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Summary Page for:
The Comedy of Jonah: Tales of a Romantic Runaway
by David-Dine Wirtschafter

• ***Number of Chapters:*** 5

• ***Contribution of this thesis:*** This project endeavors to explore various modern attempts to define the type of humor the Book of Jonah employs and to expound upon the theological implications of such genres. Ultimately, the thesis proposes an original analysis of the Book of Jonah as a romantic comedy.

• ***Goals of the thesis project:*** The goal of this project was to survey many modern commentaries about the Book of Jonah's comedic form and content, and to comment critically upon the strengths and weaknesses of these various arguments. Furthermore, the project concludes, not only with an original interpretation of the Book's comedic genre, but also with a discussion of the theological and liturgical implications of such a humorous reading.

• ***Organization of thesis:*** The thesis begins with an introduction addressing the question of how to reconcile a comedic reading with a reverential tradition of reading the Bible. The piece is divided into five chapters, each exploring a different genre of comedy at work in the Book of Jonah. The topics include: parody, farce, satire, compassionate irony, and romantic comedy. The work ends with an epilogue discussing the Book of Jonah's ritual place in the *mincha* service of Yom Kippur, and offers an interpretation for how a comic reading can enhance the spiritual goals of the High Holiday season.

• ***Types of Materials Used:*** The main materials used in this thesis were modern commentaries and criticism written about the Book of Jonah, including the modern Hebrew commentary of Uriel Simon. Translating and interpreting Simon's work was the primary Hebrew intensive task of this project. In the course of Simon's work a number of aggadic texts, from Talmudic and Midrashic sources, were also utilized. In addition, I also engaged in intensive biblical study of the text of Jonah itself, and I incorporated, into my own reading of Jonah, many works from Shakespeare and Moliere.

The Comedy Of Jonah: Tales Of A Romantic Runaway

David Dine Wirtschafter

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

10 March 1997 ~ 1 Adar II 5757

Advisor: Rabbi Stanley Nash, Ph.D.

Humor is a prelude to faith and
Laughter is the beginning of prayer.

~ Reinhold Neibhur,
Discerning the Signs of the Times, 1949

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To Shana,
for the Love and Laughter you bring to me.

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~ Acknowledgments ~

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~ Laughter and Reverence: An Introduction ~

Since the Midrashic period, thinkers and commentators have been critically and creatively inspired by the humorous overtones and lyric laughter of the Book of Jonah. This project endeavors to explore various modern attempts to define the type of humor the Book employs and to expound upon the theological implications of such genres. Ultimately, I draw upon these different literary readings of the Book, and offer my own interpretation of the comedic genre of Jonah.

Given that the Bible is a sacred text to Jews and Christians alike there has been an implicit concern that reading Jonah as a comedy is somehow lacking in seriousness and/or the proper posture of reverence. As we shall see, the authors surveyed here are all wrestling with the question of what we are meant to derive from the comic machinations and artifice which fill the narrative.

I was first introduced to the notion that it was possible to interpret the Bible as comedy through the work of the scholar William Whedbee. When I read Whedbee's essay, "The Comedy of Job," as part of the course *Job and Wisdom Literature*, taught by Professor Marc Brettler at Brandeis University, I discovered that it was possible to find humor creatively at work in the Bible. In Western religious traditions there is an overwhelming assumption that sacred works are inherently serious ones. I believe that an intensive study of how comedy works within the Book of Jonah can fulfill a number of purposes. I hope to demonstrate that a humorous reading of a Biblical story need not preclude a reverential one. In fact, I will argue, that a reading which recognizes comedic

elements at work within the text can actually enhance our understanding of what makes the Bible sacred. For example, by gaining a clearer perspective of the literary styles and nuances at work within the Book of Jonah, we can come to a fuller appreciation of the Book's holiness and theological messages. Furthermore, I hope that exploring a comedic reading of this biblical story will serve as a reminder that we need to approach sacred texts with an open mind, not becoming overly defensive when a reading seems to threaten or challenge our preconceived theological notions. In reading Jonah, for instance, when we overcome our ambivalence about laughter, we gain new perspectives on the silly humanness of Jonah and the creative compassion of God.

In choosing the authors included here, I surveyed a large sampling of literature on the topic of comedy in the Bible in general and the Book of Jonah in particular. I chose these authors because their work well represents the diversity of opinions about the comedic genres that are at play in the Book. The authors included here all take a different perspective about the specific genre of the text: John A. Miles, Jr. argues that the Book is a parody; Judson Mather asserts that the Book is a farce; Edwin M. Good and James S. Ackerman maintain the humor of the text is satiric; and Uriel Simon posits that while the Book of Jonah is humorous it's irony is one of compassion, not ridicule. I conclude by suggesting an alternative reading that the Book is a romantic comedy.

All of the comic genres discussed in this paper rely heavily on the use of irony. This word will appear repeatedly throughout this text. Generally speaking, "irony" means a situation or set of circumstances in which what a character does or says is strangely and often laughably, and/or tragically, contradictory to the audience's expectations and also to the ideals to which that character holds him/herself. While there is universal agreement among these modern commentators, that the book of Jonah employs a great deal of irony and humor, they differ greatly about how this irony functions in both its form and content and how their respective ironic readings should inform our reading of the Book as a whole.

Most significantly, these scholars disagree about the intention of the Book's irony; does the humor of the Book of Jonah strive to get the audience to laugh at the prophet, or is a more compassionate irony which invites the audience to laugh with him in a moment of human recognition and empathy? The message of the text will be altered depending upon what form of irony and humor we understand the Book to employ. Hence, if the book of Jonah is understood as parodic, farcical, satiric, compassionately ironic, or comedically romantic we will take a different position, laughing with or at Jonah, and/or ourselves.[1]

[1] In this paper I use the masculine pronoun "He" to refer to God because in the Bible God's gender is most often overtly male. In addition, while we know little about the biblical authors, I refer to Jonah's author as a male throughout, assuming that most probably the writer and redactors were men.

~ Playing on Prophesy: Jonah as a Parody ~

John A. Miles Jr. begins his exploration of the Book of Jonah's comic nature by making a distinction between satire and parody. Both genres of comedy rely on spoofing the familiar, yet the purview of satire is more expansive than that of parody, which is itself quite specific. Whereas satire makes fun of the "life" of a culture, parody makes fun of its "letters."[2] Anticipating the objection that a society's letters and texts are part of its "life," Miles clarifies his distinction in the following way: "parody does have a target in real life" since the text being spoofed is only the initial target of the joke. Ultimately, Miles notes, parody teases and mocks its audience for taking its texts *too* seriously.[3] Being human, we have certain defensive instincts that make us reluctant to laugh at ourselves. Hence, Miles argues, the magic of parody is that it "indirectly" gets us to laugh at ourselves through spoofing the texts we revere. Miles' thesis about the Book of Jonah, is that while the book's ultimate goal is to make us laugh at ourselves, its "proximate target... is not Jewish life but Hebrew letters," making the tale a parody and not a satire.[4]

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[2] Miles definition of parody is consistent with the standard definition, as found in the *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature*: "A literary form which constitutes a comic imitation of a serious work, or of a serious literary form....It is difficult to draw a line between parody and burlesque; the latter is more obviously comic in its style of imitation." (Ed. by Marion Wynne–Davies, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd, 1989) p. 783.
[3] John A. Miles Jr. "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (Philadelphia: Jewish Quarterly Review 1974–75) V. 65, p. 168
[4] Ibid. pp. 168–170.

For a parody to succeed in making the audience laugh at itself, the literary references it exploits and styles it harnesses must be "so standardized as to be immediately recognizable." The Book of Jonah fulfills this criteria by seizing upon the well–known plot of the prophetic mission, which Miles calls "surely the clearest stereotype in Scripture."[5] The book is peopled by "stock characters," and filled with "stock scenes." So too, its "formulaic" language is also clearly designed to be readily apparent to the biblical audience.[6] The author of the Book of Jonah depends upon his audience's knowledge of the traditional progression of the prophetic narrative. A critical feature of the parodic genre, in general, is that certain conventions such as narrative structure, plot, and dialogue are utterly obvious allusions to the corpus of literature of which the author seeks to make fun. Parody can not work if the author has to explain the literary references contained in the work. Miles supports his thesis that the Book of Jonah is a parody by examining what he calls the Book's five "stock scenes," each of which plays on standard elements of the prophetic drama.

The first scene of a serious prophetic narrative begins with God's selecting a prophet and then ordering His chosen messenger to undertake a particular mission. God's typical "call" of the prophet is answered by an almost routine response; the prophet humbly begs to be excused from God's service, pleading that he is unfit for and undeserving of performing God's task. After this formulaic profession of his unworthiness, the prophet quickly acquiesces to God's demands, becoming His passionate servant. This type of

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[5] Ibid, p.170.

[6] Ibid. Miles' thesis presumes that the Book of Jonah must have chronologically followed other prophetic texts, allowing for the self-referential quality of the Book. Jonah, as prophetic literature, is a parody of the genre of prophetic literature in which it is included. This type of self–referential parody is seen, for example, in Shakespeare and in film, among other genres. In Shakespeare's comedic romance, *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act V, Scene I, ll. 108–339), he includes a scene depicting a poorly performed tragedy which greatly resembles and parodies his own tragic romance, *Romeo and Juliet*.

prophetic "call," "response" and "acceptance" is evidenced with: Moses (Exod. 4:10–18); Gideon (Judg. 6:15–18); Isaiah (Isa. 6:5–8); and Jermiah (Jer. 1:6–11).[7]

In the Book of Jonah, the traditional prophetic "call" is not met with the "response" or ultimate "acceptance" which the prophetic audience anticipates from the fledgling leader. While the prophet's role requires him to play hard to get, it also requires him to convey his emotion of reticence and humility with an "anguished eloquence."[8] Jonah takes the stereotypical reluctance, called for by his prophetic part, to an absurd extreme. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah...Go at once to Nineveh...and proclaim judgment upon it...Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service." (Jon. 1:1–3)[9] His self-righteous refusal to even respond to God's call "has the parodic impact of silence after the question, "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"[10] The motivation behind his response to God's call, is not modesty but impudence. When Jonah's flight from God's call is compared to the traditional prophetic response, which was explored earlier, not only do Jonah's actions emerge as a joke, but moreover, they render the prophets' "humble professions" of reluctance to serve God as coy games. In the standard prophetic narrative, the prophet never actually intends, we can assume from the convention, to refuse God's call and it is precisely Jonah's refusal in silence and attempted flight from God's command that makes Jonah's actions parodic.

According to Miles, the parody of Jonah's flight continues with the ticket to Tarshish transaction: "He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail...away from the service of the Lord." (Jon. 1:3) Miles regards Jonah's paying the fare to Tarshish as a continuation of the same sacrilegious behavior the prophet showed in his initial running away. The prophet is supposed to be a

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[7] Miles, pp. 170–171.
[8] Ibid, p.172.
[9] Biblical quotes will be taken from the New JPS translation of the TANAKH: The Holy Scriptures (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988), from my own translation, or from that of the commentators who I am citing.
[10] Miles, p.172.

holy man, who can appreciate an encounter with the Divine and who can respond with an appropriate measure of awe and fear. In contrast to the reverent prophet, by purchasing his ticket to Tarshish, Jonah literally tries to "buy–out" of his sacred duty and sail away from God's holy presence.[11] To Miles, Jonah's purchase of a ticket makes his behavior utterly apathetic to the sacred. In fact, the way Jonah pays for his passage seems the most normal and mundane of events. Jonah's actions are a radical departure from the typically sacred storyline of the prophetic mission. Miles muses that "Moses could have hardly been more mundane than Jonah had he thrown water on the burning bush or pawned the miraculous staff to escape confrontation with Pharaoh."[12]

The second scene of the parody takes place aboard the ship. Like "the call, response, and acceptance," "the sign" is a formulaic part of the stereotypical prophetic tale. The prophet's appropriate response to God's sign is vocal and effusive awe and wonder at what the Almighty has done: upon seeing his offering consumed by fire, Gideon marvels that he, "has seen an angel of the Lord face to face;" (Judg. 6:22)[13]; when God parts the Sea, Moses and Miriam sing songs of praise and awe expressing God's glory (Exod. 15:1–20); and in fact, even a silly Moabite prophet, Balam, has the good sense and good manners to "bow straight down to the ground." with a sense of awe, when he sees a sword wielding angel of the Lord blocking his way. (Num. 23:31) How then is it possible that Jonah, a figure included among the prophets, can be so unresponsive and even silent to God's sign? As in the first scene, when he runs away, Jonah breaks from the prophetic norm through his contemptuous silence in slumber, as God appoints a raging storm as a sign to His runaway messenger.[14] (Jon. 1:5)

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid. The importance of the prophet's response to the sign is Miles' assertion and Gideon is his biblical example. I have included additional biblical references which I believe serve to support his argument further.
[14] Ibid.

Not until Jonah is roused from his sleep, designated as the cause of the storm by the game of lots, and bombarded with the sailors queries, do we actually hear him speak and respond to God's sign. Interestingly enough Miles chooses not to analyze the vast majority of the dialogue between the seamen and their strange passenger. As we shall see later, the comedic nature of the dialogue has been seized upon by other critics and commentators. Miles skips to the end of the conversation when Jonah responds to the sailors question about what they must do to him "to make the sea calm around" them. (Jon. 1:11) Miles asserts that "Jonah's resignation – his throw me into the sea, and it will calm down for you"— has the same Chaplinesque *sangfroid* as his purchase of passage in Joppa."[15]

Miles insists that Jonah's readiness to be thrown into the sea is performed as a gesture which is entirely lacking in the usual prophetic sense of "numinous abandon."[16] Miles argument implies that Jonah is missing the enthusiasm and courageousness fitting for a prophet. His actions reflect anything but a bold act of submission to God or a stirring re-affirmation of His might. The parody of Jonah's request to be cast overboard lies in the pathetic resignation and despair with which he utters it, not in his prophetic faith and submission.

Miles finds additional evidence of parody within this same scene, when he examines the behavior of the sailors. Responding to the storm, "in their fright, the sailors cried out, each to his own god." (Jon. 1:5) As a general rule, prophetic literature loves to poke fun at idolatry and polytheism. Prophets such as Elijah (I Kings 18:27) and Isaiah (Isa. 44:15–17) delight in depicting idolaters as stupid hypocrites who worship the work of their own hands. Miles asserts that:

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

> As the wind rises and the crew sinks into polytheistic confusion, we should discern the mockery of a biblical mockery; namely of the mockery of the mockery of idolatry in Second Isaiah (cf. 44:15–17)[17]

According to Miles, it is the sailors, not the Israelite prophet, who respond to the divine sign with the appropriate awe and fear. Indeed, they are so totally sincere in this undertaking that their leader reasons that their lack of success must lie in the fact that their strange passenger has not yet bothered to join them. The captain's order that Jonah rise from his slumber "and add his prayer to the cacophony of different prayers to different gods"[18] is the ludicrous pinnacle of this mockery of Israelite contempt for idolatry. The non–Israelite idolater has to beg Israel's prophet to pray to Israel's God.

Scene three of the parody, according to Miles, continues with the song. He sides with those who see the psalm as a later addition to the Book itself and he posits that a possible reason for its inclusion is that it enhances the parodic aspect of the text.[19] Jonah's song has been generally understood to draw upon many of the literary conventions found in the Book of Psalms. In the Book of Psalms, references to drowning are understood as metaphors for the Psalter's hope for salvation, or expression of the emotion of anguish or desperation.[20] The parodic irony of Jonah's Song is that it takes the Psalter's common poetic motif of drowning and applies it quite literally: "You cast me into the depths,/ Into the heart of the sea,/ The floods engulfed me;/ All your breakers and billows/ Swept over me." (Jon. 2:4) Here Jonah is not talking of an emotional state or a metaphorical hope for Divine salvation, he is actually taking about the physical experience of drowning, of being cast into the sea, and he literally speaks of God's physical salvation.

