonah does not.

Nature plays a significant role in both narratives. In both stories, forces of nature switch on and then just as suddenly, off. With Jonah, in almost every case (with the exceptions of the storm in chapter 1 and the sun in chapter 4), the text credits God with causing nature to act. In stark contrast, Elijah experiences a series of dramatic natural phenomena, all of which highlight God's absence (vs. 11-12). Even the קוֹל דְמָמָה דַקָּה, the voice of a thin hush that is often cited as evidence of God's presence does not contain a direct reference to God.

Taken together, these two elements (sleep and nature) comprise yet another surprise twist in the book of Jonah. God does not appear in a conventional Biblical manner, yet appears where he is absent in Elijah's story.

When God does respond to Elijah, it is, as with Jonah in deed rather than in word. An angel feeds Elijah in verses 5 and 7. By urging Elijah to take part in life-sustaining activities, God suggests that Elijah's life is worth living. When God later speaks to Elijah, as with Jonah, it is in the form of a question asked twice: אֵלִיָּהוּ מַה־לְּךָ פֹּה "Elijah, what are you doing here?" (vv. 9 and 13). In both cases, God's question contains the pronoun *you*, placing accountability back in the hands of the prophet.

In both cases, then, God intimates that the prophet bears some responsibility for his situation and that the solution will not be found in death. God diverts attention away from the prophetic denouncement of life and offers instead Divine contact and care.

The Elijah scene brings to mind the outcry of yet another lonely prophet in the wilderness. Twice, Moses requests that God end his life. In the first scene, Exodus 32, Moses mediates between God and the people of Israel following their most grievous sin, the golden calf. Moses' first reaction is anger toward the people. He takes action such as breaking the first set of tablets, forcing the offenders to drink powdered gold and rebuking Aaron. Having dealt with the people, Moses then returns to God. He acknowledges the gravity of the sin in Exodus 32:31b: אָנָּא חָטָא הָעָם הַזֶּה חֲטָאָה גְדֹלָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי זָהָב - "Oh, this people sinned a great sin and they made for themselves gods of gold". Moses' plea comes in the following verse וְעַתָּה אִם־תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם וְאִם־אַיִן מְחֵנִי נָא מִסִּפְרְךָ אֲשֶׁר כָּתָבְתָּ - "And now

therefore, if you will forgive[217] their sin... and if not, blot me out, please, from Your book that You have written". On this verse, Nahum Sarna writes:

> This request seems to reflect a well-rooted and widespread Near Eastern popular belief in the existence of heavenly 'books.'...It is hard to decide whether or not the notion of heavenly books was taken literally in ancient Israel... In the present instance, Moses' request is framed in the figurative language of the book of life, so that he is really asking to die if Israel is not forgiven.[218]

Moses literally puts his life on the line on behalf of the people. He has already spoken out against God's wrath prior to descending the mountain. In verses 11-14, he has convinced God not to obliterate the people completely. That passage reads:

יא וַיְחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה יְהוָה יֶחֱרֶה אַפְּךָ בְּעַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹחַ גָּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה: יב לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם לַהֲרֹג
אֹתָם בֶּהָרִים וּלְכַלֹּתָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה שׁוּב מֵחֲרוֹן אַפֶּךָ וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה לְעַמֶּךָ: יג זְכֹר
לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בָּךְ וַתְּדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם אַרְבֶּה אֶת־זַרְעֲכֶם
כְּכוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֶתֵּן לְזַרְעֲכֶם וְנָחֲלוּ לְעֹלָם: יד וַיִּנָּחֶם יְהוָה
עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לְעַמּוֹ:

But Moses implored Adonai his God saying, "Let not your anger, Adonai, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. Let not the Egyptians say 'It was with evil intent that God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from Your blazing anger and repent the evil for Your people. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Israel, how you swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever." And Adonai repenented the evil that He had said He would bring upon the people.[219]

Both Moses and the narrator refer to God's renouncing of evil (נחם על הרעה), a concept that is of primary importance in the Jonah text. In addition, like the

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217. Literally, "carry". For other examples of this usage, see Gen. 50:17 and Nu. 14:18.
218. Sarna, 210.
219. Based on JPS translation with "Adonai" substituted for "The Lord".

Ninevites, Moses hopes that God will turn from burning anger (Jon 3:9). Where Moses asks God to "repent the evil", it is as if Jonah asks God to "repent that You repented the evil."

In this text, Moses appeals to God's own feelings of connection to the people and responsibility to their ancestors. He invokes the Egyptians who are at this point in the narrative the archetypes of evil, and the reputation that destroying the people would leave behind. At no point in this passage does Moses bring up his own feelings or position.

Verse 32 conveys an altogether more personal message. In Sasson's terms, he offers "a cry from the heart".[220] The precise reason for this change is not clear. Perhaps Moses senses that God's anger is not yet tempered and hopes that a personal plea will help. Perhaps the request for forgiveness requires more emotion and less logic than the request to spare the people. In verse 30, Moses has specified that he will ascend the mountain so that אוּלַי אֲכַפְּרָה בְּעַד חַטַּאתְכֶם - "perhaps I will propitiate on account of your sins".

Jonah's outcry is just the inverse of that of Moses. Moses seeks the forgiveness that irks Jonah so. Moses wants to be written out of God's "book" if God will not forgive. Jonah wants out of a world in which forgiveness prevails. As readers, we can readily understand why Moses takes the fate of this people so personally. He has invested dearly in their plight and their journey. Jonah's personal stake is much less clear. Commentators (see above) have suggested that Jonah's deep opposition to the salvation of Nineveh stems from his loyalty to Israel and his interest

220. Sasson, 284-5.

in Israel's survival. Jonah may be, then, similar to Moses in his willingness to put his life on the line on behalf of the people Israel. Alternatively, we can infer that Jonah is as personally invested in his belief system as Moses is in his people.

God's answer to Moses' plea comes in verses 33-34:

לג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה מִי אֲשֶׁר חָטָא־לִי אֶמְחֶנּוּ מִסִּפְרִי׃ לד וְעַתָּה לֵךְ | נְחֵה אֶת־הָעָם
אֶל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ הִנֵּה מַלְאָכִי יֵלֵךְ לְפָנֶיךָ וּבְיוֹם פָּקְדִי וּפָקַדְתִּי עֲלֵהֶם חַטָּאתָם׃ לה וַיִּגֹּף
יְהוָה אֶת־הָעָם עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֶת־הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אַהֲרֹן

And Adonai said to Moses, "The one who sins against me, I will blot him out from my book. And now therefore, go, lead the people where I told you. Here is my angel for you. He will go before you and on the day of my visiting, I will visit their sin upon them." And Adonai sent a plague to the people that had made the calf that Aaron made.

God's response contains two layers of meaning. The first is that despite Moses' plea, God will not refrain from punishing the people. Verse 34 reinforces this notion as God sends a plague upon the people. The second message is that not only will God punish those who sin, but that *only* those who sin will be erased from God's record. The implication is that God, not Moses, will determine the day of his death. God once again sends the message that life is more valuable than any single issue might trouble a human being.

Moses' second plea for God to end his life is the most direct that we have encountered so far. Numbers 11:11-14 reads:

יא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לָמָּה הֲרֵעוֹתָ לְעַבְדֶּךָ וְלָמָּה לֹא־מָצָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לָשׂוּם אֶת־מַשָּׂא
כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלָי׃ יב הֶאָנֹכִי הָרִיתִי אֶת כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם־אָנֹכִי יְלִדְתִּיהוּ כִּי־תֹאמַר אֵלַי
שָׂאֵהוּ בְחֵיקֶךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאֹמֵן אֶת־הַיֹּנֵק עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לַאֲבֹתָיו׃ יג מֵאַיִן לִי
בָּשָׂר לָתֵת לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־יִבְכּוּ עָלַי לֵאמֹר תְּנָה־לָּנוּ בָשָׂר וְנֹאכֵלָה׃ יד לֹא־אוּכַל אָנֹכִי
לְבַדִּי לָשֵׂאת אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּנִּי׃ טו וְאִם־כָּכָה | אַתְּ־עֹשֶׂה לִי הָרְגֵנִי נָא הָרֹג
אִם־מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאַל־אֶרְאֶה בְּרָעָתִי

And Moses said to Adonai, "Why have you made it bad for Your servant? And why

have I not found favor in your eyes that you have[221] placed the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, bearing them, that you would say to me, 'carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries the suckling one' to[222] the land that You swore to their fathers? From where do I have meat to give this entire people since they cry to me saying, 'Give us meat and we will eat!' I, I cannot carry this entire people alone, since it is too heavy for me. If this is what you do to me, kill me, please kill, if I have found favor Your eyes so that[223] I will not see my evil[224].

This time, the text paints a vivid picture of Moses' distress. Moses renounces his responsibility for the people ("Did I conceive them...?"), critiques God for placing the burden in his hands ("...that *you* would say to me...") and dissociates himself from them entirely ("...the land that You swore to *their* fathers"). His frustration is palpable in the verses that follow. We can imagine a helpless Moses searching the barren desert as the demands of the people ring louder in his ears. In the next verse, Moses rejects his grave responsibility as "too heavy". Finally, we reach the climax of his outcry: הָרְגֵנִי נָא הָרֹג - "kill me, please kill". Moses then frames his would-be death as a mercy killing ("...if I have found favor in Your eyes so that I will not see my evil"). Death, he says, would be a kinder fate than the life he lives. He specifies that the insufferable pain would come not the people or from God, but rather from seeing his own "evil/distress".

Once again, Moses' personal interest in the issue at hand is much clearer than Jonah's. In fact, this contrast highlights the absence of background that we have for Jonah. By the time we reach the present examples, the text has characterized Moses and developed his struggle. This is also the case with Elijah, but not so with Jonah.