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[17] Miles, p.173.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, p.174.
[20] Ibid, pp. 174–75. See Psalm 130: "From the depths, I cry to you, O Lord;" Psalm 69: "Deliver me, O God,/ for the waters have reached my neck/ I am sinking into the slimy deep/ and find no foothold;/ I have come into the watery depths; the flood sweeps me away;" Psalm 107: "Others go down to the sea in ships,/ ply their trade in the mighty waters; they have seen the works of the Lord/ and His wonders in the deep;" and also others.

> The author of the Book of Jonah deliberately disregards this poetic canon for comic effect. Jonah's situation is not comparable to the situation of a man swallowed by a great monster. This *is* Jonah's situation. His troubles are not like waves rushing over his head. His troubles *are* waves rushing over his head.[21]

The magic of poetry is how it reconceptualizes life by likening dissimilar things. The book of Jonah, however, willfully tosses this classical convention out the window, and in fact, Miles argues that if this type of poetry is to work "it can not refer to real oceans and real water."[22]

A scene or a drama can only be deemed funny if its tensions or conflicts are ultimately resolved to the satisfaction of all vested parties. One could not argue that Jonah's experience in the depths of the sea, or in the belly of a whale, were funny had he been drowned or eaten alive. Had the prophet not been *saved* there would be nothing to laugh at here. Furthermore, while Miles does not fully elucidate this point himself, there is another level of parody at play in the Book of Jonah: just as the near drowning is parodied in Jonah's song, the means of salvation are written in the spirit of parody as well. In fact, the prophetic salvation is yet another "stock scene" in the Bible: Daniel is rescued from a lion's den (Dan. 6:17–24); Moses and the Hebrews are delivered from the charging Egyptian army by God's parting of the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 14:21–30); Elijah is kept from starvation by friendly ravens (I Kings, 17:4–6). In contrast to these beautiful and majestic deliverances, Jonah receives a "salvation by regurgitation."[23] Vomited out of the whale like three day old leftovers, Jonah's body is miraculously in tact, but his pride is not. For, as

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[21] Ibid, p.174.
[22] Ibid, p.174.
[23] Ibid, p.175. Rather than contextualizing this scene, as I have done here, as a parodic form of salvation which contrasts with other prophetic moments, Miles focuses on the bodily aspects of the humor. "There is a relatively wide tolerance for jokes about excretion, belching, vomiting, and other indelicacies" in biblical literature, which, Miles agues, shares much with classical Greek humor.

we shall see in the next scene, the prophet, despite himself, is now prepared to accept God's call.

The action in Nineveh comprises scene four of the parody. This time the Book of Jonah makes reference to yet another stock scene from prophetic literature wherein the king rejects the prophet: Moses is spurned by Pharaoh (Ex. 5:1–12:32); Isaiah is ignored by Manesseh (II Kings 21); and Jeremiah is imprisoned and dismissed by Zedekiah (Jer. 37:1–2, 17–21, & 38:4–6). The basic progression of these encounters is always the same. The raging ruler refuses to heed the lengthy rhetoric of the poor, poetic prophet, resulting in the punishment of the entire foreign nation by God.

The book of Jonah naturally turns this standard scene upside down. Jonah's terse, five word message, "Forty days until Nineveh's destruction" (Jon. 3:4), is utterly devoid of prophetic poetry and passion. Indeed, Miles depicts the speech as entirely dull and lacking in drama.[24] So too, the King of Nineveh refuses to play the terrible tyrant. Rather than threatening the prophet and ignoring his message, the King takes the warning almost too seriously, commanding not only his subjects but even their livestock to join in national acts of repentance and mourning. The parodic contrast could not possibly be more stark. Whereas the prophet finally, with extreme reluctance and minimalism, obeys the direct command of his own God to prophesy, the King of Nineveh immediately responds to an indirect command of a foreign God with abounding effusiveness and total sincerity.

The all inclusive nature of the King's edict in regard to the animals is a distinct issue in the question of the comedic nature of the text. With respect to the King's overwhelming response to Jonah's message, there is considerable debate about whether or not his inclusion of the animals is intended to enhance the comedy, or if it is a serious gesture that further demonstrates the King's sincerity. Commentators, like James D. Smart [25] and Uriel

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[24] Ibid, p.176.
[25] James D. Smart. *Interpreters Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1956, V.6) p.890.

Simon,[26] bring historical/textual arguments, specifically, Herodotus to demonstrate the authenticity and seriousness of incorporating the animals in fasting and wearing sackcloths.[27] Miles, however, rejects this position, insisting that the King's gesture is meant to be regarded as absurd. Furthermore, he argues that the evidence from Herodotus is taken out of context in a way that conflates mourning with repentance, and livestock with animals in general.[28]

The fifth and final scene of the parody is the extended dialogue of chapter four. The stock situation parodied here is that of the prophet who begs God for death, but ultimately receives a measure of Divine encouragement. Such downcast heroes include Moses (Num. 11:10–15); Jeremiah (Jer. 20:7–8) and Elijah, the prophet whose situation most resembles the one in which we find Jonah. Elijah makes his passionate plea, "Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors," under a furze bush, out of an overwhelming sense of shame and failure to convince his listeners to abandon idolatry. In response to Elijah, God send an angel to comfort him and urges him to "arise and eat." (I Kings 19:4–5)[29] In another instance, God responds to Elijah's death wish by consoling him again through physical nourishment and dramatically accepting his offering at Mt. Horeb, while He ignores those of the false prophets (I Kings 18: 34–39).

Once again, in the Book of Jonah, the usual nature of the prophetic scene is reversed. Jonah calls out: "Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (Jon. 4:3). Here, Jonah does not ask for death because he has failed, but rather because he

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[26] Uriel Simon, *Jonah: Introduction and Commentary.* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992) p.71. All quotations and paraphrases of Uriel Simon's work are based upon my study of Simon under the guidance of my diligent and patient advisor and translation guide, Dr. Stanley Nash.

[27] Smart, p.860 as cited in Miles, p.176, fn.10: "James D. Smart... asserts that, according to Herodotus, the Persians gives animals a part in mourning. This [the reference to animals mourning and repenting in the Book of Jonah] can only be a reference to Book I, 140, where Herodotus speaks of the Zoroastrian custom of exposing the dead to crows and dogs."

[28] Miles, p.176.

[29] Ibid, p.177–179.

has achieved the only recorded success in prophetic literature. He is not angry at himself but at his audience, the city of Nineveh, and moreover at his overly forgiving God: "God saw what they [the citizens of Nineveh] did, that they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment...and he did not carry it out. This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved." (Jon. 3:10–4:2–3). The Almighty, in turn, also departs from His typical script in which He is supposed to console the prophet. In contrast to His normal behavior, God responds to Jonah's depression by causing his gourd to die, as a spiritual lesson about the merits of mercy.[30] But while God's decision to kill the gourd certainly causes the prophet pain, the tone of God's rebuke is not like God's tone in earlier episodes of the Book. Unlike the wild storm and the humiliating departure from the whale's belly, God's humor and pedagogy, with respect to the gourd, is relatively gentle and endearing, rather than violent and derisive. Throughout the story we have been laughing *at* Jonah. In response Jonah's lament over the gourd, God "kids" Jonah, inviting the prophet to laugh *with* Him. In God's last line, He teases the prophet asking him to realize that if Jonah can care about a random plant, can't God have compassion for a city of His own creation? God prompts Jonah to laugh at the Ninevites, which in turn will help him to laugh at himself. "For if Jonah [can see he] is foolish in his resentment, the Ninevites, dressing their animals in sackcloth and forcing them to fast, have been foolish in their repentance."[31]

While Miles' thesis is both well argued, thoroughly entertaining and innovative, he does make a few assertions about the Book of Jonah as a whole which are both artistically and historically tenuous. He argues that the name of the prophet, the city he attempted to reach, and the city where he was commanded to preach have no serious symbolic importance on either a literary or historical level. According to Miles, to suggest that these names and locales have such meaning, is to push the Book into the realm of allegory, a

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[30] Miles, p.180.
[31] Ibid, p.180–81.

thesis which he dismisses early on in his analysis of the work.[32] Barring all possibility of allegory from the tale seems to imply that there can be little or no shared elements between genres. This is an especially surprising statement from a commentator who has so wonderfully demonstrated that comic literature borrows its conflicts and dilemmas from more serious works. Furthermore, given that the Book is a parody, why must the genre preclude the presence of any symbolic meaning? Indeed it seems that the opposite is true. The prophet's name is rich with biblical resonance and these biblical allusions give us a great deal of insight into Jonah's character and behavior. So too, the suggestion that the cities of Tarshish and Nineveh are only intended to serve "as cues to the genre" seems to privilege Miles' own thesis over any serious historical references which these names and places clearly make. His argument against symbolism seems both unnecessary and unfortunate in what is an otherwise remarkably open–minded and careful piece of scholarship.

While this paper seeks to explore the comic interpretations and implications of the Book of Jonah, I believe that to see comic elements and messages within the Book does not force us to exclude the possibility of finding a serious message within the work as well. Can not parody have a purpose? If the ultimate goal of the parodic genre is to make the audience to laugh at itself, then perhaps we are intended, along with the prophet to recognize the dangers of self–righteousness and the merits of forgiveness?

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[32] Ibid, p.171. "The selection of Jonah as the prophet's name and Nineveh as the wicked city where he will preach may mean no more than the selection of Text and Dodge city would mean in a parody of the western movie."

~ God's Straightman: Jonah as a Farce ~

Judson Mather provides us with an interpretation of Jonah's "comic art" that is similar yet, distinct from that of Miles. He agrees with Miles that the writer of Jonah relies heavily on the mechanisms of parody. In addition to the parodic "stylistic features" of the Book, Mather believes that the Book of Jonah also employs the "the structural features of *farce*."[33] Generally speaking, Mather's assessment of the parody, (which he also calls a "burlesque"), is very similar to what we have encountered in Miles' argument. Therefore, my focus here will be on how Mather attempts to demonstrate that, while parody is clearly at play, "the relationship between God and Jonah is essentially farcical."[34] According to Mather, the genre of farce presents itself when we read the imaginative progression of events through the lens of the humorous relationship between God, the comedian, and Jonah, His "straightman."[35]

Technically, the genre of farce is defined as "a dramatic piece intended to excite laughter." The art of the genre depends "less on plot and character development than on" the creation of "exaggerated, improbable situations, [in which] the humor...[arises] from gross incongruities, coarse wit, or horseplay."[36] In keeping with this definition, Mather's

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[33] Judson Mather, "The Comic Art of the Book of Jonah," *Soundings* V.65 (Knoxville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1982) p.281.
[34] Ibid, p.282.
[35] Ibid, p.281.
[36] C. Hugh Holmoan ed., *A Handbook to Literature* (New York: Bobbs-Merill: 1972, 3rd edition), p. 220. Also see Joseph T. Shipley ed., *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Boston: The Writer Inc., 1943), p. 188; and Marrione Wynne-Davies ed., *The Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), p.514.

definition also stresses that farce includes "the ridiculous improbability of the succession of situations that make up the story."[37] In viewing the Book of Jonah as farce, Mather asserts that the "idealized" sailors and the Ninevites are not really characters so much as they are "props" in the hands of a highly theatrical God, who delights in appointing them, along with other brilliant devices, as "a foil to the all-too-human prophet."[38] In asserting his understanding of farce, Mather's emphasizes the importance of the "straighman" in contrast to the "comedian." The straighman acts as the motivating character, ultimately driving along much of the comedic elements of the storyline. Here Mather's argues that Jonah is God's "straightman." The posture of the straightman is always one of mounting frustration, he is constantly and increasingly displeased by the events of the day. Noting this dimension of the prophet's character, and that of God as the "comedian" or "farceur," leads use to examine the interplay and interdependent relationship between the straightman and the comedian. Mather's focus on this imaginative relationship provides an essential key to understanding and appreciating the full comedic and specifically farcical force of the Book of Jonah.

Mather indicates that the initial impetus for his insight into the farcical aspects of the Book of Jonah lay in realizing how the story's tender ending is meant to inform the audience's reading of the Book's wild beginning and middle. Hence, in the backwards nature of comedy, Mather's analysis mirrors his understanding of the Book's content, he begins his study with the end of the Jonah story, believing that it provides the essential proof of the farce. Mather's asserts that in the end, Jonah feels as "discredited" by and angry about God's decision not to punish Nineveh as he does by the punishment he receives for refusing to prophesy to its citizens.[39] The frustrated position of the straightman never changes: it seems that no matter what Jonah does, he can't do it right, at least in his

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[37] Mather, p. 281.
[38] Ibid, p. 284.
[39] Ibid, p. 282

mind. Even when, in chapter four, he obeys God, his hope that the evil city will be punished is foiled. "God decides to spare the city — thus making Jonah appear to be a false prophet."[40] He feels punished for obeying God, just as he was punished throughout the story for disobeying God. This mounting annoyance on the part of the prophet is the tell–tale sign of farce, especially because God, as the "farceur," utilizes props to engage in "horseplay" with his prophet. "God 'appoints' a plant to grow up to give Jonah the comfort and pleasure of shade; then he 'appoints' a worm to kill the plant; then he 'appoints' a hot east wind to further cook the already overheated prophet—"[41] and all this just to get a rise out of Jonah. The fact that Jonah never fails to react with indignance to God's schemes, even in the end of the story, and even when there's only a little plant involved, is what inspires the laughter of farce.

By casting the prophet in the role of straightman, Mather asks us to see Jonah "not so much a sinner in the hands of an angry God [but rather] as a foil in the hands of a puckish one," a character who is full of drama, machinations, and always in the role of a director and playwright.[42] God is constantly throwing his prophet for a loop and Jonah never fails to respond with a frustration and cantankerousness that only makes things worse. The prophet's flight to Tarshish simply gets him stuck on a boat, forced to make choice between death or surrender. His resignation to die only leads him into the belly of a whale. His reticent and ludicrously minimalist obedience, designed to meet the letter but not the spirit of God's command, results in an unparalleled success which he finds utterly humiliating. Jonah can never keep his cool. God pushes his buttons and he immediately explodes. With a whimsical aside Mather remarks: "The straightman's life has never been a happy one."[43] The proof of Jonah's indigence in all of the above instances seems to be in his actions more than his words. While Mather does not actually give us extensive proof

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid, p.283.
[43] Ibid, pp. 282–283

texts to support his assertion that the prophet is indignant and frustrated, it is possible to find such examples in the text to which Mather points. We can also look to moments such as those when Jonah actually has to be ordered by a non–Israelite sailor, in the imperative, to "get up and pray" to his God (Jon. 1:6) as examples of his straightman's obstinence.[44]

Not only does the audience laugh because of Jonah's absurd frustration and indignance, but the parody of Jonah is complemented by the King of Nineveh's actions and decree.

> The burlesque of piety begun in Chapter I is carried to even greater lengths in Chapter III. The people of Nineveh, 'from the greatest to the least," on hearing Jonah's message of destruction, immediately 'proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth.' The king, hearing this, rushed forth to lead his already marching populace. He commanded them to do what they were doing and (as if to demonstrate the reach of his authority) extended the wearing of sackcloth and ashes and the ban on food and drink to cattle as well as humans. Bewer remarks (ironically?) that the conversion of Nineveh 'was a more astounding miracle than the miracle of the fish.'[45]

The King is Jonah's foil. He readily accepts the reverent actions of his people but Jonah remains frustrated. When we expect Jonah to be the cooperative and obedient prophet, he turns out to be the obstinate straightman, and when we expect the non –Israelite King to be the stubborn and unresponsive ruler, he turns out to be the benign, amiable, and cooperative partner of God.