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221. Literally, "to".
222. Literally "upon".
223. Literally, "and".
224. A key word here as it is in Jonah. Many translators use "wretchedness" here (ex. JPS). I translate "evil" in order to keep it consistent with my translations of רע in the Jonah text.

Jonah's resistance begins essentially when his story begins. Without very little background (the only previous reference to Jonah comes in 2 Kings 14:25) we wonder whether Jonah, like Elijah and Moses, has put any work into the idea that becomes a matter of life and death for him.

God's responds to Moses by providing relief from his burden. In verse 15, God commands Moses to appoint 70 elders of Israel who will share in the leadership responsibility. Once again, God does not directly address the prophetic cry for death, but rather takes action that coaxes the life force back into prominence. The Moses examples are also significant in that Moses *does* have the ability to move God toward life, but not away from it. Of all of the passages cited above, the only one in which Moses is wholly "successful" in his plea is Exod. 32:11-14. The human being, unable to persuade God to end a single life, nonetheless can influence God to save an entire people.

The stories of Jonah, Elijah and Moses cross paths thematically and linguistically at many points. One factor that the three stories share in common is sense of failure on the part of the prophet. Moses states outright in Numbers 11 that his leadership role is too burdensome. Elijah is also concerned with his sense of shortcoming. He does not request death because he is afraid or exhausted as we might expect, but rather because לֹא־טוֹב אָנֹכִי מֵאֲבֹתָי - "I am not better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4). Jonah cries out for the end of his life, ironically, after he has succeeded as a prophet. In Jonah's case, it is his personal, not his professional mission that has failed. In fact, his professional success in convincing Nineveh to repent is the very cause of his sense of personal failure.

All three characters ask for God to end their lives in response to their specific current circumstances. They are provoked by immediate feelings of anger, frustration and impotence. The desire to die seems to rise and fall for these prophets. Perhaps the impulse is fleeting in the first place, perhaps they find God's response satisfying or perhaps they simply decide to abandon this means of making a point with the deity in favor of one that is less risky. In any case, no character asks for death more than twice. Moreover, none of these characters is so distraught as to end his or her life without God's help.

Bolin suggests that the message of these three texts is the supreme power of God over the human being who attempts to tap into God's domain, namely the forces of life and death. The requests for death of Moses and Elijah, he notes, result in "diminishment in or revocation of God's power and authority from the individual."[225] God's response to Moses, he notes, is to transfer some of Moses' leadership role to seventy elders. God ultimately appoints Elisha as Elijah's successor and terminates Elijah's role as privileged prophet. Bolin notes that in the case of Jonah, this scene "serves to reinforce the key theme... the absolute power of Yahweh over creation and an equally unfettered freedom in the exercise of that power."[226] In support of his case, Bolin notes, "Of course, the most significant shared feature is the fact that these entreaties for death are denied by God."[227]

Bolin's "diminshment in power" however, can reflect a more complicated interaction than a power struggle. Recall that both Elijah and Moses seek relief from

225. Bolin, 175.
226. Ibid.
227. Ibid.

the burden that their leadership (or "power") has brought on. Perhaps their frustration is best summed up in Elijah's outburst "Enough!" of 1 Kings 19:4. Bolin is right, however, in observing that no human character has the power provoke God to end his or her life. In fact, when they contend that life is not worth living, Divine contact indicates otherwise. Jonah is a prime example of God's tenacious concern to bring a despairing prophet to choosing life.

Trodden Down: Jeremiah and Job

"I woke up this morning afraid I was going to live."
- Elizabeth Wurtzl[228]

Jeremiah and Job express longing for death of an entirely different sort than that of Jonah, Elijah and Moses. They express anguish as the result of suffering that appears to have no end. Jeremiah is the quintessential rejected prophet. Called but reluctant to speak the word of God, he is forced to utter grim prophecy to a people who will not listen. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "Jeremiah's was a soul in pain, stern with gloom... The days that were to come would be dreadful. He called, he urged his people to repent - and he failed. He screamed, wept, moaned - and was left with a terror in his soul."[229] Job's story is one of incomprehensible suffering. Job has lived a righteous and pious life when he suddenly loses his oxen, his sheep and his camels in rapid succession. His crisis turns deeper and more personal as his children die and he is inflicted with painful sores. For all this, Job wants nothing more than an audience with God. Unwilling to curse or reject God, Job yearns for a response that does not come until chapter 38. In moments of utter despair Jeremiah and Job long for the only relief they can imagine: death. Thus they offer haunting laments, each cursing his very birth.

Even before Jeremiah's own suffering leads him to lament that death may be preferable to life, he describes that sentiment in others. Perhaps foreshadowing his own despair, he cries out in 8:3:

וְנִבְחַר מָוֶת מֵחַיִּים לְכֹל הַשְּׁאֵרִית הַנִּשְׁאָרִים מִן־הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת

228. A chapter title in Wurtzl's book *Prozac Nation.*
229. Heschel, 105.

בְּכָל־הַמְּקֹמוֹת הַנִּשְׁאָרִים אֲשֶׁר הִדַּחְתִּים שָׁם נְאֻם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת

And death will be chosen over life by all the remnant that remain from this evil family in all the places of those who remain where I have driven them, thus says Adonai of hosts.

Jeremiah prophecies about a horrendous time to come. He has warned that due to the sins of the people of Judah (7:30), corpses will soon outnumber gravesites (7:32), mirth and gladness will come to an end (7:34) and the bones of kings and prophets will be removed from their tombs and scattered upon the ground (8:1-2). This time will be so unbearable, says Jeremiah, that those who remain will wish that they were dead. The desire for nonexistence becomes more personal for Jeremiah in 20:14-18:

יד אָרוּר הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר יֻלַּדְתִּי בּוֹ יוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יְלָדַתְנִי אִמִּי אַל־יְהִי בָרוּךְ׃ טו אָרוּר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר
בִּשַּׂר אֶת־אָבִי לֵאמֹר יֻלַּד־לְךָ בֵּן זָכָר שַׂמֵּחַ שִׂמְּחֵהוּ׃ טז וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ הַהוּא כֶּעָרִים
אֲשֶׁר־הָפַךְ יְהוָה וְלֹא נִחָם וְיִשְׁמַע זְעָקָה בַּבֹּקֶר וּתְרוּעָה בְּעֵת צָהֳרָיִם׃ יז אֲשֶׁר לֹא־מְוָתְתַנִי
מֵרֶחֶם וַתְּהִי־לִי אִמִּי קִבְרִי וְרַחְמָהּ הֵרֶת עוֹלָם׃ יח לָמָּה זֶּה מֵרֶחֶם יְצָאתִנִי לִרְאוֹת עָמָל וְיָגוֹן
וְיִכְלוּ בַבֹּשֶׁת יָמָי

Cursed is the day on which I was born, the day that my mother gave birth to me. Let it not be blessed! Cursed is the man who brought my father news saying, "A male child has been born to you," making him very glad. Let this man be like cities that Adonai overthrew and did not relent and let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noontime as he did not kill me in the womb and my mother would have been my grave and her womb always pregnant. Why is it that I came out from the womb to see toil and grief so that[230] my days will end in shame?

The word רחם or "womb" appears three times in verses 17 and 18. The close connection of this word to feelings of compassion and mercy (an alternative meaning of the three letter root) may provide insight into the nature of Jeremiah's cry. Jeremiah speaks of the man who announced his birth complaining that לֹא־מְוָתְתַנִי

230. Literally, "and".

מֵרֶחֶם which reads "he did not kills me in the womb". While רחם here means "womb" the phrase also connotes the sentiment, "he did not kill me out of compassion." Indeed, the death for which Jeremiah longs is a mercy killing. Death, he suggests, would be relief from the toil, grief and despair that mark his existence.

Jeremiah curses the day on which he was born. In his agony, he looks disdainfully upon the "good news" of his birth. Unlike Jonah, Elijah and Moses, he does not ask explicitly for death. As Breuggemann points out "...this curse is not addressed to God or to anyone..."[231]. While he longs for death, he does not blame those who brought him life. He refers to his parents, but does not hold them accountable for his suffering. Brueggemann suggests, "The poet is bereft of anyone to whom address can be made, utterly alone with only shrillness against a hostile abyss."[232] He does bear a grudge toward the unnamed man who announced his birth. Brueggemann interprets:

> Jeremiah has made entry into this community only when the news of his birth is announced by the messenger. If the news had not been announced, he might have been unnoticed, unvalued, assaulted, uncalled... [The messenger] could instead have suppressed the news and killed the baby. Perhaps there is a subtle irony. As Jeremiah himself is rejected as a messenger, so Jeremiah would reject the messenger who caused him to be present and known in the world. Jeremiah knows all about messengers being rejected, and he wishes his birth message had never been delivered[233]

Heschel comments on the nature of Jeremiah's cry. According to Heschel, Jeremiah cannot bear the conflicting impulses within him. He comments:

> 'Filled with the wrath of God,' it was beyond his ability to weigh, measure or control the outburst of anger. The occasion of such an outburst may at times have been a personal one; its possibility and

231. Brueggemann, 185.
232. Ibid.
233. Brueggemann, 186.

> intensity derived from sympathy. The tension of being caught, heart and soul, in two opposing currents of violent emotion, was more than a human being could bear.[234]

Whatever the immediate cause of his suffering, Jeremiah makes it clear that given the choice, he would take death over life. The man who announced his birth to the world is unforgivable, for that man made Jeremiah's life and his suffering a reality.