Throughout the narrative, our ability to laugh at Jonah is preserved by means of our "comic distance" from him.[46] The structural features of farce give us the freedom to laugh

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[44] Mather's reading of Jonah as frustrated can be seen as "midrashic" in that we do not actually have evidence of Jonah's emotional frustration before chapter four. Sasson, in his commentary on the Book of Jonah, has critiqued Mather on just this point.
[45] Ibid, p. 282.
[46] Ibid, p.283.

at situations that otherwise might trigger our empathy or sadness. According to Mather, there is an unstated, yet well known comic understanding at work in the Book of Jonah:

> The farceur has a stake in the preservation of his straightman. If the straightman perishes the farceur is no longer in control. Likewise, the controller's sense of humor is a kind of guarantee that he will not take his agent's failings too seriously. There is a certain lack of seriousness to these failings, for the most prominent defect exposed in Jonah is not so much a moral defect as a defect of the imagination.[47]

The problem with Jonah is that is that his reactions are based upon a perspective of justice that is both skewed and rigid. This shortsightedness, in turn, is comically exploited and enlarged to portray him as thoroughly silly and self–centered. "Because of this defect of imagination, the straightman also lacks the capacity to learn from experience in a way that will better protect his vulnerability."[48] Jonah takes himself and his situation so seriously that he makes the same mistake over and over again. His inability to laugh at himself or put things into a proper perspective, is intended to convince the audience that his troubles are largely of his own making. The implicit trust the audience has in Jonah's safety, despite his circumstances, teamed with the prophet's' refusal to lighten up, keeps the audience in the pleasant position of laughing along with God, the wise–guy, at the absurdity of Jonah, the straightman.[49]

While it is easy to focus on the baffonish eccentricities of the prophet, Mather points out that the role as straightman endows Jonah with an important "virtue," which should not be taken for granted, namely his "resilience" and "durability."[50] Jonah's ability to keep taking what God dishes out is essential to the Book.[51] A straightman, Mather tells

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid, p.283.
[49] Ibid, pp.282–283.
[50] Ibid, pp. 287–288.
[51] Jonah here reminds me of the *Roadrunner*: Just as Wile E. Coyote, picks peels himself off the highway, only to receive another anvil on the head, thanks to his animated foil, the

us, can never be "utterly crushed" by his misfortunes. He must always be "available for the next round of surprises,"[52] hence the "straightman" is surprisingly strong. Herein lies the theological twist to Mather's thesis. Throughout the tale, God, the farceur, shows a similar resilience to that of Jonah, with respect to His difficult prophet. God's frequent use of surprises, is an extension of His comic patience with his straightman.

> When the divine–human relationship depicted in the Book is laid out in this way, a rather curious pattern seems to emerge. In every instance, Jonah himself is in some fashion a mirror of God's character or activity. When Jonah is troubled by God he troubles the world. When Jonah acts mercifully he is the sign and forerunner of God's mercy. Thus mercy is not pictured as a virtue that contributes to the divine-human relationship: it constitutes the substance of that relationship.[53]

Just as Jonah chooses to be merciful towards the sailors, God chooses to be merciful to the city of Nineveh. Ultimately mercy is mercy, it is not a thought or a feeling but an action. This Book which is full of action yet short on words, teaches that the need to be merciful is a response not to how things should be, but to how they are. The people of Nineveh and the stubborn prophet who preaches to them are hardly ideal characters, but they are wonderfully human ones. There is much that separates God, the active farceur, and Jonah, His overreacting straightman. Yet, their common perseverance enables them to act mercifully and perhaps, in the end to share a laugh or two together.[54]

Roadrunner, Jonah keeps on picking himself up with resilience, even after he is "knocked down," by his larger than life foil, God.

[52] Ibid, p.288.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid, p.288–289. In his article Mather includes another level of interpretation of the Book, which he seems to think is very important to the reading of the comedy in the narrative. He asserts that there are multiple levels on which the Jonah story can be read and each one of them is itself a comic reversal of the previous reading. In his assertion, he assumes that the initial reading of the story is a serious theological reading in which the "author has created a parable about divine grace and human obedience." This initial reading is not "fooled by the story's humor," but it is then countered and comedically reversed by a farcical and parodic reading. He continues to suggest that while there is repeated conflict between God and Jonah, in the end we discover how the purposes of these two characters are "deeply intertwined....God and Jonah have found worthy antagonists and friends in

~ Comedy of the Absurd: Jonah as a Satire ~

That the Book of Jonah has great potential to evoke laughter, whether it be God's, Jonah's, and/or the audience's, is a feature that many of the Book's modern critics seem to agree upon. The debate, as we have witnessed thus far and will continue to see, is about what type of laughter the Book inspires, who laughs, at whom is the laugher laughing and with what devices is the laugher brought to laughter. E.M. Good's assessment of the Book of Jonah is consistent with both Miles and Mather in many of his assertions, yet he departs from both of them by arguing that the Book's essential feature is that of satire. According to Good, Jonah's author depicts the prophet from a position of ridicule.[55] Good also maintains that while a strong case can be made for the claim that God, with His constant surprises, drives the plot, the audience's attention is turned to Jonah, whose "attitude is the [real] focal point of the tale."[56] Even when the Book chooses to present and hence highlight God's perspective or that of the work's author, it only does so to emphasize and satirize the real focus which is the temperament of the prophet.

Good precedes his discussion of the satire in the Book of Jonah with a detailed discussion and definition of irony, which is the principal means by which he argues that the Book conveys its satirical message. In defining the characteristics of irony, Good writes:

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one another." While I am sympathetic to some of his claims, I disagree with the majority of this reading and I feel that a more in depth discussion of this Book would constitute an unuseful digression from the topic at hand. For the full argument see: Mather, p.289–290.

[55] Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965) p.41

[56] Ibid.

"irony… begins in conflict, a conflict marked by the perception of the distance between pretense and reality."[57] The Book begins in a conflict between God and Jonah, which is precipitated by the fact that Jonah maintains a pretense that he knows more about who should be prophesied to than does God — a pretense we know to be out of sync with the reality of God's ultimate wisdom. This distance, between the reality of a situation and a character's perception of the situation, which s/he believes to be critically grounded in "truth," creates what Good calls "incongruity,"[58] the other essential feature of satire. Good makes the point of distinguishing between irony and other literary devices, such as sarcasm. He asserts that sarcasm is:

> often equated with irony, in that it usually means the opposite of what it says. Sometimes the two can be distinguished only by the tone of voice used....[but] sarcasm will seldom attempt to hide its feelings, and its tone is ordinarily very heavy. Irony, on the other hand, uses a lighter tone and will therefore have a far more ambiguous effect.[59]

Good also makes a point of defining parody, believing that it can not to be simply equated with irony, but can be more readily equated with sarcasm. Satire too is not the same as irony, while the form can and often does draw heavily upon it.[60] While Good does not provide a clear definition of satire, he asserts that within the Book of Jonah the satire at work is "through and through ironic. Its basis is a perception of incongruity."[61] A more detailed definition of satire, than that which Good provides, serves to clarify and support

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[57] Ibid, p.14.
[58] Ibid, p.31.
[59] Ibid, p.26.
[60] Ibid, pp. 27–28. Good's assessment of parody is in direct contrast to that of Miles. Because Good's discussion of parody is not central to his analysis of the Book of Jonah, I have chosen not to include a more in depth summary of his argument. All of the authors cited in this paper are concerned with questions about the relationship between and implications of the use of different genres of comedy, the "high" and/or "low" culture with which certain stylistic forms, such as parody, satire, sarcasm, farce, and irony, have been associated.
[61] Good, p.41.

many of his claims about the Book's use of satirical irony. Satire is traditionally understood to have two basic forms:

> the first expresses a basic instinct for comedy through *mockery in human beings*...; the second is a self–conscious medium, implying standards of civilized and moral rightness in the mind of the poet and hence a desire on his or her part to *instruct readers so as to reform their moral failings and absurdities*. [These] two kinds of satire are interrelated, so that it is not possible to distinguish them sharply.[62] [italics mine]

Judging from his analysis of Jonah, Good's understanding of satire indeed draws heavily upon these "interrelated" satiric approaches, adding to them his emphasis on the distinctive and important contributions of irony and incongruity to the satirical.

Good's first interesting observation about the satire of Jonah is that the prophet's initial actions are signs incongruity for at least two reasons. Firstly, Jonah should respond to his special assignment with excitement and relish. We would think that "the denunciation of Nineveh would be pleasure [for Jonah] — the prophet Nahum, at least, found it so."[63] The audience expects that Jonah should have leapt at his chance to preach to these evil–doers, but the next thing we know the strange prophet is bound by boat for Tarshish. Good suggests that the author deliberately withholds the reasons for Jonah's rebellious refusal and his subsequent flight until the end of the story.[64] In the beginning of the narrative the author intends for the audience to focus on the "incongruity" of the prophet's response to his once in a lifetime opportunity to work for God.[65] In addition to the incongruity between the reality of God's offer and Jonah's "unhesitating and total abandonment of his prophetic task," a second instance of incongruity is evidenced in Jonah's absurd pretense that he thinks he can runaway from God. Israelite belief in general, and Jonah even affirms this with his own words, recognizes that God reigns over land and sea. (Jon. 1:9) The

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[62] Wynne–Davies, p.874.
[63] Good, p.42.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

prophet's attempt to "escape God's presence on the sea," therefore, "is an ironically perceived impossibility."[66]

The next scene of the Book which strikes Good as "wildly incongruous"[67] is the dialogue which ensues between Jonah and the sailors on the ship. While Miles and Mather only focused on the sailors' actions, Good pays particular attention to their conversational style and tactics. After the lots point to Jonah as the cause of the storm, the sailors bombard him with questions. Good points out that these helpless seamen can have no practical reason can these helpless seamen for asking Jonah their totally irrelevant questions. In the middle of a severe tempest, they ask the prophet to provide them with "a thumbnail autobiography."[68] They ask the prophet four questions about himself before they ask him the only two questions that really matter: "What have you done?" (Jon. 1:10) and "What must we do to make the sea calm around us?" (Jon. 1:11) Furthermore, their four queries about Jonah's life are answered with the total incongruity that was noted earlier, for the prophet tells them "I am a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh the God of heaven, who made the land and sea." (Jon. 1:9) At this, the audience of the story is intended to wonder why, if the prophet believes this, was he stupid enough to think that he could simply sail away from his divine mission? [69]

Good asserts that the text's primary posture in relation to Jonah is one of ridicule. And, being vomited back onto dry land is the satiric, all be it grotesque height of the text's ridiculing agenda. Good describes this image with great imagination and humor, believing that it reveals a talented artistic combination "of the miraculous and of the ludicrous" at work in the highly crafted satirization of Jonah.[70]

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[66] Ibid, p.43.
[67] Ibid, p.44.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, pp. 44–45.
[70] Ibid, p.46.

> Not only the sea itself but also its very denizens are in conspiracy, under Yahweh, to disabuse the prophet of his escapism. How silly Jonah must have felt in the eyes of God, or of anyone else looking on, as he was vomited head over heals across the dunes! It enough to take the ego out of any man![71]

According to Good, another important element of satire is its love of exaggeration. He insists while Jonah's author was certainly familiar with Nineveh's vast and wicked reputation, he never actually saw the city for himself. The artist's geometric enlargement of Nineveh's proportions bespeaks his cultural associations with the city as being emblematic of a brutal, tyrannical, oppressive country which ultimately represents "not a quantity but a quality, not a mere metropolis but an immorality."[72] Good suggests that the city's size is deliberately inflated so as to evoke a sense of the magnitude of the task, dramatizing the overwhelming nature of Jonah's mission, which stands in stark opposition to the "timorous" attitude and nature of this meek, and seemingly small, prophet."[73]

Jonah, as we have noted earlier, is a highly reluctant preacher but despite his absurd minimalism, his words, unknown to him, carry a fascinating measure of "double meaning," which foreshadows part of the upcoming comedic surprise. Good points out that the verb *haphak*, which the prophet uses to mean "overthrown," "destruction," or "turned upside down" is, in fact, turned upside down on Jonah himself. According to Good, Jonah's message: "Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown (*haphak*)," (Jon. 3:4) is intended to prophesy what Jonah wants to happen to Nineveh, that it is doomed like Sodom and Gomorrah were when the same verb *haphak* was used to describe the situation of those cities. (Gen. 19:25)[74] While this destructive connotation of *haphak* is consistent with the way the word is used in the Sodom and Gomorra narrative and in much of

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[71] Ibid, p.47.
[72] Ibid, p. 48.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid, p.48–49.

prophetic literature,[75] the word possesses another, very different meaning as well. As evidenced in Zehchariah 3:9, this verb can also be employed to mean a radical and immediate transformation from wickedness to faithfulness.[76] This second, meaning of positive change is hardly what Jonah wanted to convey, yet in light of Nineveh's reaction the artist's choice of words can scarcely be deemed coincidental.[77] Hence, we see that in the classical style of satire Jonah's words are filled with irony and they also bespeak the incongruity between his pretense in using the word *haphak*, in order to assert his prophetic power, and the reality of its ultimate meaning in the city of Nineveh. Furthermore, the genre of satire is also evidenced as the prophet's own words and beliefs are mocked and as the author of the Book seems to self–consciously offer an alternative standard of "civilized and moral rightness"[78] which seeks to encourage Jonah, and presumably the Israelite audience which identifies with him, to "reform their moral failings and absurdities."[79]

The overwhelming response of the king is yet a further continuation of the satiric as expressed in the wonderfully exaggerated positive response of the city. The King's personal piety and the penitential program he proclaims for his people appears to be the pinnacle of preposterousness, because his edict merely mimics what is already being done by his subjects and moreover because he adds to it the absurd inclusion of all the animals under his it's purview.[80] Unable to resist a comparative religionist's jest at Jonah's expense, Good adds some mockery of his own: "Perhaps St. Francis preached to the birds but only Jonah brought about the prayer and repentance of cattle!"[81] Taken as a whole, the

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[75] See also Amos 4:11 and Isa. 1:7.
[76] For additional examples, see also: I Sam. 10:9; Jer. 31:13; and Neh. 13:2 for uses of the verb in the Qal; and as it is seen in Jonah 3:4 in the Niph. see: Hos. 11:8; Ex. 14:5; and Esth. 9:22. (Good, p.49, fn.18)
[77] Good, p. 49.
[78] Wynne–Davies, p.874
[79] Ibid.
[80] Mather, p. 282.
[81] Good, p.49.

exaggerated quality of the Nineveh pericope is essential to appreciating the artistic goal of Jonah's author.

> Everything about Nineveh is exaggerated, by the author's design. He intends the overwhelming success of the reluctant prophet to surprise everyone, Jonah included. This is a satire, and the author deliberately overdraws his scene to highlight the irony of the peevish prophet's totally unexpected success. We are supposed to laugh at the ludicrous picture, precisely because Jonah is so upset.[82]

Furthering the satire, the text returns to its use of the tool of incongruity, presenting a humbling contrast between the King's and, by extension, Nineveh's theological sophistication with that of Jonah's, and perhaps, by extension, Israel's ethical immaturity. Having finished the list of what he and his subjects and their animals must do, the King enriches the audience's understanding by telling us his rationale: "Who knows — God *may* repent and have pity, and turn from his burning anger, and we *may* not perish" (Jon. 3:9). Good adeptly points out that the King's actions clearly suggest that the Ninevites know that their repentance cannot "force God" to pardon them. They never assume that their actions will have a "magical" effect. Again the irony here is fully intentional. Based strictly on textual evidence, we discover that the Ninevites seem to have a much more sophisticated understanding of mercy than does Jonah, our prophet.[83]

It is precisely a conflict over mercy which brings the Book's satirical irony to a resounding crescendo. Jonah's running away and his anger at God are motivated by his firm belief that his conception of justice, incongruous as the audience sees his perception to be, is more appropriate than God's. He is thoroughly, and ironically, disturbed by God's mercy and it is his opinion of God's character that makes him runaway: "That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a compassionate and gracious God, slow

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[82] Ibid, pp. 49–50.
[83] Ibid, p. 50.

to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment." (Jon. 4:2) What makes Jonah's behavior so funny is the total discrepancy and incongruity between these laudatory words, seemingly praising God's compassion, and the utterly disparaging tone in which they are spoken.