This text has the terms רחם, נחם and הפך in common with the Jonah text. Jeremiah's image of the "cities that Adonai overthrew and did not relent" provide a backdrop for Jonah's desire for Nineveh. For Jonah, this would be Divine justice finally brought to a city of sinners. Jeremiah similarly calls for retribution for those who have sinned (ex. Jer. 15:15). In this case, however, Jeremiah calls for vengeance on the messenger who bears responsibility for his being and his suffering.

Jeremiah who has led a life of suffering and curses the day of his birth nonetheless shows restraint when it comes to accusations. Willing to blame an unnamed messenger, in this passage he will not directly confront the God who chose him for this task and a lifetime of suffering. Jonah, on the other hand, turns immediately to God. In contrast to Jeremiah, Jonah does not look to a single human being (least of all himself!) to find the source of his suffering, preferring to take his complaint straight to his Creator.

Like Jeremiah, Job regrets being alive. While he weaves this sentiment into several of his outcries (see, for example Job 9:21,10:1 and 18), he expresses it most forcefully in chapter 3:[235]

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234. Heschel, 125.
235. Translation from Clines, 67-68. For the Hebrew text, see appendix 2.

After that, it was Job who broke the silence, with a curse on his day. And Job said, "Perish the day I was born, the night that said, 'A boy is begot!' That day would it had become darkness! That God above had taken no thought for it, that no light had shone on it! Would that gloom and death's shadow had claimed it for their own, that cloud had settled upon it, that eclipses had affrighted it! That night - would that deep darkness had carried it off, that it had not been counted among the days of the year, not found its way into the reckoning of months! If only that night had been barren, and no cry of joy been heard in it! Would that the cursers of days had laid a spell on it, those skilled at rousing Leviathan! Would that the stars of its dawn had been darkened, that it had waited in vain for the light, and never seen the eyelids of morning! Because it did not shut the doors of the womb, nor shield my eyes from trouble.

Why did I not die a new-born, perish as I left the womb? Why did the knees receive me, a mother's breast suckle me? Then I should have laid myself down in tranquility, then I should have slept and taken my rest, with kings and ministers of state, who rebuilt ruined cities for themselves, with princes rich in gold, who filled their houses with silver. Why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never saw the light? There the wicked cease to rage; those who have spent their powers rest. Captives are at utter ease; they hear no slavedriver's shout. Small and great alike are there; and the slave is free from his master.

Why is light given to the troubled, and life to those bitter in spirit? They yearn for death, and yearn in vain, would dig for it rather than for a hidden treasure; they would rejoice exultingly and delight to attain the grave. Why is light given to one whose path is hidden, one whom God has hedged about? For my sighs are my daily bread, groans pour from me like water. For what I most feared had befallen me, all that I dreaded has come upon me. I have no repose, no quiet, no rest. Turmoil has come."

This poignant and passionate poem is among the most desperate cries in the Hebrew Bible. Clines refers to it as a complaint, though he notes that it shares features in common with a curse, a lament, a monologue and a malediction.[236] Job yearns for darkness, for night, for death while casting off light, morning and life. Being alive means suffering to Job. He fantasizes about his death at conception (v.7), at birth (v.3) and as a newborn (v.11), finally settling on images of the grave.

In the first stanza, Job, like Jeremiah, longs for the disappearance of the day

236. Clines, 76-7.

on which he was born. He does not curse the day, per se, but simply wishes it would fall out of existence. Commenting on the futile nature of Job's wish, Clines writes, "The potency of his imagination is not weakened by the impossibility of his wish."[237] His desire, even more so than Jeremiah's, is contrary to the Biblical motif of yearning for birth and life. He wishes that the night of his conception had been, of all things, barren (גַּלְמוּד - also in Isaiah 49:21).

Clines' translation of יְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ "would it become darkness" may understate the reference to creation in Genesis. Clines argues, "This is not a defiant gesture against God but the anguish of a man who has found the creation of himself the very opposite of the 'good, very good' of Gen 1."[238] Indeed, we cannot conclude definitively that Job means to incite the deity. However, as Catherine Keller observes the phrase יהי אור is a deliberate reversal of the language of Genesis 1:3 and it demands a closer look.[239] First, it ought to be translated "let there be darkness" in order to reflect the reference to Genesis that is clear in the Hebrew.[240] Second, we cannot preclude the possibility that God is Job's intended audience. At the very least, Job must be aware that the God whose words brought on creation will "overhear" the malediction. Third, as Whedbee notes, it is clear "...that Job hurls a curse and a challenge against the whole creation... he apparently desires to throw all of creation back into primordial chaos."[241] As Job invokes the first days of creation with images of light, darkness, morning, stars and the Leviathan, his complaint

237. Clines, 84.
238. Ibid.
239. Keller, 128.
240. Ibid.
241. Whedbee, 230.

suggests a scope that is wider than the current pain in his life.

In the second stanza, Job focuses on the moment of his birth, wondering why he was not spared a life of pain from that moment on. Clines suggests that this stanza is a lament that "sets its heart not on some improvement of the sufferer's lot, but on the dissolution of his life."[242] Job places in opposition the turmoil of his life and the rest he imagines in the afterlife (verse 13: כִּי־עַתָּה שָׁכַבְתִּי וְאֶשְׁקֹט יָשַׁנְתִּי אָז | לִי). In fact, he romanticizes non-existence. Clines cites Davidson who observes, "The picture of the painless stillness of death fascinates him and he dwells long on it, counting over with a minute particularity all classes, kings and prisoners, slaves and masters, small and great, who there drink deep of a common peace, escaping the unquietness of life."[243]

In the third and final stanza, he generalizes his experience to others. Unlike any other Biblical character who longs for death, Job seems aware of an entire class of people who experience that impulse. For those who are עָמֵל "troubled" and לְמָרֵי נָפֶשׁ "bitter in spirit" light and life are a curse rather than a blessing (v.20). They would not merely accept death but actually *rejoice* and *delight* in it - הַשְּׂמֵחִים אֶל־גִּיל יָשִׂישׂוּ כִּי יִמְצְאוּ־קָבֶר (v.22). Still, as Clines notes:

> ...beneath the surface of vv 20-23 purportedly about troubled humanity in general, the principle concern is still the troubled individual Job, who in the last verses (vv 24-26) speaks again directly of himself. And here finally the *Leitmotiv* of the whole poem is stated in its most explicable form: unlike the ease of Sheol which he desires, he has here in life no "ease" (נוח) at all, but only "trouble" (רגז) that comes,

242. Clines, 89.
243. Clines, 89.

and keeps on coming, against him.[244]

Job calls for death in another moving passage. Chapter 6, verses 8-13 read:

ח מִי־יִתֵּן תָּבוֹא שֶׁאֱלָתִי וְתִקְוָתִי יִתֵּן אֱלוֹהַּ׃ ט וְיֹאֵל אֱלוֹהַּ וִידַכְּאֵנִי יַתֵּר יָדוֹ וַיִבַצְּעֵנִי׃ י וְתְהִי
עוֹד | נֶחָמָתִי וַאֲסַלְדָה בְּחִילָה לֹא יַחְמֹול כִּי־לֹא כִחַדְתִּי אִמְרֵי קָדוֹשׁ׃ יא מַה־כֹּחִי כִּי אֲיַחֵל
וּמַה־קִּצִּי כִּי־אַאֲרִיךְ נַפְשִׁי׃ יב אִם־כֹּחַ אֲבָנִים כֹּחִי אִם־בְּשָׂרִי נְחוּשִׁי׃ יג הֲאִם אֵין עֶזְרָתִי בִּי
וְתוּשִׁיָּה נִדְּחָה מִמֶּנִּי׃

Would that my request would find fulfillment[245] and that God would grant my hope. And God would be willing[246] to crush me. He would let loose his hand and cut me off! And it would still be my consolation if[247] I recoiled[248] in merciless pain for I have not denied[249] the words of the Holy One. What is my strength that I should wait and what is my end, that I should prolong my life? Is my strength the strength of stones? Is my flesh bronze? Is there no help in me? And strength cast from me?[250]

In chapter 3, Job longs for the afterlife and wishes himself out of existence. In this passage, he makes a bolder statement about his desire for death. He does not address God directly, but makes clear his "hope" that God crush him and let his life go. Clines argues that the "consolation" of which Job speaks would be the comfort in knowing that he never crossed the boundary of his faith and betrayed God (as his wife has urged him to do in 2:9).[251] Clines adds, "...this is not merely a protestation of innocence by Job, but a desperate appeal for a speedy end to his life because he fears he cannot maintain his right behavior much longer (cf. vv 11-13)."[252]

In verses 11-13, Job turns to his current state of anguished weakness. Waiting

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244. Clines, 98.
245. Literally "my request would come". Here, I follow Clines.
246. Alternatively, "pleased".
247. Literally "and".
248. Again, I follow Clines. He argues against NRSV and others who translate "exult" for סלד (p.. 159). This is a hapax legomenon.
249. See Clines, 159 for a discussion of כחד and its typical meaning "hide".
250. Here, I depart from Clines and NRSV who do not translate this last line as a question. I find the use of הֲאִם a compelling reason to do so.
251. Clines, 172.
252. Clines, 174.

is unbearable for this man who sees only suffering on his horizon. Job compares his utterly defeated self to resilient materials that can endure continuous harsh treatment. Unlike stone and bronze, the human Job has a pain threshold and is nearing his limit. His most desperate cry, "Is there no help in me? And strength cast from me?" expresses ultimate despair. It is reminiscent of the cry in Jeremiah 8:22, "Is there no Balm in Gilead?" Job sees no resources from which he would draw relief. Even his friends have betrayed him as he describes in verse 14. The only respite Job can imagine is the relief that would come with death.

In both passages, Job expresses a sentiment much like Jonah's טוב מותי מחיי.[253] Still, he will not curse God and die as his wife urges him to do in 2:9. Even in the midst of despairing lament, Job is propelled forward, perhaps by his desire to confront God and to understand the unintelligible system of justice. Indeed, his complaint seems to comprise a force of its own. As he comments in 7:11:

גַּם־אֲנִי לֹא אֶחֱשָׂךְ־פִּי אֲדַבְּרָה בְּצַר רוּחִי אָשִׂיחָה בְּמַר נַפְשִׁי

Therefore, I cannot restrain my utterance; I must speak in the anguish of my spirit; I must protest in the bitterness of my soul.[254]

Whedbee comments on the nature of Job's speeches:

> Job moves from his own plight to a radical and comprehensive indictment of God and a frontal challenge to God's justice in the universe. As interpreters have long argued, what began as a trial of Job has now turned into a trial of God; thus the moral vision of the universe comes to stand under a severe and searching scrutiny.[255]

Rejecting the counsel and justification that his friends offer, Job demands a trial (9:14), laments the absence of a mediator (9:33), refers to an "advocate on high"

253. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, in conversation.
254. Clines' translation.
255. Whedbee, 237.

(16:19) and finally speaks confidently of a "redeemer" who will vindicate him (19:25).[256] This language of the courtroom highlights that Job ultimately wants not death but a forum for his challenge. He wants (and finally gets) a response from the God who controls human suffering.

J. William Whedbee suggests that the "Book of Comfort" of Jeremiah 30-31 and God's "Speech from the Whirlwind" of Job 38-41 provide God's responses to the two maledictions and God's affirmation that life is valuable even when for those who are deeply suffering.[257] The scope of this study does not allow for complete analyses of these passages. However, I concur that both passages are Divine responses to cries of human suffering. Jeremiah's "Book of Comfort" is filled with assurances that God will restore Israel (see, for example, Jer. 30:3, 18-22, 31:4, 9) and the implication that Jeremiah's suffering has not been in vain (ex. 31:16). Likewise, Job, who wants nothing more than an answer, finally hears God's poetic description of a world that is beyond human comprehension.

That Job possesses a powerful will to live is confirmed by the final narration of the book. After God speaks to him from the whirlwind, he acknowledges God's response (42:1-5) and repents (42:6)[258], and God restores his blessings (42:12-14). The final two verses read:

וַיְחִי אִיּוֹב אַחֲרֵי־זֹאת מֵאָה וְאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וַיִּרְאֶ֣ [וַיִּרְאֶה] אֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־בְּנֵי בָנָיו אַרְבָּעָה דֹרוֹת: יז וַיָּמָת אִיּוֹב זָקֵן וּשְׂבַע יָמִים:

And Job lived after this one hundred and forty years and he saw his children and his

256. Whedbee points out this sequence, 240.

257. I am grateful to Dr. Whedbee and his students Lelsie Barnard, Sam Cross and Sara Eron for sharing their insights into these passages with me.

258. JPS and NRSV are among the many translations that read נחם as repentance in this case. Clines, however translates, "Therefore I melt in reverence before and I have received my comfort (ונחמתי) even while sitting in dust and ashes." In either case, Job's will to live is confirmed by the final verses of the book.

children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.

Thus Job, the man who once wanted nothing more than to fade out of existence experiences continued generation of life and lives to old age. In fact, he lives far beyond the 120-year life span that God grants humanity in Gen. 6:3. Even the archetypal sufferer, who at one time wished for creation to reverse itself, finds himself propelled out of the proverbial fish's belly and driven relentlessly toward life.

Breaking Through: Rebecca and Rachel[259]

Most people have from time to time wished to be dead, null, beyond sorrow.
- Andrew Solomon[260]

In a handful of instances, Biblical characters express longing for death in a single verse. Woven into longer narratives of familial and personal struggles, these outcries capture the attention of fellow human beings and God alike. Unlike any passage that we have examined thus far, in all three of these cases, the speaker is a woman. In each case, as the root of the despair is a matter of interpersonal or family relationship.

In Genesis 25:22, Rebecca conceives and the following verse reads:

וַיִּתְרֹצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶּה אָנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה׃

And the children struggled inside of her and she said, "If so, why do I live?"[261] And she went to seek Adonai.

Context tells us that Rebecca is at first unable to conceive, Isaac prays on her behalf, God is entreated, and she then conceives (all in v. 21). Still, we do not know whether she suffers primarily from physical pain, from regret over conceiving or from a suspicion that the struggle between her twins will not end in the womb. If Rebecca has such a premonition, God confirms it in verse 23. God's answer is more an

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259. We should make note of one additional brief call for death. In 2 Sam. 19:1, David learns of the death of his son Absalom and cries out

בְּנִי אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנִי בְנִי אַבְשָׁלוֹם מִי־יִתֵּן מוּתִי אֲנִי תַחְתֶּיךָ אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנִי בְנִי׃

My son, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would that I had died! Me, in your place, Absalom, my son, my son!

I have not included this incident in this study as it is not clear that David calls the meaning of life into question. Rather, he wishes for an exchange of Absalom's life for his. Still, it is worth noting that the triggering event for David, as with Rebecca and Rachel, has to do with his child.

260. Solomon, 244.

261. Literally, "Why is this me?"

explanation than a response to her complaint:

שְׁנֵי גיִים [גוֹיִם] בְּבִטְנֵךְ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֵּעַיִךְ יִפָּרֵדוּ וּלְאֹם מִלְאֹם יֵאָמֵץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר

Two nations are in your womb and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.[262]

Whether or not God's answer satisfies Rebecca is left to speculation. Neither God nor Isaac revisit Rebecca's outcry but the text continues to tell the story of the twins' struggle through chapter 33. In fact, Rebecca plays a role in their struggle (ex. Gen. 27:5-17) which suggests that she has found in herself the drive to live and even to affect the course of history.

Rebecca once again calls the value of her life into question in Genesis 27. Esau has threatened Jacob's life and Rebecca has instructed Jacob to flee to Haran. Rebecca then turns to Isaac and says (v.46):

קַצְתִּי בְחַיַּי מִפְּנֵי בְּנוֹת חֵת אִם־לֹקֵחַ יַעֲקֹב אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת־חֵת כָּאֵלֶּה מִבְּנוֹת הָאָרֶץ לָמָּה לִי חַיִּים

I abhor my life because of the daughters of Het. If Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Het like these, from the daughters of this land, why do I have life?

Sarna explains that Rebecca needs to explain to Isaac why Jacob must flee without exposing her own role in the deception earlier in the chapter.[263] As we know from Genesis 29:34, Esau has married two Hitite women who have become a source of bitterness to both Isaac and Rebecca. Still, it is quite a leap for Rebecca to "abhor" her life and doubt its value. Isaac responds by sending Jacob away (28:1) but does not address the extreme nature of her request or her apparently wavering will to live.

This second comment of Rebecca's brings up the matter of hyperbolic speech both for Rebecca and for Jonah. If Sarna is correct, then Rebecca's cry is more in the

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262. NRSV.
263. Sarna, 195.

spirit of manipulation than agony. What more compelling way to make a point than to suggest that the very meaning of one's life depends upon it?

Rachel also speaks of her own death. Genesis 30:1 reads:

וַתֵּרֶא רָחֵל כִּי לֹא יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב וַתְּקַנֵּא רָחֵל בַּאֲחֹתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הָבָה־לִּי בָנִים וְאִם־אַיִן מֵתָה אָנֹכִי

And Rachel saw that she did not bear Jacob [children][264] and Rachel envied her sister and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, and if not, I die!"

Rachel's intention is not completely clear. NRSV translates, "Give me children or I shall die" indicating that she intends to end her life or anticipates that she will die. Alternatively, Sarna suggests in a footnote she means, "Life without children would not be worth living."[265]

The text notes that Jacob responds to her outcry with anger, and asks (v.2):

הַתַּחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר־מָנַע מִמֵּךְ פְּרִי־בָטֶן

Am I in the place of God who withheld from you fruit of the womb?

Rachel then has her handmaid Bilhah bear children for her (vv. 5, 7) and she eventually bears children herself (30:22, 34:17). Both Jacob and God (the text specifies that it is God who opens her womb in 30:22) respond to Rachel's complaint. By now, we have seen that it is characteristic of God to respond in deed, implicitly answering that the unhappy human being's life is in fact worth living. This interaction, however, is the only glimpse that we get into an emotional reaction on the part of the person who *hears* the complaint. Jacob's anger may reflect his fear of losing his beloved wife, his reluctance to take responsibility for her in ability to conceive and his own sense of impotence at this critical moment. The third

264. Implied.
265. Sarna, 207.

possibility is intriguing. It paints a picture of Jacob so real and so human. Indeed, when a loved one expresses suicidality or describes an utterly fruitless search for meaning, anger, frustration, powerlessness and fear are often evoked.

This text points to the remarkable *absence* of anger on God's part in the book of Jonah (and for that matter any of the other texts of our study). While much attention is paid to Jonah's anger, the text never once discusses whether or not God is angry with Jonah. The *only* reference to God's anger comes in 3:9 where the king of Nineveh speculates that God might "turn back from his burning anger so that we do not perish."

Rebecca and Rachel both experience moments of feeling that life is meaningless. Whereas Jonah cannot divorce matters of justice from life's meaning, these two women find life's value in familial relationships, particularly in matters pertaining to their children. Rebecca is dubious about the meaning of life when her children struggle. Rachel likewise rejects life when it looks as though she will not have children at all. In both cases, the women express their doubts about life with a single comment. In both cases, however, they continue living and in fact pursue solutions to their sources of woe.