> It would be possible to miss the author's satiric purpose here. He puts into the prophet's mouth a formula that occurs almost verbatim six other times in the Old Testament. Jonah is mouthing — not for the first time — a liturgical cliché, a rote theology. He has spouted another such phrase to the sailors (Jon. 1:9)....He speaks the pious well-worn words, but he thoroughly disapproves of their being true. "That is why I hurried to flee to Tarshish." No danger that this absurdly gracious God would bother me there![84]

Indeed Jonah becomes so frustrated with his plight that he asks for God to grant him death, presumably because he can't stand to see this city pardoned: "Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (Jon. 4:2–3) Like Miles, Good regards the prophet's melodramatic request as "a parody of Elijah's profound discouragement."[85] But God's response to Jonah's dismay, the lesson of the *qiqayon* (gourd), returns our comedy to the genre of satire. After surmising several serious attempts to specify what kind of fauna we are dealing with here, Good promptly deems the query to be fruitless. The type of plant simply "does not matter, and we would as soon get satisfaction by trying to identify the variety of Jack's beanstalk."[86] About the plant, Good does point out that it is "miraculous," quickly spurting from nothing to reach a height and width sufficient to supply the prophet with ample shade. The gourd also succeeds in supplying "the peevish prophet with something to cheer about: 'And Jonah rejoiced greatly over the plant'" (Jon. 4:6)[87] However, just when the prophet gets his spirits up, we discover that God is not yet

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid, p. 51.
[86] Ibid, pp. 51–52.
[87] Ibid, pp. 51–52.

through with "appointing" things to Jonah's unpleasant surprise. God instructs a worm to devour Jonah's beloved plant, He makes the wind blow in prophet's face and arranges for the sun to "beat upon Jonah's head."[88] Yet again, only five verses later, Jonah pleads for death, but this time because of the gourd: "He begged for death saying, 'I would rather die than live.'" (Jon. 4:8) Good offers a satirical analysis for why Jonah's request for death is so thoroughly absurd:

> What is there to live for? The prophetic message has gone awry, the shade that made life bearable is gone, and the maintenance of life is just too much trouble. How can a man function with a God like this, who favors his enemies but who, as soon as he has given one little thought to his servant's comfort, promptly makes life miserable again? [89]

Both times the prophet wishes for death God responds with a question. Indeed, He makes exactly the same query only a few verses apart, save His last two words, in verse 8, about Jonah's specific relationship to the plant. In both cases, the phrasing of His question is identical: "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jon. 4:4 and 4:9) Jonah is unable or unwilling to see that God has asked him a rhetorical question, and so the second time, he defiantly answers God's question in the affirmative, stating again his desire to die: "'Yes,' he replied, [I cared] so deeply [about the plant] that I want to die.'" (Jon. 4:9) For Jonah, nothing seems to be going right. In Jonah's opinion, God is absurd. An existence that demands working with a God like this, is worse than no existence at all.[90]

The stage is now set for "the full force of the divine irony."[91] Borrowing from the German scholar Artur Weiser, Good tells us that "God finally has Jonah where He wants him."[92] God has cornered the prophet into finally making an affirmative and affectionate statement about something, a radical departure from the prophet's posture up until now.

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[88] Ibid, p. 52.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid, p. 53.
[92] Ibid., p.53.

> Jonah has committed himself to something. His verbal commitments to God earlier in the story were, as we have seen, a mere spouting of rote phrases with no relation to the prophet's real feelings. Now Jonah is willing to die for a castor-oil plant. Could any satirist have drawn his portrait more deftly?[93]

Citing Heschel and Camus, Good reminds us that saying that we are prepared to die for something is a very serious thing. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live."[94] The people and causes for which we are ready to make sacrifices speak directly to what concerns are present at the core of our identity and fuel our unique sense of mission in the world. The things that Jonah is ready to die for, however, are utterly lacking in religious, existential and moral seriousness. Good helps us to recall that Jonah's ridiculous, almost sacrilegious, readiness to die for a plant is not the first time in our narrative that he has demonstrated overwhelming foolishness and self-centerdness.[95]

> Jonah was willing to die for the sake of escaping his prophetic commission (Jon. 1:12), and the coincidence of rescuing a shipload of sailors did not affect him. But when it comes to Nineveh, "that great city," his vexation at the Divine absurdity overcomes his humanity.[96]

Jonah is so angry at God for what he thinks is His absurd propensity to forgive, that he forgets that simply by virtue of being human the Ninevites deserve compassion. While we might well expect God to chastise Jonah for his warped sense of what is ultimately importance, instead God responds to the prophet with "ironic patience."[97] Even though

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Speech in Detroit," June 23rd, 1963.
[95] Ibid, p.53.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid. This concept of "ironic patience," to which Good only alludes, becomes of increasing importance in the analysis of the Book offered by Uriel Simon.

Jonah's attitude leaves much to be desired, God takes him seriously. By taking Jonah's love for the plant seriously, God hopes that the prophet will take His Divine love of all humanity seriously as well, that perhaps this time Jonah will listen with some appreciation to what God has to say. Through "ironic patience," God seeks some level of mutual respect and, oddly enough, equality with His prophet.

At this point, Good's work takes a sharp turn towards drumming home what he believes to be the theological implications of the prophet's absurd behavior. He expands on his earlier critique of Jonah as a disingenuous proclaimer of God's power (Jon. 1:9, 4:2), in order to make a case not only for Jonah's hypocrisy, arrogance and isolationism but, by extension that of all Israel. "Jonah … is the personification of the arrogant isolationism which holds the God of heaven and earth in its pocket, all the while making pious noise about his universal reign and the breath of his compassion."[98] Good applauds the author of the Book of Jonah for challenging the "isolationism" of Jonah and Israel with respect to their claim about God's universal "reign and compassion."[99] Good unabashedly seems to be calling Israelite behavior and belief hypocritical and he views the Book of Jonah as a commendable self–critique on the part of the Book's Hebrew author. In addition, he aggressively attaches his understanding of Jonah as a critique of Israelite isolationism, to a larger Christian theological agenda, which I view as problematic. Good asserts that Jonah's selfish beliefs, "persistent notions in Israel," were exactly "the same pattern of belief" which "Jesus was battling … when he said to the chief priests and elders, 'The tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you' (Matt. 21:31)."[100]

What is even more problematic is that Good applies his Christian theological critique of Jonah and the Israelite hierarchy to his analysis of the Psalm. Like other scholars, Good sees the Psalm as an ironic commentary on Jonah's judgmental posture and

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[98] Ibid, pp. 53–54.
[99] Ibid, p. 54.
[100] Ibid.

self-centerdness.[101] He also argues, like others, that the Psalm lampoons the classic Israelite mockery of idolatry.[102] As noted earlier, Miles suggests a similar reading about the irony of the prophet's refusal to worship his God, even when he is begged to do so by the ship's captain.[103] However, what makes Good's reading of the Psalm uncomfortable from a Jewish perspective is that he links his understanding of Jonah's self–centeredness and the mockery of Israel's anti–idolatry stance to what he calls Israel's misguided claim of "covenantal loyalty" and privileged relationship with God, which is "precisely what," Good argues, "Jonah has abandoned."[104] Jonah's profession that "deliverance is the Lord's," (Jon. 2:10) is clearly disingenuous, in Good's mind, because Jonah certainly doesn't leave the deliverance of Nineveh up to God. Jonah self-righteously rebels against his God given commission and even when he is forced to obey the prophet assumes a posture of protest against Divine mercy. Satire has a serious mission, through the medium of mockery it seeks get the audience to laugh at itself and inspire them to "reform their moral failings and absurdities."[105] The direct implication of Good's argument is that the Book's serious message is that Israel's belief in their special "covenantal" relationship with God is a serious "moral failing and absurdity," considering that God is universally compassionate and all merciful.[106]

From my personal perspective as a Jew I find it virtually impossible not to react to Good's theological interpretation with defensiveness. Perhaps it is the addition of a Christian critique into what is an otherwise unthreatening literary essay which is partially responsible for Uriel Simon's and Jack Sasson's reluctance to accept the satirical thesis on grounds that it can not be disassociated from what appears to be a position of Christian

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Miles, pp. 173–175.
[104] Good, pp. 54–55.
[105] Wynne–Davies, p.874
[106] Good, p.54–55.

condescension with little textual support.[107] Nonetheless, while I feel compelled to reject this disturbing element of Good's work, believing that it is truly beyond the purview of a careful textual interpretation, I am still thoroughly impressed by the strength and creativity of his work as a whole.

In all fairness it should be pointed out that Good's theological perspective does not seem to directly impact his reading of the vast majority of the Book. Strangely, however, after his intense discussion of the text's theology, the final paragraph of his conclusion begins with a cautionary disclaimer against trying "to spell out the author's positive theology with too much detail."[108] The funny thing about this statement is that Good seems to contradict it despite himself. He ends his analysis by arguing that the main objective of Jonah's author was not generate "theological statements" for us to analyze but rather to lay open absurdity through "the irony of satire."[109]

> Like all ironists, he [Jonah's author] took his stand upon an ultimately serious truth. The alternative to Jonah's absurdity is the absurdity of God. If the author's readers are not prepared to settle for the former, he offers us the latter. And the mystery of grace is no less absurd than the mystery of justice.[110]

According to Good, for as much Jonah receives an answer about why God is merciful to Nineveh, there is no ultimately rational explanation about why and when God's compassion will be manifest. Good believes that God's actions, like Jonah's, must be understood to be absurd in their randomness, in the wonder that is grace.

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[107] See following chapter on the perspective of Uriel Simon. Jack Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretations.* (New York: The Anchor Bible/Doubleday, 1990) p. 332. Sasson writes, in response to Good's argument: "Jonah is no more 'self–centered, self–righteous, and self–willed' for arguing with God about mercy, than are Abraham, Moses, or Job when they too confront him. All of them know some truths about the Hebrew God and are reacting instinctively to occasions in which they feel that such truths are being distorted. Jonah, in fact, readily accepts his charge once mercy is shown the sailors and readily makes his peace with God when shown the slightest evidence of care for his feelings."

[108] Good, p.54–55.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

Good's essay leaves me feeling both highly impressed, and yet deeply disturbed. From a classical Jewish perspective the notion of God's absurdity, if that refers to the mysterious ways of God's mercy, is not inherently problematic. But when Jonah's absurdity, if that is linked to the notion of covenantal hypocrisy on the part of the prophet and Israel, is viewed from a similar Jewish perspective, the ability to laugh at the prophet's actions is seriously compromised. It is one thing to suggest that a people has a skewed notion of grace, or even a somewhat exclusionary notion. It is quite another to say that such a shortcoming scandalizes their tradition writ large. However, the specific theological implications of Good's analysis need not negate what is a wonderfully imaginative and well articulated piece of work with many persuasive insights into the Book's comedic style.

As we have seen, Good argues forcefully that the Book of Jonah is a satire. He is not alone in such an assertion. James S. Ackerman in his article, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah,"[111] also supports a satirical thesis about the Book of Jonah's primary genre, however, his methodology is very different from Good's. Ackerman's analysis of the Book's satirical nature hinges upon his understanding of the position and meaning of the Psalm within the larger context of the Book as a whole. Because Ackerman's evidence of the story's satiric style resembles Good's in many respects, I have chosen only to highlight the major places in which his study differs from Good's and/or furthers an original thesis about the comic nature of the text.

Biblical scholars have engaged in a great deal of debate as to whether or not the Song of chapter two is an original part of the Book itself or whether it is representative of the heavy–hand of a later redactor. After summarizing many of the arguments on both sides of the debate, Ackerman presents his thesis that not only is the Song authentic to the Book, but that it is essential to understanding the major comic theme and devices of the

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111 James S. Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith*, ed. Baruch Halpern & Jon D. Levenson. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981) pp. 213–246.

Book as a whole. He argues that the song is "set in the context of the bizarre and unexpected" and thus moves "the entire work in the direction of satire," compelling "an ironic reading throughout."

> The song performs two functions. It helps to establish an appropriate genre (i.e. satire) through which the story can be understood. It is also the crucial vortex into and out of which all of the story's main images move, helping us to integrate and properly interpret the symbolism with which the work abounds.[112]

What makes the Psalm so funny and ironic is that it depicts Jonah as having absolutely no sense of reality. He does not realize where he is; how he got there; or where he is going. This dissonance, between Jonah's perception of what he is experiencing and what is actually happening to him in his "narrative world," exploits his presumptuousness and self-centerdness for comic effect.[113] Unlike the informed audience, Jonah appears to have no idea of where he is. Throughout the Psalm, the joke is completely on the prophet who does not know that he is in the belly of a whale. He ironically thanks God for his salvation "because he sees the fish as a secure place bringing him up from the destructive chaos of Death's raging breakers [in]to the security of the Temple."[114] Ackerman asserts that this erroneous and ironic presumption on the part of the prophet is in keeping with Jonah's "misguided attempts to avoid certain enclosures he perceives negatively, by searching for other shelters that he [mistakenly] perceives as sources of security,"[115] such as the boat, the belly, and the plant. According to Ackerman, such "wildly incongruous and distorted" situations are at the "heat of satire."[116] The dissonance and incongruity also

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[112] Ibid, p. 217.
[113] Ibid, p. 216 & 222.
[114] Ibid, p.236.
[115] Ibid, p.229.
[116] Ibid, p. 228.

explain why Jonah offers a Psalm of thanksgiving despite the precariousness of his situation.[117]

Instead of making "an appeal for help," which would make sense considering Jonah's situation, "the prophet shifts gears, and the prayer veers crazily towards a song of thanksgiving."[118] There are numerous instances, Ackerman argues, in which Jonah's song draws upon the style of a traditional lament. In fact, "his song is replete with snippets from the Psalter, the first verse closely paralleling the opening lines of Psalms 120 and 130."[119] However, both of these psalms are "individual laments" which continue to "express eloquent" confessions "of sin and hope in God's mercy," emotions which Jonah's song in no way reflects.[120] Instead, Jonah's song becomes a song of thanks. But, in contrast to the conventional form of a psalm of thanksgiving, Jonah's song skips the standard opening rubric, an exultation of God's greatness, and dives straight into the second traditional rubric, a personal lament describing the troubles from which he has been rescued.[121] The omission of God's praise serves as a poetic indication of the prophet's presumptuousness and egotism. To his arrogant oversight in poetic form, Jonah's language includes a large measure of conceited and incorrect content. Jonah mistakenly credits his salvation from the wicked seas to *his* outcry (*qarq'ti*, Jon. 2:3), rather than that of the *sailors*, who passionately beseech God not to hold them accountable for the demise of an innocent servant of God: "They cried (*wayyiqre'u)* out to the Lord: 'O, please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person for You, O Lord, by Your will, have brought this about.'" (Jon. 1:14). From a close reading of the text, we see no evidence that Jonah actually "called to the Lord," but he takes credit for doing so in his song. Ackerman exploits the comic potential of this self-important claim

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[117] Ibid, p. 222.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid, p. 221.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid, p. 222.

with vivid imagination and wit: "Jonah may well have gurgled out an unreported plea for help as he thrashed in the water," but if it is any cry which is responsible for saving Jonah it was probably the meritorious plea of the sailors that succeeded in persuading God to grant the prophet's deliverance, not his own, which if it happened at all didn't even make it into the text.[122]

In fact, not only does Jonah refer constantly to his humble petitions to God, of which we have no actual evidence, but he promises "with loud thanksgiving" that he will "sacrifice to" God and that what he "vowed" he "will perform."(Jon. 2:10). Again the text seems to be silent on the performance of any sacrificial rites on Jonah's part, but is detailed in its description of those supposedly heathen sailors when they "feared the Lord greatly" and "they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and they made vows" (Jon. 1:16). It seems as if Jonah's over–blown perception of himself and the effects of his words and actions, leads him into a very low place, literally and figuratively.