Cycling Back: Qohelet

And though it seems grand
We're just one speck of sand
And back to the hourglass we're going...
- Emily Saliers in "Deconstruction"

Rebecca and Rachel's message that the desire for death will pass is confirmed in the wisdom of Qohelet where the preference for death over life makes several brief appearances. The speaker expresses this sentiment 3 different times, each with its own circumstances and motivation. In the first, Qohelet has sought to consider חָכְמָה וְהוֹלֵלוֹת וְסִכְלוּת wisdom and folly and madness (2:12) While he comments that הֶחָכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וְהַכְּסִיל בַּחֲשֵׁכָה הֹלֵךְ ("The wise one has eyes in his head and the fool walks in darkness" - 14a), he also reflects: וְיָדַעְתִּי גַם־אֲנִי שֶׁמִּקְרֶה אֶחָד יְקָרֶה אֶת־כֻּלָּם ("And I also know that what happens to one happens to all" - 14b). Qohelet finds the latter notion deeply troubling. If this is so, he wonders in verse 15, וְלָמָּה חָכַמְתִּי אֲנִי ("And why have I been wise?") The fact that the wise and the foolish face the same eventual end in death leads Qohelet to comment in verses 16-17:

טז כִּי אֵין זִכָּרוֹן לֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם בְּשֶׁכְּבָר הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכָּח וְאֵיךְ יָמוּת
הֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל: יז וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים כִּי רַע עָלַי הַמַּעֲשֶׂה שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
כִּי־הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ:

For there is no remembrance of the wise, as there is never any of fools, because both are already forgotten in the days to come, and the wise die like fools. Then I hated life, for the work that was done under the sun was grievous to me because everything was vapor and shepherding the wind.[266]

266. All Qohelet translations are based on Crenshaw unless otherwise noted. In this case, I have followed the Crenshaw translation but replaced "futility" with "vapor". As Tarama Cohn Eskenazi teaches, "vapor" is the more literal translation while"vanity" (also NRSV's "vanity") is

Qohelet's distress relates thematically to that of Jonah. Qohelet longs for a more just system than the one in which "the wise" and "fools" are subject to the same fate. Ironically, it is the ultimate levelling that comes with death that causes Qohelet to hate life. He would likely agree with Jonah that God's mercy on the Ninevites is unwarranted. The two speakers share a similar grievance though they discover it at different points in the life cycle. While Jonah rails against the chance at *life* granted to fools, Qohelet's concern is the *death* that claims wise ones. Both argue that the matter of who shall live and who shall die should reflect a system based on merit. Both reject a world in which life and death are handed out "indiscriminately".

In the second passage, oppression and despair lead Qohelet to doubt the value of living. He opens this section with a discussion of matters that once again relate to Jonah's concerns. 3:16-17 read:

וְעוֹד רָאִיתִי תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט שָׁמָּה הָרִשְׁעָ וּמְקוֹם הַצֶּדֶק שָׁמָּה הָרָשָׁע׃
יז אָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי אֶת־הַצַּדִּיק וְאֶת־הָרָשָׁע יִשְׁפֹּט הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי־עֵת לְכָל־חֵפֶץ וְעַל כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה שָׁם

And furthermore I saw under the sun that wickedness was in the place of judgment and in the place of righteousness, wickedness. I reasoned that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, because there is a time for everything and concerning every deed there.

On the one hand, Qohelet sees an absence of justice and in its place, wickedness. On the other, he seems to trust that God will eventually set things right.[267] Still, after pondering the nature of humanity, he returns to the topic of wickedness. In chapter 4, verses 1-3 read:

א וְשַׁבְתִּי אֲנִי וָאֶרְאֶה אֶת־כָּל־הָעֲשֻׁקִים אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשִׂים תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וְהִנֵּה | דִּמְעַת הָעֲשֻׁקִים

an interpretation that provides an unnecessarily negative spin on the word הבל.

267. Qohelet expresses both perspectives elsewhere. See, for example, 3:17, 7:15 and 8:14.

וְאַיִן לָהֶם מְנַחֵם וּמִיַּד עֹשְׁקֵיהֶם כֹּחַ וְאֵין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם׃ ב וְשִׁבַּחְתִּי אֲנִי אֶת־הַמֵּתִים שֶׁכְּבָר מֵתוּ
מִן־הַחַיִּים אֲשֶׁר הֵמָּה חַיִּים עֲדֶנָה׃ ג וְטוֹב מִשְּׁנֵיהֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר־עֲדֶן לֹא הָיָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־רָאָה
אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הָרָע אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ׃

Again I turned and saw all the oppressions that were penetrated under the sun, and oh, the tears of the oppressed, but there was no comforter for them. In the hand of their oppressors there was power, and there was no comforter for them. And I praised the dead who had already died more than the living who were still alive. But better than both of them is the one who still has not been, who has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Oppression seems to be a category beyond wickedness for Qohelet. The "tears of the oppressed" and complete absence of comfort are so unbearable, that he, like Jeremiah and Job, reasons that any lifeless state is preferable to being alive. In fact, while death is preferable to life, not being born is better still. For Qohelet, the privileged state is never having entered this world and thus never having seen the oppression that plagues him. We should note that while it is suffering that drives him to this position of despair, it is not his own suffering, but rather the pain of others that he has observed. Again, he shares Jonah's concern for justice. Both are distraught by the "evil deeds that are under the sun."

In the third instance, Qohelet questions the value of life in a detached and philosophical tone. In the section that Crenshaw labels, "The Disappointments of Wealth"[268] (5:9 - 6:9), we find the following comment (6:3):

אִם־יוֹלִיד אִישׁ מֵאָה וְשָׁנִים רַבּוֹת יִחְיֶה וְרַב | שְׁנֵי־שָׁנָיו וְנַפְשׁוֹ לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע מִן־הַטּוֹבָה
וְגַם־קְבוּרָה לֹא־הָיְתָה לּוֹ אָמַרְתִּי טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ הַנָּפֶל

If a person begets one hundred children and lives many years, and if the days of his years are many, and he is not satisfied with the good, and also if he does not have a burial, I said that a stillborn is better off than he.[269]

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268. Crenshaw, 119.

269. This translation is based on Crenshaw's. However, I have changed his "say" to "said" in order to reflect the Hebrew literally. What follows is an additional comment on the final ambiguous phrase: NRSV translates, "...if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he." According to this rendering, Kohelet teaches that two things

Here Qohelet suggests that a certain life without appreciation is not worth living. Qohelet compares the person endowed with the Bible's most precious blessings (many children and a long life) who is unsatisfied with his or her life to the stillborn baby. As if echoing Job 3:11 and 16, Qohelet decides that the stillborn is better off. This passage is not an impassioned expression of longing for death but rather a distanced judgment that a poorly lived life is hardly a life at all.

In contrast, Qohelet expresses profound appreciation for life elsewhere in the text. For example, in 9:4, he clearly concludes that life is valuable:

כִּי־מִי אֲשֶׁר יְחֻבַּר [יִחָבֵר] אֶל כָּל־הַחַיִּים יֵשׁ בִּטָּחוֹן כִּי־לְכֶלֶב חַי הוּא טוֹב מִן־הָאַרְיֵה הַמֵּת

For whomever is chosen among all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.[270]

Crenshaw comments that, "In the ancient Near East 'dog' (a scavenger) was a metaphor for a contemptible or worthless person, whereas 'lion' designated a prince of person of great worth." For Qohelet, though, life is ultimately superior to death overcoming the wretchedness or nobility of the individual.

Indeed, throughout the book, we detect various sentiments that would appear to be in contradiction with one another. For example, as noted above, Qohelet expresses a tension between the lack of justice that he sees and the trust that God will ultimately act as judge. He observes that the wicked prolong their lives (7:15) and elsewhere that they do not (8:13). He both touts (7:19) and doubts (2:15) the value of seeking wisdom. It is therefore useful to read Qohelet as an inner dialogue. As

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make a person's life virtually meaningless. The first is lack of appreciation of one's blessings in life. The second is not being buried. Crenshaw translates "...even if it does not have a burial, I say that the stillborn is better off than he." He suggests that the "it" is anticipatory and refers to the stillborn, who would not have a burial according to traditional Jewish custom. Though Crenshaw's reading is not obvious from the Hebrew, I find the logic more compelling.

270. Crenshaw's translation.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi[271] teaches, Qohelet searches for philosophical insights and his search involves examining and various perspectives and positions. During any particular exploration, he cycles through emotions, "trying on" outlooks that often include despair and hope. Through Qohelet, we experience the processes that lead us from one stance to another.

Certain viewpoints, however, are more lasting than others. Eskenazi suggests that Qohelet's periods of searching are often marked by the terms אמרתי or ראיתי. When he reaches a more stable conviction, he tends to speak in the imperative. The following pericopes demonstrate that despite the disappointments and frustrations of this world, Qohelet finds value and pleasure in living. He teaches a way of life that is based upon embracing rather than rejecting life. He often expresses sentiments such as those found in 3:12-13, 8:15 and 9:7:

יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין טוֹב בָּהֶם כִּי אִם־לִשְׂמוֹחַ וְלַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹב בְּחַיָּיו׃ יג וְגַם כָּל־הָאָדָם שֶׁיֹּאכַל וְשָׁתָה
וְרָאָה טוֹב בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא׃

(3:12-13) I know that there is nothing better in them than to rejoice and to fare well during life. And also that every person should eat and drink and experience good in his toil - it is a gift of God.

וְשִׁבַּחְתִּי אֲנִי אֶת־הַשִּׂמְחָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין־טוֹב לָאָדָם תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ כִּי אִם־לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת
וְלִשְׂמוֹחַ וְהוּא יִלְוֶנּוּ בַּעֲמָלוֹ יְמֵי חַיָּיו אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

(8:15) And I praised pleasure, for there is nothing good for a human being under the sun but to eat, drink, and be happy, and it will accompany him in the toil of the days of his life that God gives him under the sun.[272]

לֵךְ אֱכֹל בְּשִׂמְחָה לַחְמֶךָ וּשְׁתֵה בְלֵב־טוֹב יֵינֶךָ כִּי כְבָר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ׃

(9:7) Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart, for God has already approved your actions.

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271. In her Hebrew Union College course "Bible 3: Writings".
272. Crenshaw's translation.

Qohelet seems to understands that in the vast majority of cases, the desire for death does not last. The philosopher who contemplates the cycles of nature (1:5-7) and the ephemerality of human existence (ex. 1:4) concludes that even a death wish is fleeting. Like all human emotions and whims, this too comes and goes. This too is הבל. We never find out whether or not Jonah reaches this conclusion. The abrupt ending of the book leaves us wondering what becomes of Jonah and his death wish. However, his rapid responses to the plant and his desire for life in chapter 2 suggest that he too experiences a range of emotions triggered by changing circumstances. The desire for death, then, may be as temporary for him as it is for Qohelet.

Opting Out: Suicide in the Bible

The man who kills a man kills a man
The man who kills himself kills all men.
As far as he is concerned, he wipes out the world.
- G. K. Chersteron[273]

Our study would not be complete without an exploration of the stories of the characters in the Bible who take their own lives. Without consulting God or giving long dramatic speeches, these individuals take matters into their own hands and simply end their lives. Perhaps the most chilling example is the case of Ahitophel. Ahitophel starts out as a military advisor to David and then switches camps as Absalom garners support for his rebellion (2 Samuel 15). He advises Absalom to escalate the challenge to the king by sleeping with David's concubines, "before the eyes of all of Israel". While the text then compares Ahitophel to those who "inquire of the word of God"[274] (2 Sam. 16:23) and David himself has acknowledged the significance of Ahitophel's advice (15:31 and 35), Absalom appears to lose confidence in his counsel. Rather than taking Ahitophel's advice to pursue the king immediately, Absalom consults another strategist, Hushai. In fact, Absalom's salient reason for seeking a second opinion appears to be doubt about that of Ahitophel. Absalom asks Hushai, "This is according to the word that Ahitophel has spoken. Should we go his way? If not, you speak." (17:6). Hushai, who turns out to be a double agent, suggests that Absalom's followers take time to gather a larger army and massacre David's entire camp. In what must have been a humiliating moment for the

273. As quoted in Solomon, 252.
274. Alter suggests an alternate translation, that Ahitophel is compared to "one would inquire of an oracle of God" noting the "sour irony in likening the sordid, if pragmatic, counsel to have sex with the king's concubines of a s divine oracle" (p. 295)

once-favored advisor, the text reads, "And Absalom and every person in Israel said, 'The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than the advise of Ahitophel.'" (17:13). The narrator adds, "And Adonai had ordained to frustrate the good counsel of Ahitophel in order that Adonai would bring evil to Absalom" (17:14). Whether or not Ahitophel attributes his downfall to the deity and whether or not he knows that Hushai's loyalty lies with David, Absalom's rejection of his advice is catastrophic for him. Time seems to slow down as the text hauntingly reports, "And he saddled his ass, and he got up, and he went to his house, to his city, and he commanded his household[275] and he strangled himself and he died, and he was buried in the tomb of his father" (17:23).[276]

We find a questionable case of suicide in the story of Saul. Two passages present differing accounts of Saul's death. Both, however, describe a scene in which Saul asks someone (in one case his armorbearer, in the other an Amalekite) to assist him in ending his life. The narrator tells the version in which suicide obtains. 2 Samuel 31 describes a battle between Israel and the Philistines. The text explains that three sons of Saul have been killed and that the scene looks grim for Saul (31:2-3). The opposing archers find him and inspire in him terrible fear (13:4). Saul then requests of his armorbearer, "Draw your sword and pierce me with it, lest these uncircumcised ones come and pierce me and deal ruthlessly with me." (31:4) The armorbearer, however, it too frightened to grant Saul's request. The text ends Saul's life with a six-word narration, "And Saul took the sword and he fell on it" (31:4).

The Amalekite tells the second version of the story, reporting Saul's death to

275. Often understood as putting his affairs in order. See Alter *King David*, 301.
276. Incidentally, his burial indicates that there is no cultic stigma attached to suicide in Samuel.

David. In this account, Saul leans upon his spear while chariots and horsemen pursue him. Upon seeing the Amalekite, Saul requests, "Stand next to me and kill me for confusion[277] has taken hold of me, for while life is still in me...[278]"(2 Sam 1:9). The Amalekite continues, "And I stood over him and I killed him, for I knew that he would not live after having fallen" (2 Sam 1:10). In both stories, Saul has a hand in his own death, though they vary as to whether or not he completes the act himself.

Likewise, Abimelech takes part in his own death though he does not pull the proverbial trigger himself. Abimelech is involved in a series of military conquests when he attempts to capture Thebez (Judges 9). The men and women of Thebez flee to a tower within the city and gather on the roof of the tower (v. 51). Abimelech approaches the entrance to the tower with the hopes of burning it (v. 52). An unnamed woman then throws a stone on Abimelech's head that crushes his skull (v. 53). Verse 54 reads:

וַיִּקְרָ֤א מְהֵרָה֙ אֶל־הַנַּ֔עַר | נֹשֵׂ֖א כֵּלָ֑יו וַיֹּ֣אמֶר לוֹ֩ שְׁלֹ֨ף חַרְבְּךָ֜ וּמוֹתְתֵ֗נִי פֶּן־יֹ֤אמְרוּ֙ לִ֣י אִשָּׁ֔ה
הֲרָגָ֖תְהוּ וַיִּדְקְרֵ֥הוּ נַעֲרוֹ֙ וַיָּמֹ֔ת׃ נה וַיִּרְא֥וּ אִישׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל כִּי־מֵ֣ת אֲבִימֶ֑לֶךְ וַיֵּלְכ֖וּ אִ֥ישׁ לִמְקֹמֽוֹ׃

And he hurriedly called to the young man who carried his armor. And he said to him, "Draw your sword, lest they will say to me[279] 'A woman killed him.'" And his young man stabbed him and he died.

Abimelech clearly states his motivation. He would rather die immediately than suffer posthumous humiliation. Perhaps the text comments on his motivation in 2 Sam 11:21. In that verse, Joab asks:

מִֽי־הִכָּ֣ה אֶת־אֲבִימֶ֗לֶךְ בֶּן־יְרֻבֶּ֫שֶׁת הֲלוֹא֩ אִשָּׁ֨ה הִשְׁלִיכָ֜ה עָלָ֤יו פֶּ֙לַח֙ רֶ֔כֶב מֵעַ֖ל הַחוֹמָ֑ה וַיָּ֖מָת

277. A hapax legomenon, meaning uncertain. Others translate "a fainting spell" (Alter) or "convulsions" (NRSV). BDB suggests a connection to the verb meaning "weave".
278. Here, I follow Alter who suggests that this clause, "is most simply construed as a broken-off sentence that the failing Saul does not have the strength to complete" (Alter, *King David*, 196).
279. Literally, "to me".

בְּתֵבֵץ

Who struck Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman cast an upper millstone upon him from the wall and he died at Thebez?

Ironically, no mention is made of his servant. Thus, the one thing etched into history is the very fact he hoped to conceal by causing his own death.

Another major character who plays a role in his own death is Samson the judge. The scene takes place when Samson is in the Philistine prison and has regained his great strength. The Philistines bring him out to perform and he asks to lean on the pillars of the building (v. 26). The text specifies that the house is full of men and women and an additional three thousand stand upon the roof. In verse 28, Samson calls to God:

אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה זָכְרֵנִי נָא וְחַזְּקֵנִי נָא אַךְ הַפָּעַם הַזֶּה הָאֱלֹהִים וְאִנָּקְמָה נְקַם־אַחַת מִשְׁתֵּי עֵינַי מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים׃

My lord Adonai, Please remember me and please strengthen me just this time, Oh God and I will avenge the Philistines, one vengeance for my two eyes.

Samson makes clear his motivation: vengeance. With retribution on his mind, he takes hold of pillars and calls out תָּמוּת נַפְשִׁי עִם־פְּלִשְׁתִּים "My soul will die with the Philistines!" (v.30). Samson then brings the prison house crashing down to the ground, taking the lives of thousands of Philistines along with his own.

In 1 Kings 16, Zimri, servant of King Elah of Judah kills Elah (v.10), takes over the kingdom (v.10) and kills Elah's family (v. 11). The people of Israel learn of the revolt and revolt in turn (v.15-17). Verse 18 reads:

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת זִמְרִי כִּי־נִלְכְּדָה הָעִיר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־אַרְמוֹן בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׂרֹף עָלָיו אֶת־בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ בָּאֵשׁ וַיָּמֹת

And it was when Zimri saw that the city was captured. And he came to the palace, the house of the king. And he burned the house of the king around himself with fire and he died.

For three of the characters who take their own lives (Saul, Abimelech and Zimri) it appears that death is imminent via another means. They control their own demise, choosing not to face what they imagine to be a worse fate. No evidence suggests that they would otherwise posess or act upon a death wish. Samson makes his own life a casualty of the vengeance he will take. Ahitophel's motivation may be the humiliation of being rejected, the fear of reprisal from David or simply a sense of utter failure. In fact, a sense of failure seems to run through these stories. Only Samson is "victorious" in his final act. His "triumph" is bittersweet at best and tragic at worst.