Ackerman argues that throughout the first half of the narrative we find a pattern of Jonah's descent, denoted by the use of the verb *yrd*, to go down. The impression that the prophet is descending into an abyss is an image that is actively and repeatedly expressed from the beginning of the tale. The recurrent use of the verb *yrd*, to go down, is used to link Jonah's constant attempts to distance himself from God and his duties to the other major descent of biblical literature, the descent into the underworld. The verb is used to describe Jonah's flight "down to Joppa," (Jon. 1:3) and how he had "gone down into the hold of the vessel" (Jon. 1:5). Both of these passages rely on the word *yrd* to convey the prophet's movements. Even Jonah's decision to take a nap, to "lay down and fall asleep," is portrayed as a part of his continual descent; the word *va'yerdam* is intended to play on the same root *yrd*, "to go down." (Jon. 1:5) This pattern of descent is hardly coincidental. As Ackerman points out the word *yrd* throughout the Bible in general, and Psalms in

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122 Ibid.

particular, is employed to depict a descent to Sheol, the world of the dead.[123] What makes this perpetual descent and near death experience so ironic, in Ackerman's view, is that it is motivated by Jonah's desire for escape. The reason why the prophet is constantly on the move is that he is trying to find a place where he will be free from God's ability to compel him into obedience. The irony, however, is that the more the Jonah seeks this false safety, the more endangered he actually becomes.[124]

Like the word *yrd*, the phrase *el yarkete ha sephina*, "the innermost parts of the ship," also functions as a subtle hint about the extent to which the prophet is lulling himself into a false sense of security. Ackerman suggests that this phrase is intended to play on two important associations. the Hebrew word *sephina*, ship, is linked to the root *sfn* meaning "to hide, treasure up." Seen in this regard, "the word-play is re-enforcing Jonah's search for a hiding place in his flight from YHWH."[125] Furthermore, the entire phrase "*el yarkete ha sephina*," the innermost parts of the ship, is meant to echo Isaiah 14:12-15, which teaches that seeking "the heights/realm of the gods," *yarkete Zaphon*, will ultimately result in landing in the *yarkete bor*, "the innermost parts of The Pit, another name for the nether world of Sheol.[126]

> As the build-up of imagery in Jonah's song gives increasing vividness to Sheol, with its contextual resonances as a swallower, we are forced to equate the dread world from which Jonah thinks he has escaped — the "womb of Sheol" — with the belly of the fish in which he still remains. Since Jonah has been swallowed by the great fish, we are prevented from sharing his illusion that he has found deliverance in a secure place. We are at once amused by his total blindness, yet forced to ponder the ties constructed within the narrative of the ship, the fish and the world of the dead.[127]

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[123] Ibid, p. 223.
[124] Ibid, p. 230.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid, p. 230.
[127] Ibid, p. 234.

While the reader is able to contemplate with clarity the "ties" between these interlinked locations, Jonah is not. In addition to his confusion about where he is, Jonah is also mistaken about where he is going. He seems to think that he is now bound for God's Temple. The prophet soon learns however that this notion is delusional. Jonah is bound for Nineveh, not Jerusalem. The tone of the song itself may be a consequence of this confusion. Jonah expresses no sorrow or remorse for his disobedient behavior or his arrogant attitude. What is more, he never promises to accept the charge he was given in the first place. This conflation between what he is supposed to do with what he wants to do is yet another comic example of his self-centerdeness. God has not put Jonah through all these trials and tribulations so that he can worship at the Temple. God's objective is simply to get Jonah to do precisely what he was commanded to do from the beginning of chapter one. "In the song Jonah affirms only deliverance *by* YHWH's power, whereas the prose narrative suggests he should be fearing deliverance *into* YHWH power for his disobedient flight. This is hardly a song to be sung by a prophet who had smugly confessed his fear of YHWH to the sailors in 1:9"[128] Seen in this light, the erroneous and egotistical ending of the Song, in which Jonah commends himself for not being one of those "who cling to empty folly [and] forsake their own welfare" (Jon. 2:9), but rather is one of the honored few who recognize and are privileged to experience that "deliverance is the Lord's," (Jon. 2: 10) foreshadows the fact that Jonah is still absurdly immature and still has much to learn.

Whereas Good closes his chapter on Jonah with a discussion of the Psalm, seeing it as additional proof for his thesis about the role satire in the Book, Ackerman begins with the Psalm, seeing it as the essential key to beginning a satirical reading. While both authors, along with thinkers such as Milar Burrows and Andrew and Pierre Emanuel Lacocque,[129] form a type of "satirical school," agreeing on the genre of the Book, the

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[128] Ibid, p. 224.

[129] I have chosen not to include the work of these thinkers in this paper because I believe the satirical arguments are well–represented by Good and Ackerman. For further commentaries on Jonah as a satire, see: Andre & Pierre Emanuel Lacocque, "Jonah, A

theological critique and analysis which is present in Good's work is absent in Ackerman's, a feature which makes his reading more persuasive as a whole, and more palatable. Both authors, however, succeed in forcefully arguing that incongruity and irony play central parts in inspiring the audience's laughter, a laughter characterized by many of the elements of classical satire.

I have intentionally devoted this much time and space to presenting and discussing the satiric theories of Good and Ackerman because their works seems to be the foremost arguments within "the satiric school" to which Uriel Simon, among other commentators, take exception. In powerful contrast to Good, Simon will argue that the humor, the absurdity and the irony of Jonah, are "not satiric but compassionate."[130] The action of the plot, he will assert, is not invested in ridiculing Jonah but in returning him to a rational understanding of His God and of himself.

Menippean Satire," in *Jonah: A Psychoreligious Approach to the Prophet.* (Columbia, S.C., University of South Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 26–47 and Milar Burrows, "The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank & William L. Reed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) pp. 80–107.

[130] Simon, pp. 16–17.

~ A Laughter of Love, A Comedy of Kindness:

Jonah as a Compassionate Irony ~

Those who see the Book of Jonah as a satire regard the prophet's attempt to run away from God as a wonderful case in point. Given that Jonah acknowledges that his God rules over both sea and land, trying to elude God seems contradictory in the extreme, as does Jonah's misconception of where he is and what is important throughout the story. According to both Good and Ackerman, the "wild incongruity" between reality and perception, along with the use of satirical irony place the work firmly in the genre of satire. However, Uriel Simon, in his commentary on the Book of Jonah, disagrees with this characterization. Instead, Simon suggests that the Book's sense of humor utilizes a more sensitive and compassionate irony than that of classical satire.[131]

> The exaltednesss of scripture and the mode of seriousness which hovers over it has prevented many generations from understanding the text's distinctively humoristic nature. However, the feeling of hesitation [which generations have felt about reading the Book as comedic] is not justified because humor is not identical with frivolous joking.[132]

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[131] Uriel Simon, pp. 16-17.
[132] Ibid.

Far from being a ridiculous hypocrite, like the stock characters of Moliere, a comedic "straightman," or a hilariously deluded prophet, Simon argues that Jonah is a simultaneously tragic and comic figure, like the complex characters of Anton Chekov.

Simon argues that understanding Jonah to be at once tragic and comic, rather than satirical, changes the ways in which the motivations behind his strange behavior are to be understood. From Simon's perspective, Jonah's actions emerge as evidence of an intense internal theological conflict. Jonah runs from God because he believes that God's plan is unjust. The people of Nineveh have sinned and they deserve to be punished.[133] "Jonah allowed himself to disobey a command of God and to maintain his opposition to it out of his faithfulness and passion for justice, and because of his suspicion that God would [ultimately] withdraw His anger against the city."[134] However, Simon suggests, it is Jonah's same radical passion for justice, which can be perceived in a positive light in some cases, which also makes Jonah so "presumptuous" in other cases.[135] Jonah knows that he is compelled to obey God, but he rebels against Him because he sincerely believes that God is compromising justice. The root of Jonah's self-deception is not that he thinks he can escape God. Jonah knows that this is impossible. Simon asserts that the source of Jonah's self–deception is two–fold: firstly, he believes that he knows better than God about what constitutes justice, and secondly that his "correctness" gives him the right to reject and walk–away from God's commands.[136]

This "presumptuous" character flaw in the prophet is remedied by a plot line that keeps interrupting Jonah's arrogant attempts to runaway, by repeatedly putting him back in his place.[137] Simon argues that the storm comes as a surprise to Jonah and that it is designed by God to interrupt Jonah's escape long before he ever reaches his destination.

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[133] Simon, pp. 16–17.
[134] Simon, p.17.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

Like other surprises and interruptions in the plot, the storm is intended to remind Jonah that God is capable of anything and that God's judgment is absolute.[138] Simon contends that Jonah's failed "escape attempt," like many other moments throughout the tale, exhibits an irony and humor that is not satirical but rather pathetic. What makes the prophet's actions so sad and simultaneously so funny is that he is involved in a hopeless struggle with God.[139] Therefore in Simon's interpretation, the laughter which the Book's author tries to evoke is not one of derision but of recognition. The author works to create a moment in which the audience laughs because we recognize human eccentricities in the prophet which we see in ourselves. Jonah's attempt to runaway inspires a laughter of sympathy and empathy, not a laughter of mockery.[140]

I believe that Simon's work implies a very subtle but important distinction about the prophet's behavior and intentions: Jonah is not actually running away from God but from God's command. In this regard, Jonah is like many other biblical characters who disobey Divine orders. What makes Jonah special, indeed unique, is that the way God punishes his wrong doing is simply by forcing the prophet to do what He has already ordained. The punishments of other biblical "sinners" are very different from the one assigned to Jonah: Saul loses his right to hereditary succession (I Sam. 15:14–35); David loses a child (II Sam. 12:14); Adam and Eve are exiled, and granted lives filled with hard labor, and physical pain (Gen. 3:16–24); Cain is banished from his family home, his relationship with the ground is cursed, and he is destined to live his life as a "ceaseless wanderer" (Gen. 4:10–12); and Moses is not permitted to complete his God given mission to take the Israelites into the Promised Land, and he is only allowed look on longingly from a mountain top as they reach their destination (Deut. 32:48–52). The fact that Jonah, unlike all the other biblical figures I have just noted, is punished only by having to do God's will

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[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.

and experience remarkable success at doing so is precisely what makes him and his story simultaneously tragic and comic. Jonah is tragic because his vanity and egotism lead him to the pathetic act of running away from God's command. Jonah's passion for justice over Divine will resonates with elements of classical Greek tragedy wherein otherwise respectable characters act with narrow vision in their obsessive pursuit of one virtue to the tragic neglect of all others. Jonah's obsession with his version of justice is like Oedipus' unrelenting and ultimately destructive search for truth.[141] Jonah is also like Creon, Antigone's uncle, judge and executioner, in his catastrophic insistence on law and order.[142] However Jonah, unlike Oedipus and Creon, is simultaneously a comic character because of the poetic way in which he is compelled to do God's will *despite himself*. What is equally funny is that in doing so Jonah enjoys an unparalleled success which he considers to be utterly depressing.[143]

The dual tragic and comic nature of Jonah's character is highlighted in the very first chapter when he tries to escape God's command. Jonah was actually not the only one of God's prophets to try to runaway from doing God's will but, from Simon's perspective, he was the most pathetic and absurd of them. Like Jonah, Jeremiah hopes to escape God's command but unlike Jonah, he recognizes quickly that a prophet is unable to resist the word of God. He testifies:

> The word of the Lord causes me constant disgrace and contempt. I thought [to myself], "I will not mention Him, no more will I speak in His name" — But [His word] was like a raging fire in my heart, shut up in my bones; I could not hold it in, I was helpless. (Jer. 20:8–9)

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[141] Sophocles, *Three Tragedies*, "*Oedipus the King*," trans. David Grene. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).
[142] Sophocles, "*Antigone*," trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff.
[143] While Simon does not actually draw the comparisons which I have made in this paragraph his work on the pathetic nature of Jonah's character inspired my reading of the simultaneously tragic and comic elements at work in the text.

Like the commanding feeling in Jeremiah's bones, Divine command prevents Jonah from hiding himself from God and from leading a conventional life. If he is truly a prophet Jonah should no better then to think that he can escape God's word, and his attempt to runaway despite this fact is both laughable and pathetic.[144]

Jonah spares no expense in his attempt to do the impossible. According to numerous aggadic sources, Jonah's anxious desire to flee was so great that he was believed to have "hired the whole ship" in an effort to expedite his flight. This belief led exegetical writers to speculate about the extent of Jonah's wealth.[145]

> Without entering the debate over Jonah's personal wealth, [Jack Sasson] nevertheless support the contention that Jonah hired the [entire] ship and its crew, for the following reasons. First of all, the narrative in chapter one speaks only of Jonah and the crew. As a matter of fact, the narrative would become too cluttered, and certainly off–focus, were there any other passengers on board. Think how complicated the lots–casting scene would have become, for one example.... Second, the vocable *sakar* [commonly translated as "fare"], is worthy of attention. As used in Scripture, it clearly means wages, for hire of services.... As far as [Sasson] can research the matter, until Roman times ... the ancient world did not have a specific word for "a fare," a charge for the purchase of space in an expedition, seagoing or otherwise.[146]

For this reason, Sasson and Simon[147] assert that Jonah was not as passive in his attempt to runaway as it may have initially appeared. Like Miles, Sasson and Simon seem convinced that Jonah's boarding of the ship was a deliberate action of defiance. However, they stop well short of suggesting, as does Miles, that his actions represent the height of sacreligiousness.[148] Both authors seem to prefer more subtle and reverent readings of Jonah's rapid and expensive departure.

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[144] Simon, p.43.
[145] For aggadic citations see: Sasson, p. 83 & Simon, p. 44.
[146] Sasson, pp. 83–84.
[147] Simon, p. 44.
[148] Miles, p.172.

Simon argues that even after Jonah's absurd attempt to runaway from God by boat, his laughable and pathetic behavior does not stop. The pathetic quality of his actions is epitomized by his taking a nap in the midst of God's commanding storm: "The Lord cast a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great tempest came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up ....Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell asleep." (Jon. 1:4–5) Like other commentators, Simon takes up the challenge of trying to determine exactly when Jonah's snooze occurred. At issue is whether or not Jonah went down for his nap before or after the arrival of the storm. Simon points out that the past perfect of *yrd*, to go down, allows the reader two interpretive options: the word could imply that Jonah took his nap before the storm began, or alternatively it could be used to indicate that Jonah lay down to nap just as the storm began to rage. Simon prefers to read the verse to indicate that Jonah decided to take his nap at a moment when the tempest was already coming upon the sea.[149] This allows him to contrast the highly responsive reaction of the sailors with the passive, apathetic reaction of the prophet. While the sailors are take spiritual and practical steps to get themselves out of danger, Jonah decides to go to sleep, "to close his eyes to the possible religious meaning of the storm."[150] Going to sleep is a continuation of Jonah's rebellion. According to Simon, Jonah is well aware of the fact that the storm is a sign of God's pursuit.[151] While his rebellion to God's request began with an active response, in which he took deliberate steps to runaway, his rebellion continues in a different style, he responds passively, with the epitome of non action — falling asleep. Once God chooses to reassert His authority by means of a storm, Jonah decides to counter His power with a gesture of denial. If Jonah can't flee from his duty physically or spatially, perhaps he can escape God's orders by sleeping. In fact, Jonah may be thinking that God can only control his reality if he is

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[149] Simon, p.48.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

awake. By going to sleep Jonah attempts to deny the reality and the seriousness of the storm, hoping to escape God's command through his dormant withdrawal. Furthermore, Simon suggests that Jonah's ability to sleep during this maritime crisis is the first of many indications that the prophet has a tendency to prefer death over life, a behavior that becomes fully explicit in chapter four.[152]

Jonah's desire to flee his prophetic calling through sleep is also significant because it provides us with the first of several striking similarities between Jonah and the prophet Elijah.[153] Like Jonah, Elijah also tries to escape reality through sleep (I Kings 19:5). Also like Jonah, God provides Elijah with a dramatic salvation through special animals (I Kings 17:2–6). And like Jonah, Elijah too prays to God, while sitting under a plant, to grant him death (I Kings 19:4).[154]

As we have noted, according to the proponents of "the satirical thesis" the Hebrew prophet's ability to enjoy the "sleep of the righteous" while the idol worshipping sailors reverently pray for their lives is intended to make the prophet look absurd. Moreover, the fact that Jonah needs a personal invitation from the ship's captain just to invest himself in the fate of the ship is yet another example of the ludicrous irony intended to make a mockery of the prophet.[155] According to Simon however, the irony at work in this pericope is of a more subtle, compassionate nature than the biting mockery of sarcasm: Jonah's flight into sleep is endemic of his hopeless existential struggle with his God. Simon acknowledges that humor is at play in this scene but he argues that the laughter lies in Jonah's determined, yet self-righteous attempt to keep struggling with God despite His overwhelming Power.[156] While Simon would hardly concur with the assertion that Jonah is God's "straightman," he would agree with Mather that Jonah's quality of endurance and

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[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid. p.77
[155] Ibid, pp. 16–17
[156] Ibid.

perseverance is an essential element of the Book's humor. Jonah's resistance is funny because he is so determined to get his way, although it is utterly impossible. And even when Jonah faces difficulties he still "remains available for the next round of Divine surprises."[157] Jonah's disinterest in joining the sailors in prayer is "the logical consequence of his refusal to prophesy:" Having refused to accept a Divine command, Jonah neither wants nor expects God to hear his prayer.[158] Simon argues that Jonah's refusal to pray is emblematic of his desire to be true to himself and to his actions. He wisely believes that he can't fairly try to engage God when he has runaway from Him. Therefore, the irony in this pericope, is not ludicrous, but pathetic.[159] Jonah has cornered himself into a sad position wherein he believes that he can't even pray to his own God.