In all of these cases, the events that trigger suicide are issues between human beings. No character is motivated by a grievance against God and only Samson calls out to God as he takes his life. Samson's is an interesting case, however, in the implication that God grants the strength Samson needs to bring the prison house down. It is the one case in which God appears to participate in the granting of a death wish. Still, this case is clearly the exception. In all other cases, God is virtually absent from scenes in which Biblical figures take their own lives.

These characters provide a foil for Jonah and the others who call for death but do not take their own lives. Those who do end their lives highlight the will to live that is present, albeit hidden, in those who do not. In addition, they emphasize the matter of conversation with God. Jonah, Elijah and Moses take their grievances directly to the deity. Jeremiah, Job, Rebecca, Rachel and Qohelet voice complaints that concern God, though they often refrain from outright blame. We can conclude, then, that the Bible distinguishes between those who are determined to take their own

lives and those who contemplate the value of living, often involving God in their deliberations. Samson is the only possible example of one person who invokes God's name and God's supernatural powers and takes his life nonetheless.

IV. REGAINING BALANCE: THOUGHTS OF CONCLUSION

But there was no need to be afraid of tears, for tears bore witness that man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer.

- Viktor E. Frankl[280]

As we have seen, the book of Jonah takes our assumptions about the Biblical world and turns them upside down. In the context of the Bible's profound emphasis on the sanctity of life, Jonah's perspective is utterly *nehephach* as he cries, "Better is my death than my life." He is not unique, however, in his death wish. Taken together, the stories of those who seek the end of life illustrate an impulse of hopelessness that goes against the grain of the Biblical narrative.

The motivation behind these calls for death is rarely stated outright. Each character, however, faces some crisis of meaning. Each character doubts the value of living in the midst of overwhelming suffering, injustice or impotence. Jonah, Elijah and Moses bring their grievances directly to God, asking the Creator of life to take their lives back. Jeremiah and Job, surviving perhaps on the mere fumes of a life force, long for either the womb or the grave. Their maledictions express a desire for nonexistence in any form. Rebecca, Rachel and Qohelet express brief but significant moments of antipathy toward life. Even when declaring a preference for death, however, their actions demonstrate that they are at least ambivalent. Their despair does not lead them to rash or irreversible actions. Every one of them finds the strength to live on.

Not so with Ahitophel, Saul, Abimelech, Samson and Zimri. The Bible does

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280. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, 100.

not exclude the reality of suicide in its portrayal of the tension between hope and despair. In their book *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*, Beck et. al. explain, "A person's degree of suicidal intent may be regarded as a point on a continuum. At one extreme is an absolute intention to kill oneself and at the other extreme is an intention to go on living. Many different forms of intent may be found along the continuum."[281] Indeed, the Bible tells a handful of stories of those with "an absolute intention to kill" themselves.

In the majority of cases, however, our characters appear to fall elsewhere on the continuum. With or without the individual's awareness, he or she possesses a will to live that overtakes the will to die. Beck, et. al., offer therapists the following technique when counseling a suicidal patient: "...it is useful for the therapist to treat the decision to commit suicide as the outcome of the struggle between the patient's wishes to live versus his wishes to die... the therapist's effort should be directed toward shifting the votes in favor of living."[282]

It is not my intention here to impose the modern language of psychology onto an ancient text or to suggest that the Bible deliberately describes therapeutic activity. What I do contend is that the Biblical author has tapped into a struggle that is timeless and universal - a tension between awareness of the sanctity of life and the sometimes unbearable nature of living. While engaged in this internal wrestling match, most Biblical characters find the balance eventually tipped toward the side of life.

In many of the Bible's cases, God moves to influence the decision. God does not initiate discussions of the meaning of life, death and dying or the will to live. Nor

281. Beck, et. al., 210.
282. Beck, et. al, 214.

does Divine fury rain down on those who would reject the sanctity of life. In fact, not once does God rebuke an individual for ingratitude as we might expect. Rather, God subtly acts in ways that "shift the votes". God's response may come in the form of an explanation, an improved situation or simply the potent succor of Divine contact. God's (often implicit) message consistently comes down on the side of life.[283]

Consider the primary text of our study: the book of Jonah. Jonah, like many of the other figures, is desperately unhappy with the ways of the world. Recall that when his story begins, *his* universe is turned upside down as he is caught between the rock of disobeying God and the hard place of taking action that is antithetical to his convictions. Once he makes his choice, the *nehephach* nature of his struggle is reflected in his every move and in every countermove of the story. No wonder Jonah exhibits ambivalence (at best) about living. Yet, he too manages to wake up every morning and carry on with his day. It would seem that he has more life force in him than even he wishes to have at times.

It is true that when the opportunity for confrontation arises, Jonah verbally hurls the gift of life back at God. Yet, his motivation appears to be only in part a death wish. We can also identify well-documented anger and a likely desire to move God toward a change in policy.[284] As Jonah attempts to incite the deity, God takes him seriously, yet tempers the drama of the scene. To be sure, God will not be moved

283. In these cases. Elsewhere in the Biblical narrative, other matters take priority (consider, for example, the story of Nadav and Avihu of Leviticus 10). What I mean here is that whenever a human being involves God in weighing the value of life and death, God influences him or her to choose life.

284. This is another phenomenon observed by psychologists. Beck et. al. note that "[Some] suicide attempters report that they have gambled with death in order to produce some interpersonal change." (212).

to destroy Nineveh. At the same time, God is as invested in Jonah's life as he is in the survival of an entire city, providing a remarkable amount of attention and care. The life force continues, even in an unchanged universe.

Of course, the story concludes and we never discover Jonah's final reaction. Still, it is clear where both God and the narrator stand. In the midst of many uncertainties, the text is certain about the value of life. The book of Jonah ends with a question, but the unresolved debate is about mercy on a wicked city, not about the meaning of life. The question that is *not* left hanging in the air is, "Should Jonah continue living?"

Indeed, in the majority of Biblical stories about those who struggle with a wavering desire to live, the individual ultimately continues living. The Bible recognizes that behind an expressed desire for the end of life is often a desire for the end of pain. As Beck, et al., observe, "...statements such as 'I cannot stand things anymore' do not necessarily represent a wish to kill oneself, they are frequently a manifestation of a desire to block out all experience or sadness, at least for a period of time."[285] Solomon confirms this notion in his comment, "I have often wanted to kill myself for a month".[286] Somewhere in the middle of Beck's continuum, most Biblical characters pursue an end to their pain, not an end to their lives.

In the book of Qohelet, we learn that when the pain recedes so too can the suicidal impulse. In his movement from hating to taking pleasure in life, Qohelet demonstrates that desire for death can be as temporary as any emotion. We cannot discount the gravity of suicidality or ignore those individuals (in the Bible or in life)

285. Beck, et. al, 211.
286. Solomon, 246.

who find the only relief from their anguish in killing themselves. However, in most cases (in the Bible and in life) moments of wanting to die are just that - not insignificant moments but moments nonetheless. The ephemerality does not lessen the pain, yet it fosters an acknowledgement that buried deep beneath hopelessness is the possibility of hope.

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Literature on the Book of Jonah

The following three reviews of the literature on the book of Jonah provide comprehensive and insightful discussions of scholarly works and the topics that they address:

(1) Sasson's chapter "Interpretations"[287] organizes his discussion of Jonah literature into three major categories: The Narrator, The Audience and Character Roles.
(2) Similarly, Bolin's section entitled "Modern Exegesis of the Book of Jonah"[288] reviews the literature by topic. Examples of headings include, "Jonah as Allegory" and "Jonah and Literary Criticism".
(3) Scolnic's "The Book of Jonah: An Annotated Bibliography" discusses 13 works on or related to the Book of Jonah.

Here, I discuss in brief the works that I have cited that were published after the works above or are otherwise not discussed:

(1) Rachel Adler's "A Carnival at the Gates: Jonah and Laughter on Yom Kippur"

Adler discusses the humor in the book of Jonah and its relationship to Yom Kippur. She explores the effect that reading this book of exaggeration and inversion, in other words "the funniest book of the Bible"[289] has on worshipers engaged in the otherwise serious business of atonement. Adler contends that "By mocking the sins of the spirit, Jonah sends us back into our afflicted bodies to be

287. Sasson, 321-51
288. Bolin, 33-62
289. Adler, 321.

made whole, to know ourselves as bodies flooded with spirit. If we have understood, we will be able to extrapolate from our own growling bellies, aching heads, boredom and weariness to the infinitely precious and vulnerable spirit-flooded bodies of other living creatures."[290]

(2) Thomas M. Bolin's *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined*

Bolin provides a translation followed by textual, grammatical and thematic analyses of each of Jonah's 4 chapters. He challenges "the method in Biblical studies which uses Israelite history and the Bible to mutually support and explain each other"[291] and thus offers "An interpretation of Jonah... independent of any historical speculation derived from hypothetical reconstruction of Israelite history".[292] Bolin's grammatical analyses are particularly thorough as are his discussions of previous scholarship.

(3) Serge Frolov's "Returning the Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah"

Frolov argues against those who read Jonah as an anti-hero, a villain and a thoughtless rebel. Rather, he suggests that Jonah is God's intended sacrifice who flees because he refuses to be sacrificed. Frolov contends that the author of Jonah is "an opponent of Deutero-Isaiah (admiring the fate of a righteous servant of God...who gets afflicted and ultimately dies for 'the sin of many'; cf. Isaiah 53).[293] Thus,

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290. Adler, 331.
291. Bolin, 7.
292. Ibid.
293. Frolov, 102

suggests Frolov, the author intended for the original post-exilic readers of Jonah to sympathize with Jonah in his dispute with God.

(4) Jonathan Magonet's *The Subversive Bible*

Magonet's "The Book of Jonah and the Day of Atonement" he suggests that Jonah is the "most subversive "book" of the Bible[294] and, like Adler, explores additional gleanings from the book in relation to Yom Kippur. He comments on topics such as Jonah's challenge to "all sorts of pietistic acts which may become substitutes for the real requirement of God,"[295] and emphasis on the power of repentance to move God. In addition, he offers an original and insightful symbolic reading of Nineveh and the prophet himself for the Day of Atonement.