Simon highlights the irony of the storm pericope in which Jonah, who refused to rebuke Nineveh, receives a rebuke from the ship's Captain, ordering him to arise and pray to His God. As was noted, according to Simon, Jonah believes that after having refused to "cry out to Nineveh" at God's command, he can not possibly cry out now on behalf of the sailors and himself. The Captain, on the other hand, expresses a cautious hope that God will respond to their pleas for deliverance, but he presumes no guaranteed response. In this way, the Captain foreshadows the King of Nineveh who hopes that the city's repentance will cause God to change His mind. The text does not offer Jonah's response to the Captain, and nor is there any mention of his prayer. Therefore, Simon argues, the audience has no other alternative but to surmise that Jonah not only rebuffed the Captain's urgent command to pray, but that he also declined to explain the reasons behind his refusal.[160]

In sharp contrast to Jonah, who tries to escape from reality and block out the serious nature of the stormy situation, the sailors take a highly active role in trying to discover the reason for their dire predicament. When their initial prayers and their attempt to

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157 Miles, p.288.
158 Simon,
159 Ibid, pp. 16-17, 48.
160 Ibid, p. 49.

lighten the vessel fail to ameliorate the storm, the sailors conclude that their valiant measures have fallen short due to their lack of understanding about the reason for the tempest. The game of the *goralot*, lots, is founded on the "ethical assumption"[161] that there is a sinner among them whose wrongdoing is jeopardizing the lives of everyone else on the ship. The fact that the word *goralot,* "lots," is used three times within one verse to describe the planning of the game, the execution of the game, and the resolution of the game, reveals the author's conscious artistic decision to slow down the tale so as to "make the audience participate in the mounting tension" of the sporting and risky moment [162] (Jon. 1:7).

Once the lots fall upon Jonah, he is greeted with a flurry of questions. Whereas Good sees the questions of the sailors as superfluous and absurd, Simon regards their style of interrogation as emblematic of their thoughtfulness and prudence. Even in the furious storm the sailors do not become impulsive. Their questions reveal what they regard to be a highly rational method of inquiry: "In order to stop the storm they must learn the identity of Jonah's God and find out how Jonah has offended Him. [Like skilled detectives,] they rain down a litany of questions that are repetitious and overlapping so as to get to the bottom of things."[163] Jonah does not answer the sailors' question about his occupation, but rather anticipates their future questions and provides them with the answer that he thinks is more applicable. Jonah identifies himself as an *ivri* , a Hebrew, one who reveres the God "who made both sea and land." (Jon. 1:9) Taken as a whole, therefore, Jonah's answers to the sailors' first round of questions leave much to be desired. He conveniently ignores their initial question about his occupation, probably because it would reveal far more about his situation than he cares to at the moment. To the questions regarding his origins, his response is somewhat mixed. He tells them he is an *ivri*, a Hebrew, and this piece of

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[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid, p. 50.

information is probably sufficiently detailed to answer to the sailors questions: "where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?" (Jon. 1:8) However, the second part of his reply to their three questions, "I fear the Lord, who made the sea and land" (Jon 1:9), must strike the sailors as rather strange. If Jonah is a devotee of the Lord, then why didn't he beseech his God to stop the storm?

> The juxtaposition of the *yira gedolah*, great fear, of the sailors with the statement "*ani yareh*," I fear, in the mouth of Jonah, is not intended as a mockery of the prophet but rather it is used to define a counterdistinction between where the sailors and Jonah stand, in relation to each other and to God, at this moment. Jonah understands the power of God, but he is not afraid to defy Him or go against His will. In contrast, the Sailors do not have an understanding of God's workings, but, unlike Jonah, they are afraid of God's power, [and seek to learn His will].[164]

Given the life threatening storm around them, the sailors are anxious to know the misdeed of this strange man whose God rules over all the world (Jon 1: 10). Like the earlier question and command of the Captain (Jon. 1:6), the query "what is it you have you done?" carries a tone of rebuke. Simon points out, however, that the sailors' question is not phrased to say "what have you done *to us*? In fact, he argues, the sailors ability to refrain from over personalizing the situation is yet another example of the "positive and unselfish aspects of their collective image."[165] The sailors words and actions are not motivated by their anger at Jonah for the terrible predicament that he has brought upon them. Instead of being angry, the sailors response towards Jonah is informed by their sense of shock at Jonah's careless decision to hazard an escape attempt from a God who is both omnipresent and omnipotent.[166]

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[164] Ibid, p. 51.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.

In the face of an ever growing storm, the sailors are desperate to discover something that they can do to free themselves and Jonah from the God who is pursuing him. However, Simon illustrates, the sailors' desperation does not cause them to lose their deep sense of humanity and compassion. By asking Jonah's opinion about what they should do, the sailors' sensitivity to Jonah and their reluctance to do anything reckless or impulsive is made vibrantly clear. In contrast to their cautious and patient posture in the midst of a crisis that is not of their own making, Jonah insists on being stubborn and stupid. A wiser and calmer person might have seen being selected by the lots as a last chance to "atone for his flight," but instead Jonah insists on continuing along his downward and destructive course, even if it costs him his life. "Jonah submits to his pursuer, [who is God,] but he continues in his rebelliousness. He prefers death, passive suicide, to repentance for his flight and acceptance of his [God–given] responsibility to prophesy to Nineveh." [167].

Simon argues that whereas the thoughts of the sailors focus on the root of Jonah's sin, the thoughts of the prophet focus on the consequences of how his flight has put these poor sailors in peril.[168] Just when the audience expects Jonah to confess what he did to aggravate his God, the text switches from the voice of Jonah to the voice of the narrator. According to Simon, the fact that the audience is denied from hearing the prophet's confession, is intended to help shift the focus from what Jonah has done wrong to what is about to do right: Jonah accepts responsibility for the crew's well being. He regards the prospect of his own drowning less as a punishment for himself, than as a noble deed which he can perform in order to save the sailors, he says: "Throw me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you" (Jon. 1:12).[169] Of course, Jonah's act is not completely admirable. The fact that he doesn't simply repent is indicative of his persistent desire to rebel against

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[167] Ibid, p. 52.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.

God, even if he saves the life of the sailors he doesn't do it at the expense of his destination of defiance.

The sailors have very different ideas from Jonah. Regardless of the fact that Jonah has acknowledged responsibility for endangering them and has requested to be thrown overboard, the sailors are still not convinced that killing an "innocent man" is the only way out. "Despite the previous failure of technical efforts (Jon. 1:5), the sailors initial response to Jonah's request, the logic of which is seemingly irrefutable, is to try to extricate themselves from their stormy predicament through the technical means of their oars;" "nevertheless, the men rowed hard to regain the shore, but they could not, for the sea was growing more and more stormy about them." (Jon. 1: 13). Only when their rowing proves futile, in the midst of an increasingly violent storm. do the sailors remorsefully give–in to Jonah's command (Jon. 1:13, 15). Even still, before these sweet sailors do the dreadful act of casting Jonah onto the waves, they cry out once more to God to let Him know, in no uncertain terms, that they are obeying Him under protest: "They cried out to the Lord, 'Oh, please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person. For You, O Lord, by Your will, have brought this about" (Jon. 1:14). Citing a wonderfully comic midrash, Simon acknowledges that he is hardly the first commentator to be fascinated by the sailors' reticence to throw Jonah in the water. Seizing on the seemingly superfluous verb *wayis'u*, "they lifted him up," (Jon, 1:15), aggadic literature further develops the image of the sailors in agony over their obligation to take an innocent life. The midrash transforms the complimentary actions of "lifting Jonah up and casting him overboard" into the image of the sailors raising and lowering Jonah into and out of the sea, in their hope that God will be fooled, or perhaps placated, if they simply dip the prophet in deep enough.

> They took him and placed him into the sea up to his knees, and the storm abated. They lifted him back on board, and the sea became agitated against them. They placed him back up to his neck, and the sea-storm abated. Once again they lifted

> him back among them, and the sea became agitated against them. Finally they cast him in entirely, and immediately the sea storm abated.[170]

Simon argues that it is this pained, yet provocative, moral maturity which distinguishes the sailors from their passenger. Unlike Jonah, they find a way to articulate their dissent from God's plan, while still recognizing that they have no choice but to obey it. Moreover, Simon points out, they have the humility and the reverence to ask God's forgiveness for an act they have performed under protest. In the end, despite the fact that they felt compelled by God to do something which displeased them, the sailors are portrayed as a model of reverence, fearing God, offering sacrifices to Him, and making vows (Jon. 1:14-16).

While the sailors are the modicum of reverence, praying somewhat regularly, Jonah doesn't actually pray to God until he is in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights. (Jon. 2:1–2) In fact, midrashic writers argued that God performs some very crafty tricks, including the sex–change of a fish, in order to get Jonah to worship Him. The Hebrew, the word for fish, *dag*, is used twice in the first verse of chapter two, in the second verse a variant of the word for fish, *dagah*, is used when referring to Jonah's position, in the fish's entrails, when he is finally prepared to pray. The midrashic writers played upon the possibility that the *dagah* in Jon. 2:2 could be construed to denote a female fish. In the Midrash the author seizes on the feminine rendering of the word to concretize Jonah's stubbornness:

> [Even when Jonah was in the belly of a whale,] he did not pray because he was not compelled to do so. He spent three days in the whale's belly and still he had not prayed. The Holy One said: "I made him a big comfortable place within the innards of the whale so that he would not be overly distressed, and still he does not pray to me?! I'll teach him a lesson. I'll put him in a fish pregnant with three hundred and

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[170] Simon, p. 53 & Sasson, p. 141; see: *Pirke D'Rebbe Eliezar* 1:10; *Yalkut Shemoni*, Vol. II:550.

sixty five thousand little fishies, then he'll feel crowded and cramped and he will pray to me."[171]

And so it seems that God's plan worked, at least partially, because Jonah offered up a Song of thanksgiving to God. In so far as Simon considers the language of drowning to be an important element at work in the Song, he is in agreement with Miles and Mather. The critical difference in his analysis, however, is that while these commentators assert the drowning motif is enlarged to a comical extreme, Simon sees the Song as a offering a series of correctives to the prophet's behavior intended to show how Jonah regards his current position with respect to God. It is God himself who has cast Jonah into the depths. The second person address and second person ending attached to the waves and breakers serves to dramatize the idea that God is responsible for Jonah's situation: "*You* cast me into the depths...*Your* waves are rushing over me. *Your* breakers are drowning me." (Jon. 2:4) Like a desperate drowning victim Jonah feels that each and every one of these forces is being hurled directly at him by God. Yet it is this traumatic experience and his salvation from it that finally compels Jonah to break his silence toward his Creator and praise His greatness.[172]

Ironically, Jonah's time in the whale marks the start of his being forced to recognize God's greatness despite himself. The prayer is the beginning of a process that, according to Simon, returns the prophet to God and to himself.[173] The fact that the psalm is offered in the spirit of thanksgiving and not that of repentance is an extension of the reticence and rebelliousness which remain in the prophet's heart, even after his extraordinary salvation. Jonah's affect therefore, resembles that of those rebellious but needy teenagers who want to maintain a posture of protest, even when they know that what they are being "forced to

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[171] Simon, p. 58. From: *Midrash Yonah*, p.98. See also Sasson, p. 155, fn.122: "S. Talmon informs me of an illustration on a manuscript at his disposal wherein a mermaid awaits Jonah's splash into the waters."
[172] Ibid, pp. 59-60.
[173] Ibid, pp.16–17.

do" is ultimately what is best for them. The overwhelming anxiety of almost drowning chastens Jonah into grateful prayer, an act that reaffirms God's power, but which is still a far cry from accepting God's justice. As a profession in and of itself Jonah's prayer compensates for his silent refusals to go to Nineveh and to join his prayers with those of the sailors. In terms of how the Psalm's content is set within a larger context, however, Simon argues that it fulfills a different function than simply that of compensation. Both thematically and syntactically it reveals a hero who is beginning to return to God but is still far from recognizing the depths of his own self-righteousness, a character trait which caused him to sink so low in the first place.[174]

Jonah's inability to fully change his indignant ways is made clear as soon as he sets foot in Nineveh. Although this time Jonah responds quickly to God's command, he still doesn't do it with the full heart and zeal that we might expect from someone who has undergone such a humbling ordeal at God's hands. According to a satiric reading of the Book, the immediate and total repentance of the Ninevites at the urging of a foreign messenger, serves as an ironic indictment, by comparative inference, of Israel's continued refusal to listen to its own prophets in their own land of Jerusalem. Simon, however, insists that the satirists are making an unfair comparison. Likening the two cities and peoples responses "totally ignores the fact that" what is presented to have happened overnight in the fairytale of Nineveh is a "pure idealization," not to be compared with what is presented in graphic realism about the history of the people Israel in the city of Jerusalem.[175]

Simon argues that the enthusiastic penitence of the Ninevites is an even greater departure from real life than was the prophet's survival inside a whale. Unlike the storm which elicits the devotion of the sailors, or spending three days in a big fish, which evokes the prayer of Jonah, the miracle of the Ninevites immediate and sincere response comes

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[174] Ibid, p. 55.
[175] Ibid, pp.16-17.

without any dramatic special effects. They are attentive even when all they hear is five words from a highly reluctant prophet, who does not even bother to speak directly with their King. Hence what would logically have been the Book's climax is performed entirely without a giant showdown. The only real conflict, as it turns out, is not between God and Nineveh, but between God and his pathetic prophet. The climax of their conflict happens when Jonah is thrown into the water and, for a brief moment, the audience wonders whether he will live or die. Indeed the people of Nineveh are so cooperative that what is found in the city can only termed a climax because of its comedic effect. While Simon deems a comparison between the prophets of Nineveh and Jerusalem unfair he is still impressed by the surprising relationship between Jonah's prophetic effort, or lack thereof, and his societal results. Isaiah walks around naked for three years in an utterly unsuccessful attempt to get Judah to stop cooperating with the Assyrian leadership. (Isa. 20: 12) Jonah, however, utters only a few words without any appeal to signs, wonders or melodrama and, much to his surprise, a foreign city abandons its evils ways.[176]