(5) Raymond F. Persons Jr.'s *In Conversation with Jonah: Conversation Analysis, Literary Criticism, and the Book of Jonah.*

Persons applies theories of conversation analysis to the book of Jonah. He analyses the book on several levels: line-by-line, through narrative developments of plot, character, atmosphere and tone and finally through theoretical (and then actual) responses of readers. Particularly informative (and entertaining!) are his appendices. These are collections of ways in which centuries of readers have (1) explained Jonah's account of 4:2 and (2) written in Jonah's answer to God's final question.

(6) Yvonne Sherwood's *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*

Sherwood follows the book of Jonah from its early religious interpretations through its appearance in modern popular culture and explores everything in between.

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294. Magonet, 76.
295. Magonet, 78.

She offers her own reading that echoes the book's brilliance through her use of language, humor and familiar texts. Sherwood's book is a multidisciplinary exploration that analyzes interpretation as well as it does the book of Jonah.

(7) Uriel Simon's *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*

Simon cites traditional Jewish sources as well as modern scholarship in his commentary. In his own words, he writes with a "dual commitment: academic rigor, which aims at uncovering the original meaning of the book of Jonah and a Jewish commitment to Scripture as the taproot of our national existence and wellspring of our religious life."[296] Simon breaks the book of Jonah into seven literary units. He views Jonah's story as a progression from violation [of God's commandment] to submission to fulfillment [of God's commandment] to a second rebellion and finally to acquiescence.

(8) J. William Whedbee's chapter "Jonah as Joke" in *The Bible and the Comic Vision.*

Whedbee's chapter artfully traces the comic vision through the book of Jonah. Whedbee highlights elements of parody, irony and caricature. He makes a compelling case that "Jonah's satiric humor is deft and decisive, intensifying the play of contradiction and subverting traditional prophetic forms."[297] Whedbee, too, echoes the book of Jonah with his own humor and word plays that poke gentle fun at Jonah while at the same time taking him quite seriously.

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296. Simon, Introduction vi.
297. Whedbee, 218.

APPENDIX 1: JONAH AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

The following terms are found in both texts (the citations listed are in Jonah):

Elements and Forces of Nature:[298]

רוח 1:4, 4:8
ים 1:4, 1:9, 1:11 (twice), 1:12 (twice), 1:13, 1:15 (twice), 2:4
מים 2:6, 3:7
ארץ 1:8
שמים 1:9
יבשה 1:9, 1:13, 2:11
דג 2:1 (twice), 2:2, 2:11
תהום 2:6
בהמה 3:7, 3:8, 4:11
שמש 4:8

Life and Death (See Above)

מות 4:3, 4:8, 4:9
חיים 4:3, 4:8

Verbs

רדם 1:5, 1:6
קרא 1:2, 1:6, 1:14, 3:1 (twice) 3:4, 3:5, 3:8
ידע 1:7, 1:10, 1:12, 3:9, 4:2, 4:11
גרש 2:5
הלך 3:3, 3:4

Good and Bad

רע 1:2, 1:7, 1:8, 3:8, 3:10 (twice), 4:1 (twice), 4:2, 4:6
טוב 4:3, 4:4, 4:8, 4:9

Other

נפש 1:14, 2:6, 2:8
מה זאת עשית 1:9
יהוה אלוהים 4:6
מלאכה 1:8
נגד 2:5
יום 2:1, 3:3, 3:4 (twice)
אפר 3:6
אדם 3:7, 3:8, 4:2
קדם 4:2, 4:5, 4:8

298. In addition to these references, the ricinus plant, the storm and the worm are forces of nature that God calls up in a creation-like fashion. Jonah himself bears the name of an animal.

APPENDIX 2: JOB, CHAPTER 3

א אַחֲרֵי־כֵ֗ן פָּתַ֥ח אִיּ֑וֹב אֶת־פִּ֥יהוּ וַיְקַלֵּ֖ל אֶת־יוֹמֽוֹ׃ ב וַיַּ֣עַן אִיּ֣וֹב
וַיֹּאמַֽר׃ ג יֹאבַ֣ד י֭וֹם אִוָּ֣לֶד בּ֑וֹ וְהַלַּ֥יְלָה אָ֝מַ֗ר הֹ֣רָה גָ֑בֶר׃ ד הַיּ֥וֹם הַה֗וּא יְהִ֣י
חֹ֭שֶׁךְ אַל־יִדְרְשֵׁ֣הוּ אֱלוֹהַּ֮ מִמָּ֢עַל וְאַל־תּוֹפַ֥ע עָ֝לָ֗יו נְהָרָֽה׃ ה יִגְאָלֻ֣הוּ חֹ֭שֶׁךְ
וְצַלְמָ֑וֶת תִּשְׁכָּן־עָ֝לָ֗יו עֲנָנָ֥ה יְבַעֲתֻ֥הוּ כְּמְרִירֵ֗י יֽוֹם׃ ו הַלַּ֥יְלָה הַה֗וּא יִקָּחֵ֥הוּ
אֹ֑פֶל אַל־יֵ֝חַ֗ד בִּימֵ֣י שָׁנָ֑ה בְּמִסְפַּ֥ר יְ֝רָחִ֗ים אַל־יָבֹֽא׃ ז הִנֵּ֤ה הַלַּ֨יְלָה ׀ הַה֗וּא
יְהִ֣י גַלְמ֑וּד אַל־תָּבֹ֥א רְ֝נָנָ֗ה בּֽוֹ׃ ח יְקֻבֻ֥הוּ אֹרְרֵי־י֑וֹם הָ֝עֲתִידִ֗ים עֹרֵ֥ר לִוְיָתָֽן׃
ט יֶ֭חְשְׁכוּ כּוֹכְבֵ֣י נִשְׁפּ֑וֹ יְקַו־לְאוֹר֮ וְאַ֪יִן וְאַל־יִרְאֶ֫ה בְּעַפְעַפֵּי־שָֽׁחַר׃ י כִּ֤י
לֹ֣א סָ֭גַר דַּלְתֵ֣י בִטְנִ֑י וַיַּסְתֵּ֖ר עָ֣מָל מֵעֵינָֽי׃ יא לָ֤מָּה ל֣֑וֹא מֵרֶ֥חֶם אָ֝מ֗וּת
מִבֶּ֣טֶן יָצָ֣אתִי וְאֶגְוָֽע׃ יב מַדּ֣וּעַ קִדְּמ֣וּנִי בִרְכָּ֑יִם וּמַה־שָּׁ֝דַ֗יִם כִּ֣י אִינָֽק׃
יג כִּֽי־עַ֭תָּה שָׁכַ֣בְתִּי וְאֶשְׁקֹ֑וט יָשַׁ֥נְתִּי אָ֝ז | נָ֗נוֹחַ לִֽי׃ יד עִם־מְלָכִ֥ים וְיֹעֲצֵ֑י
אֶ֝רֶץ הַבֹּנִ֗ים חָרְב֥וֹת לָֽמוֹ׃ טו אֽוֹ עִם־שָׂרִ֥ים זָ֝הָ֗ב לָהֶ֥ם הַמְמַלְאִ֥ים
בָּתֵּיהֶ֗ם כָּֽסֶף׃ טז אֽוֹ כְנֵ֣פֶל ׀ טָמ֣וּן לֹ֣א אֶהְיֶ֑ה כְּ֝עֹלָלִ֗ים לֹא־רָ֥אוּ אֽוֹר׃
יז שָׁ֤ם רְ֭שָׁעִים חָדְל֣וּ רֹ֑גֶז וְשָׁ֥ם יָ֝נ֗וּחוּ יְגִיעֵי־כֹֽחַ׃ יח יַ֤חַד אֲסִירִ֨ים ׀ שַׁאֲנָ֑נוּ
לֹ֣א שָׁ֭מְעוּ ק֣וֹל נוֹגֵֽשׂ׃ יט קָט֣וֹן וְ֭גָדוֹל שָׁ֣ם הֽוּא ׀ וְעֶ֣בֶד חָפְשִׁ֗י מֵאֲדֹנָֽיו׃
כ לָ֤מָּה יִתֵּ֣ן לְעָמֵ֣ל א֑וֹר וְ֝חַיִּ֗ים לְמָרֵ֥י נָֽפֶשׁ׃ כא הַ֭מְחַכִּים לַמָּ֣וֶת וְאֵינֶ֑נּוּ
וַיַּחְפְּרֻ֥הוּ מִמַּטְמוֹנִֽים׃ כב הַ֭שְּׂמֵחִים אֱלֵי־גִ֑יל יָ֝שִׂ֗ישׂוּ כִּֽי יִמְצְא֥וּ־קָֽבֶר׃
כג לַ֭גֶּבֶר אֲשֶׁר־דַּרְכּ֣וֹ נִסְתָּ֑רָה וַיָּ֖סֶךְ אֱלוֹהַּ בַּֽעֲדֽוֹ׃ כד כִּֽי־לִ֭פְנֵי לַחְמִ֣י
אַנְחָתִ֣י תָּבֹ֑א יותכו כַּ֝מַּ֗יִם שַׁאֲגֹתָֽי׃ כה כִּֽי פַ֭חַד פָּחַ֣דְתִּי ותיני וַאֲשֶׁ֣ר
איגרתי יָבֹ֑א לִֽי׃ כו לֹ֤א בשלותי | וְלֹא־שָׁקַ֨טְתִּי ׀ וְלֹא־נָ֗חְתִּי וַיָּ֥בֹא רֹֽגֶז׃