Whereas Simon agrees with all of the scholars that we have reviewed that the scene with the Ninevites is humorous, he passionately argues that the humor is not one of satire. The audience does not laugh in mockery or ridicule at Jonah or Israel. Laughter is evoked by the simple fact that these Ninevites are so quick to accept Jonah's word and the mandate of Israel's God. We laugh at the Ninevites because we don't expect them to be so amenable. Thus, according to Simon, the humor of the Book is not intended to deride Jonah or Israel but rather to act as a *mashal*, helping people to make an analogy between the Ninevites actions and their own: if these people, of all people, can listen to God's message and atone for their misdeeds then so can Israel. The story is a lesson in humility, inspiring the audience to repent, rather than shaming them into believing they have squandered their chance to change.[177]

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[176] Ibid, pp. 11–12.
[177] Ibid, pp. 11, 16-17

Those of the satiric school assert that the inclusion of Ninevite animals and livestock in the acts of fasting and wearing sackcloth is pure slapstick. What could be more ridiculous then forcing dumb animals to join their masters in their acts of contrition? For satirists, the zoological element of the text serves as further proof of the mockery and ridicule contained within it. Simon concedes that viewing the animal inclusion as slapstick is a viable interpretation, but he also brings substantial proof to argue that the matter is more complicated than we might have first expected. Theologically, Simon questions whether or not the penitence of the animals further contributes to the idealization of the Ninevites repentance, or if it only makes it appear all the more ludicrous.[178]

Given the wondrous speed and comprehensiveness of the Ninevite response to God's message, the addition of animals to their penitential program could well be designed to further enhance the immediacy and all inclusiveness of their miraculous repentance. Hence, the King's animal edict may really serve to illustrate the commendable piety of the Ninevites. On the other hand, however, Simon points out that instead of seeing the Ninevites repentance as ideal, Rabbinic literature has seized upon the ludicrous potential of animal repentance as part of a defensive homiletic agenda to undermine the authenticity and integrity of the Ninevites.[179] The Talmud Yerushalmi Ta'anit 65b states: "The Ninevites said if you are not going to have pity on us, we are not going to have pity on them (our beasts).[180] Here the Ninevites emerge as vindictive people who take out their frustration at God by abusing their animals. Another Midrash, offered in the same vein, teaches as follows:

> Rabbi Shimon Ben Levi said: 'The people of Nineveh did a repentance of cheating.' Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta said: 'They put the young calves inside and the mothers

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[178] Ibid, pp.16-17.
[179] Ibid, p. 70
[180] Ibid.

of young calves outside. They put the donkeys inside and their mothers outside. This caused a wild bleating from both sides." [181]

In this Midrash, the rabbis seem to be trying to prove that the Ninevites tears weren't really genuine but contrived, involving the manipulation of innocent animals. Simon, however, rejects this type of interpretation believing it is defensive, ahistorical and insupportable. Simon asserts that throughout scripture in general, the Book of Jonah included, there is evidence of a pervasive cultural belief that the lives and fate of humankind and the animal world are inseparably related to each other.[182] "Not only is it the case that because of the evil of mankind the beasts and the birds were sentenced to annihilation during the flood, but the saving of mankind was linked to the saving of creatures. Even the cessation of God's punishment was dependent upon humans and animals alike:"[183] God "remembered Noah and *all the beasts* and *all the cattle* that were with him on the ark … and the waters subsided." (Gen. 8:1). In other instances, the biblical text is deliberate in its language, stating that animals, as well as humans, are effected when theological warnings are ignored and geo–political conquests are made. (Jer. 27: 6). In Psalms, we find it clearly stated that salvation is not exclusive to humankind: "Your justice [is] like the great deep, man and beast you deliver, O Lord" (Ps. 36:7). If both humans and beasts can be saved by God, then why can't they both repent to Him? Should Nineveh be overturned, both human beings and beasts will be killed and therefore the people have no reservations about forcing their animals to take part in the penitential fast. In addition, the Book of Judith makes explicit reference to a fast in which animals are not allowed water or pasture (Jud. 4:10–12), and the Book of Joel depicts animals calling out to God for relief: "the very beasts cry out to You: for the water courses are dried up and fire has consumed the pastures and the wilderness." (Joel 1:20).[184] Seen in this context, Simon argues, the words of the King are

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[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid, p. 70.
[184] Ibid. Simon makes all of these biblical citations in furthering his argument.

not ludicrous but part of a highly rational and reverent program: "No man or beast — of flock or herd — shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth — man and beast — and shall cry mightily to God." (Jon. 3:7–8)

After building a foundation for his argument by citing these examples from sacred texts, Simon supports his assertion further by highlighting historical evidence to bolster his claim that the Ninevites inclusion of animals was serious, admirable, consistent with a pattern established in the ancient world. Making the animals put on sack cloth and ashes seems to signify that they are joining their masters in mourning. Simon regards the inclusion of animals as a significant mandate, especially considering the fact that the works of Herodotus and Plutarch[185] both provide evidence that there was an established tradition in which the beasts of illustrious officers took part in such acts of "mourning" as an element of their funeral rites. In the ancient world and even in some cultures and contexts today, beasts of burden such as horses and elephants are often decked out in highly ornamented regalia as a display of power and wealth. Just as the citizens of Nineveh must doff their everyday and/or fancy dress, and don the "costume" of mourning, so too their animals must do the same.[186]

Furthermore, Simon notes that while some aggadic sources, like those cited earlier, contend that the Ninevites used their animals to engineer a false wailing to evoke God's mercy, this does not reflect an unanimous opinion within Rabbinic literature. Ibn Ezra actually refutes this assertion. He states that the language of the text indicates that only human beings were crying out. Ibn Ezra bases his reading on the fact that while the word *ish* (man) occurs twice in Jon. 3:8, the word *behemah* (beast) is only used once. Hence, he argues, the repetition of the word "man" is used to clarify that while both man and beast

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[185] See *Herodotus*, 9.22–24 & Plutarch. "The Life of Alexander," 72. (Simon, pp. 70–71 & Sasson, p. 255)
[186] Ibid, p.71.

fasted and wore sackcloth, only human beings cried out to God and only human beings were supposed to "turn back from" their "evil ways." (Jon. 3:8) [187] In addition, Simon argues that the assertion that God could be fooled by the Ninevites ploy to get their animals to wail for them, creative as it may be, goes against the fundamental tenant of classical Jewish belief that God is omniscient. Based on his close reading of a number of sources, therefore, Simon states that the inclusion of animals into the reverential-program of the Ninevites is comic only in so far as it reveals yet another dimension of their intense piety and it should not be understood, as the satirical scholars have done, as the bafoonish practice of a ridiculous people.[188]

Jonah passes up numerous opportunities to explain his rationale for running away from God. He does not offer any explanation for why he buys his ticket to sail away to Tarshish. (Jon. 1:3) Although, Jonah tells the sailors that the storm was occasioned because of his disobedience, he does not tell them *why* he was disobedient, or *why* he ran away. (Jon. 2:10–12) Even when he is in the belly of a whale, or as he believed, on his way to the holy Temple of the Lord, Jonah does not ask God for His forgiveness, nor does he explain the reasons for his callous actions. (Jon. 2) It is not until chapter four, when the Ninevites repent and God forgives them, that the audience is given any clue about the motivations for Jonah's actions.

In fact, part of what makes Jonah's response to the Ninevites repentance, and God's forgiveness of them, seem so bizarre and melodramatic is that we learn of his emotions before we hear of his reasoning. First the text tells us: "God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out." (Jon. 3:10) Immediately the text alerts the audience to Jonah's emotional state: "This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved." (Jon. 4:1) After we hear of his emotions, we are finally enlightened about why

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187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.

Jonah has tried so hard to evade God and why he will be so sad for the rest of the narrative. Jonah's disobedience and depression is spurned on by the fact that he knows God to be "compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness," and last, but certainly not least, "*renouncing of punishment*." (Jon. 4:2) Jonah is aware that God wanted to pardon the people of Nineveh from the very beginning and he believes that God's judgment in this matter is highly mistaken. It is only now, when his fears have been realized, that Jonah breaks from his stoic silence and, crying out in anger, tells God and the audience that God's merciful nature is the reason why he "fled to Tarshish." (Jon. 4:2) It is here that the comic and tragic nature of the Book comes to a climax. Jonah actually disapproves of one of God's most admirable and awesome qualities. He even assumes a vigilant position, desiring God to punish others but pardon himself. Jonah even has the *chutzpah*, if you will, to remind God of a conversation that they supposedly had back in Israel. He says: "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country?" (Jon. 4:2) To offer a brutal paraphrase, he actually has the audacity to tell God: "I told You so!"

Simon sees Jonah's thoughts and feelings throughout this final chapter as reflective of the prophet's desperate need to retain his self-righteous attitude in an act of defiance because he is convinced that God's mercy for Nineveh is unjust. Jonah's posture of protest produces profoundly ironic results. In chapter three, for example, the word *ra'ah* is used twice in verse 10 to convey both "the evil" that the Ninevites turned away from and "the punishment" that God chose not to bring upon them. (Jon. 3:10) The word *ra'ah* is used again, in the same context, by the prophet when he articulates the reason for his disobedience, i.e. that God is one "renouncing of punishment." (Jon. 4:2) Jonah also seizes upon the verb *ra'ah* to express his outrage and grief, *wayera'*, And Jonah "was displeased"(Jon. 4:1). According to Simon therefore, *ra'ah*, which is "Jonah's term for a terrible injustice" is doubly ironic. It expresses "how the anger from which God had

relented, now becomes" the sentiment which the prophet embraces.[189] The state of "evil," *ra'ah,* which was "removed from Nineveh," along with the impending "punishment," *ra'ah,* which they were spared by God, "comes to lodge in Jonah himself."[190] Jonah now embodies a great sadness, a great depression, *ra'ah gedolah*, which consumes him, which is "terribly upsetting to him."[191] According to Simon, the repetition of the root *r'h*, implies that part of Jonah's presumptuousness lies in his assumption and misuse of God's language to advance his own self-righteous position. Jonah fails to see how the city of Nineveh has benefited from the same attribute of Divine forgiveness as he did when he was saved by God's fish. He is happy to be the beneficiary of such merciful treatment, but he fails to see how his redemption in and from the whale's belly should make him empathetic, rather than belligerent to the people of Nineveh.[192]

Rather than rejoicing with the people of Nineveh, who like him have received the Divine gift of mercy, Jonah feels as if he can't distance himself from them enough. In fact, he can't even bear to reconcile living if this requires doing so in a world that tolerates the Ninevites existence as well. Jonah can't get far enough away from them spatially and so he asks to be moved away from them existentially: "Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (Jon. 4:3) In Simon's view, Jonah's plea for death is consistent with his tendency throughout the Book to deny the wisdom of God's will. Trying to sleep during God's storm is his way of denying its importance, power and meaning. (Jon. 1:5) So too, by pleading for death, he tries to escape the fact that God has decided to save the people of Nineveh. To Jonah, this truth of God's great compassion is too unjust a reality to be suffered. He would rather die than live in such an unjust world and as subject to such unjust God. In the Bible, asking for death is not all that unusual a request. Even Moses asks for death when he is endangered by his leadership duties (Num. 11:15), and the

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[189] Ibid, p. 75.
[190] Sasson, p. 272.
[191] "Terribly upsetting" is Sasson's translation of the phrase: *ra'ah gedolah.* See p. 270.
[192] Ibid. p. 75.

prophet Elijah, whose story resonates with Jonah's in many places, asks God for death when he unable to convince his listeners to turn away from their evil idolatrous ways. (I Kings 19:4–)[193]

The satiric school seizes upon the highly ironic contrast between Elijah and Jonah to support the claim that the audience is intended to see Jonah a melodramatic oaf who lacks the wisdom to appreciate what he has accomplished. We can all sympathize, on a basic human level, that someone like Elijah might want to die because of an utterly overwhelming failure. While we might see such a desire to die as melodramatic, we can still empathize with it as being a perfectly natural reaction to one of life's defeats. Jonah's desperate plea for death, however, seems utterly irrational and absurd when compared to Elijah's. Jonah is a man who has just done the impossible; as a foreign prophet he walked into Nineveh and with a five word message, utterly unsupported by fancy miracles or dramatic artifice, inspires an entire city to repent and save itself. He accomplishes what no other Biblical prophet does. He gets people to listen to him on his first try. And yet, he is thoroughly miserable. Jonah's great sadness over his tremendous success is intended to be thoroughly ridiculous.[194]

Simon, of course argues to the contrary. While he agrees with the Satirists that the association with Elijah is intentional, he argues that its purpose is not to deride Jonah but to honor the prophet and "make him [appear] sublime."[195] Morally, the two figures, Jonah and Elijah, are linked by their passion for justice. Psychologically, they are connected by a shared tendency to identify with and invest themselves entirely in their prophetic work., even if it takes Jonah a while to get his act together. When they realize that they can not fulfill their function as they had planned, their lives as men, seem to them to have been utterly wasted and meaningless.[196]

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[193] Ibid. p.76–77.
[194] See: Miles, Mather, & Good, among others.
[195] Simon, p.77.
[196] Ibid.

> In Jonah's eyes, his suffering at the responsiveness of the Ninevites was no less [painful] than the suffering of Elijah at the deafness of Israel. Indeed, Elijah attributes his failure to his unsuitability to serve as a prophet. And so, God has to constantly buttress him up and reassure him. Jonah, however, casts the full responsibility for his hopeless success on God. Consequently, God has to weaken Jonah and shake him up, [so that he can assume a proper position of humility and perspective on the world]. [197]

Elijah asks for death because he can not convince his people that they are wrong. Whereas Jonah asks for death because he can not convince his God that He is wrong.[198] God provides a storm and a whale in an effort to force His prophet to obey His orders. Once that is accomplished, God provides a plant in order to teach the prophet a lesson in both compassion and justice. Denied the opportunity to protest God's orders in practice, asking for death is Jonah's way of protesting His mission in principle. The vast discrepancy between Jonah's success and his sadness is indeed ironic and even funny. The parallel with Elijah makes the Jonah story all the more humorous because it amplifies his total intensity and seriousness, not his absurdity. What makes Jonah's wish for death so funny and so empathetically recognizable to the audience are the lengths to which he will go simply to prove he is right.[199]

Since his wish for death is not granted, Jonah grudgingly settles for placing a physical distance between himself and the city. His move to a place east of Nineveh marks his final attempt to runaway. Once again the prophet is alone, having separated himself from the signs of God's power present all around him. (Jon. 4:5) He tried to separate himself from the storm and the sailors by going to sleep. (Jon. 1:5) Now he attempts to separate himself from the penitence and salvation of the city by walking away from it. Unlike his resolution to go to Tarshish, or his agreement to go to Nineveh, this third

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[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid.

"move" receives no Divine approval or disapproval. Jonah simply decides to get out of town and God allows him to do so without comment or interference. While this act may appear to contain no explicit meaning on the surface, Simon posits that a closer reading reveals that Jonah's exit from the city is not as innocent as it may initially seem.[200] The evidence, Simon claims, lies in the use of the word *mikedem*, eastward. Jonah's rebellion against God began by his shipping-off for Tarshish, the furthest known point to the west. Now, his pathetic refusal to acknowledge God's justice is represented by his leaving Nineveh and heading towards the east. "Just as the word Tarshish is mentioned three times in one verse, (Jon. 1:3) here too, Jonah's renewed rebellion is expressed by the repetition of the word of the word *'yr*, city, namely the city of Nineveh, to which Jonah remains close. (Jon. 4:5)"[201] The irony in this passage is twofold: despite all that transpired, Jonah still clutches desperately to his futile rebellion against God's mercifulness; and Jonah's need to leave the city, yet still look upon it epitomizes a transformation in him which involves two contradictory impulses. Firstly, Jonah does not want to see the penitent city pardoned from all punishment. But, secondly, he seems to want to witness this miracle of their absolution, all be it from a distance: Jonah "made a booth there and sat under it in the shade, until he should see what happened to the city." (Jon. 4:5) It may be that he wants to watch only so that he can tell later God how wrong He is for being merciful.[202] Jonah is still simply too self righteous and too presumptuous to give up on saying to God, "I told you so."

Simon is hardly the first commentator to pick up on the strange image of Jonah starring down upon the city which he deplores. The medieval commentator Rabbi David

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[200] Ibid, pp. 77–78.
[201] Ibid. p.78.
[202] Ibid. pp. 78-79 To use a modern image, Jonah's posture here is like a zealot who tells his/her followers not to read a certain book or see a certain film because it is blasphemous or offensive. One wonders, of course, how someone can say this unless they have seen the "offending piece" for themselves. If they have not seen it, then how can they judge? If they have seen it, then who are they to prohibit from others from doing the same?

Kimhi (Radak) offers an interpretation that Jonah's reason for gazing at the city is that he hopes that if he watches carefully enough he will discover that the Ninevites haven't continued their repentance. Radak invites the reader to imagine Jonah straining and squinting simply to catch sight of some Ninevite sin or misdeed that he can use as proof to allege the erroneousness of God's mercy.[203] We have already noted that Jonah retains his rebelliousness when he goes west and when he goes east, he goes to the literal extremes to try to put a type of distance between himself and God. However, his desire to look on at the events in the city, is the inverse of his refusal to see what was happening during the storm. Although the actions are opposites their meaning and motivation are the same; in both instances Jonah refuses accept that God's plans are wise and inescapable.[204]

For Simon, the image of Jonah as the vigilant prosecutor and accusing fault–finder of Nineveh summons up an interesting contrast with Abraham as the staunch defender and negotiator for Sodom. Both men, he points out, have the special courage to argue with God. Yet Abraham does so on the side of mercy, while Jonah does so on the side of punishment. What makes this contrast even more intriguing is that neither Abraham, the defender, nor Jonah, the prosecutor, ultimately succeeds in convincing God to change His mind. Abraham is perhaps a bit naive, in God's opinion, about the true character of the people he tries to defend, but in the end he accepts God's decision with maturity. Jonah, however makes the mistake of being so passionate about justice that he fails to understand the need to temper it with mercy and compassion. His failure to see the import of compassion is highly ironic, considering that the prophet himself has benefited so much from this Divine attribute. The fact that God continues to put up with Jonah, despite his stubborn, and hypocritical stance is emblematic of the compassionate manner through which God ultimately silences the prophet's arguments, enabling him to rediscover a love

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[203] For citation see: Simon, p. 78.
[204] Ibid, p. 78–79.

for life. God orchestrates the swift life and death of the gourd in order to teach Jonah the importance of mercy and the love we should feel for all that lives.[205]

The lesson of the gourd, in Simon's view, represents not only the peak of Jonah's rebellion, but also the beginning of his repentance.[206] Simon puts particular emphasis on the way in which the gourd is introduced into the narrative. The "huge fish" (Jon. 2:1), the "gourd" (Jon. 4:6), the "worm" (Jon. 4:7), and the "sultry east wind" (Jon. 4:8) are all introduced by the word *wayeman*, and God "provided." The word is used to describe the way in which God "appoints" things, like props and special effects, to further and ensure His plans. God also "casts," *hetiyl*, a "mighty wind," and a "great tempest," as signs of his incredible power (Jon. 1:4).God directs the storm and the fish in order to make sure that Nineveh will get its fair chance at repentance, despite the reticence of His rebellious prophet. Now, as we reach the conclusion of our tale, God also provides "these various creatures and natural forces to bring the fleeing prophet back to Him." [207]

Though Jonah is through with his active resistance to God's will, he has certainly not parted with his posture of protest all together.[208] In Simon's view, the main implication of Jonah's thrice stated desire for death (Jon. 4:3, 4:8-9) is a continuation of the prophet's wish to escape from living life with God.[209] Having already discussed Jonah's initial request for death (Jon. 4: 3), with an eye to how it contrasts with that of Elijah, Simon returns to I Kings 19:4 to underline yet another important distinction between these two prophets. Unlike the petition of Elijah, the second of Jonah's three requests for death is no direct addressee (Jon 4:8).[210]

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[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid, p. 81.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid, p.84.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.

> In this [second] request, the rebellion of Jonah reaches the peak that precedes its waning. This time Jonah is not silent as he was on the boat, nor does he express his rebelliousness at the same level as he did after the pardon of Nineveh. Here instead he reflects and pleads for death without turning to or addressing God, who has already responded to his [first] request negatively. [211]

Simon regards God's refusal to grant Jonah his wish as doubly ironic. Normally we might think that the prayers of a prophet carry a special weight. Yet whereas God grants the petitions of the sailors (Jon. 1:14-15) and the Ninevites (Jon. 3:10), the request of the runaway prophet is repeatedly revoked, in a seemingly uncompassionate way.[212] On the other hand however, God's negative response is consistent with His merciful tendency to preserve life, since the petitions of both the sailors and the Ninevites involve their survival, and those of Jonah involve his death. As we have seen with other commentators, Simon regards Jonah's depression over the death of the plant as decidedly inappropriate. The repetitive wording of God's queries, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jon. 4:4, 4:9), in regard to Jonah's bouts with anger serves to highlight the pathetic nature of Jonah's frustration. Simon draws particular attention to the fact that while Jonah refused to answer God's challenge to his anger about the pardoning of Nineveh (Jon. 4: 4), the prophet provides a particularly vocal reaction when God questions his depression over the plant. (Jon 4:9). By ignoring the question about Nineveh, yet responding to the one about the gourd, Jonah reveals that the "truth be told, the salvation of Nineveh was not as important for him as the loss of the plant. He himself admits that the multi–dimensional assault on the order of justice in the world did not anger him as much as this assault upon him." He was pained more by the perishing of the plant than what he perceived to be a travesty of injustice.[213]

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[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.

Likening Jonah's despair over the gourd to His own concern for Nineveh is God's final attempt to make the prophet see the absurdity of his position. Simon points out that God is remarkably generous in making an analogy between His own relationship with Nineveh and Jonah's relationship with the gourd because they are, in actuality, very different in a number of ways. Firstly, there is a great discrepancy between the amount of work which has been put into these respective relationships. Whereas Jonah has done nothing to sustain the plant, (Jon. 4:10) God, The Creator, is the parent and sustainer of all that lives, and the city of Nineveh is no exception. Secondly, there is a tremendous distinction between the duration of Jonah's relationship with the plant and God's with Nineveh. While Jonah has barely enjoyed this plant for a single day (Jon. 4:10), God has been concerned about the well–being of Nineveh for an inestimable length of time. Thirdly, there is a significant difference between the benefit which Jonah derives from the plant and which God derives from the city. Jonah loves the plant because it provides him with shade (Jon. 4:6), God has no such physical needs and therefore does not derive any material benefit from the Ninevites, or anyone else for that matter.[214] God's comparison, in this regard is overwhelming. Time investment, labor investment and the unconditional nature of His relationship with the Ninevites all support God's claim that they are deserving of mercy, yet the prophet expects God to have no regard for the life of Nineveh, while he agonizes over a plant. The implication of God's analogy, therefore, is that mercy is not simply derived from sympathy or pain, but moreover because there are certain things or relationships which one can not bear to lose. Despite the overwhelming differences between the relationship of Jonah and his plant and God and His city, there is an underlying similarity. Just as Jonah feels sorrow over the loss of the plant, so too, God would feel sorrow were Nineveh to be lost.[215] The comparison between the plant and the city ironically overturns Jonah's self–righteous resentment of Divine mercy by

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[214] Ibid, p. 84-85.
[215] Ibid, p. 84.

demonstrating that the prophet's criterion for caring are far more irrational and bizarre than are those of God.

Simon's analysis of the way in which God describes the Ninevites, the recipients of His hotly disputed Divine mercy, differs greatly from the commentators surveyed in the rest of this piece. Simon disagrees with those who argue that the Ninevites inability to distinguish their right from their left implies that they are deficient in their moral and ethical understanding because they are Gentiles. (Jon. 4:11) Simon points out that were this true it would be inconsistent with the way in which Gentiles are depicted throughout the rest of the Book. Indeed, both the Sailors and the Ninevites are shown to be intelligent, responsible, and penitent.[216] For this reason, Simon aligns himself with the medieval commentators who argue that "not knowing right from left" does not refer to the entire Ninevite population but rather to the Ninevite children, who have yet to reach the age of reason and can not, therefore, be held accountable for their actions.[217] This non-culpability of children, Simon posits, is a well documented concept in biblical literature. When God angrily tells those who believed the reports of false spies that they will not be allowed to enter into the land, He exempts their children from this punishment because "they do not yet know good from bad" (Deut. 1:39). What is more, Simon argues, Scripture also implies that before one reaches adulthood, not only can a child not recognize the difference between good and bad, but that children are essentially incapable of doing evil (Isa. 7:15-16).[218]

I find this reading problematic and inconsistent. If the lesson of the gourd is God's way of demonstrating the ineffable nature of His mercy, then why would the text limit the scope of His mercy to include only children? And, if it is true that God is only concerned

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[216] Ibid, p.86.
[217] Ibid, p. 86–87. Simon cites Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Radak in order to support this assertion about the Ninevites.
[218] Ibid.

for the children, then why doesn't He save the children and punish the parents, as was the case in the passage from Deut. 1:39, which Simon cited as a proof-text?

The people of Nineveh are righteous in their immediate pursuit of repentance, but even the All Merciful acknowledges that they have been evil. (Jon. 1:2) Asked to present a defense of why He is so forgiving in the face of such wickedness, God diplomatically softens his terminology from the harsh and explicit accusation that Nineveh is wicked to a gentler, more metaphorical assertion that Nineveh is intellectually or morally challenged in that they "do not yet know their right hand from their left." (Jon. 4:11)

Just as Simon advocates a serious understanding of the inclusion of animals in the rites of fasting and mourning,[219] so too he argues that God's decision to spare them is meant to be taken with equal sincerity. Simon suggests that God's inclusion of the animals, completes a merism, a figure of speech in which the mention of two polarities is used to express a totality. Hence, God's intention is to pardon every living thing, from the citizens of Nineveh right down to their animals (Jon. 4:11), and his use of the words, "adam … u'behemah," persons and animals, is used to express the whole entirety of life.[220] By running away and begging for death, Jonah's protest against God effectually becomes a rejection of his own life. With His final question, "And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are … persons and animals?," God reminds the prophet about the preciousness of all living creatures "in order to restore Jonah to his full human existence," and to his relationship with God.[221]

Simon articulates an understanding of the Book of Jonah as a work of compassionate irony, a piece in which the deep theological concerns and struggles of the prophet are expressed by his pathetic posture throughout much of the narrative. Simon's perspective on the Book, in contrast to Miles, Mather, Good, and Ackerman seems

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219 Ibid, pp. 70-71.
220 Ibid, p.87.
221 Ibid.

distinctly concerned with finding a reverential way to approach the text and to glean its messages. He is uncomfortable with interpretations of Jonah which emphasize mockery and humor above theological sincerity and struggle. Simon makes some very important points, from my perspective, especially with regard to reading the Book in a religious context. However, I believe that Simon's interpretation of the Book, in an effort to treat it reverentially, fails to see how humor can in fact lead to and complement reverence, not simply take away from its sincerity.

~ A Portrait of a Runaway Prophet:

Jonah as a Romantic Comedy ~

In this chapter I will endeavor to present a personal reading and interpretation of the Book of Jonah. Like those who see it as a parody, farce, or satire, my reading of the text is based on the notion that Jonah is a comedy. While I have said that I disagree with Simon's assertion that Jonah is not the subject of any ridicule or mockery, I am impressed by his argument that the irony of the Book ultimately restores the prophet to himself and to God. I suggest that the Book of Jonah is a romantic comedy and as such it can be both comic and tragic at once. The magic of romantic comedy is that it employs the various genres of humor — satire, farce, parody, and compassionate irony — in order to create a literary context in which conflicts are borne out, but are always eventually resolved in a way that allows love and laughter to flourish. Ultimately, I believe that interpreting the Book of Jonah as a romantic comedy can help us to arrive at a reading that is both comic and reverential, recognizing both the humor and the seriousness of the text.

In presenting this hypothesis I will be drawing on a number of diverse sources and texts. William Whedbee's work on the "Comedy of Job" provides the basic foundation for my own reading of Jonah as a romantic comedy. While Whedbee does not discuss romantic comedy as such, instead he likens Job to Greek love comedies of its era, [222] I believe that the criterion he establishes for defining comedy are applicable to any lovers'

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[222] William Whedbee, "The Comedy of Job," *Semeia* 7 1977.

story. Whedbee articulates a "vision of comedy which has two central ingredients: 1) its perception of incongruity and irony; and 2) its basic plot line that leads ultimately to the happiness of the hero and his restoration to a harmonious society."[223] To some extent elements of Whedbee's understanding of comedy resemble the definitions of comedy which Miles, Mather, Good, and Ackerman articulated. What makes Whedbees's criterion different is not so much their content as it is their context. For when the comic ingredients of irony, incongruity, and reconciliation are found within the context of a love story, our understanding of what makes the Book of Jonah so funny undergoes some interesting changes.

A number of scholars have pointed out the resonances between the plays of antiquity and the stories and structures of the Bible. Because I am far more familiar with the comic love dramas of Shakespeare and Moliere, than with the playwrights of antiquity; whose structure and plot lines they often borrow, I will be drawing on their work to elucidate humorous situations in the Book of Jonah from a romantic perspective. Strictly speaking, scholars of Shakespeare use the term romances "to express the character of his last four plays: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*."[224] While this study refers to none of these plays, the Book of Jonah and Shakespearean comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, share certain features common to the above four works, formally regarded as "romances." These shared elements include "extravagance of incident;" "an ordeal undergone by the main character;" and an "emphasis on reconciliation."[225] By calling the Book of Jonah a romantic comedy I do not mean to infer that it is historically linked to Romanticism or Romance literature. Rather, I will be using the word "romantic," to provide a contextual

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[223] Whedbee, p. 1
[224] Marion Wynne–Davies, ed. *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989) p.856. Written at the end of his career, these "romances" are regarded as more philosophical than other Shakespearean comedies.
[225] Ibid pp. 856-857.

frame of reference for how the form and content of the Book of Jonah dramatically enlarges and then resolves a conflict between two parties who love each other. I also believe that "romantic" is a fitting term to describe the tendency of Jonah to be highly fanciful, imaginative, and theatrical.

Before embarking on a scene by scene analysis of the Book of Jonah based on this hypothesis, I would like to begin by pointing out how even the prophet's name is symbolic of the romantic relationship he has with God. In all but a few instances the word Jonah in the Hebrew Bible means "dove." In The Song of Songs both the male and female lovers refer to their beloved as "my dove" (Songs 2:14, 5:2, 6:9). Biblically, the dove is portrayed as a creature given to moaning and complaining (Is. 38:14, 59:11 & Ezek. 7:16), a characteristic that is certainly present in the prophet as well. Furthermore, the dove is used to represent not only an individual but an entire people. For example, the people Israel is referred to as a silly dove: Hosea laments that "Ephraim has acted like a silly dove with no mind" (Hos. 7:11). Jonah, as we have seen, definitely has a tendency to be silly and act without careful consideration of the consequences. Hence, I am suggesting that the prophet's name was intentionally chosen with these romantic and silly images in mind because they are emblematic of his character and of his relationship with God. Jonah loves God and is beloved by God. Yet he is given to moaning and silliness, as comic lovers often are. In addition, the fact that prophet's name can also refer to an entire people, indicates that Jonah himself is model of human behavior and relationships; we see this, for example, in his tendency to be judgmental about the evil of others, while being self–righteous enough to be blind to his own faults.

One of the things that is revealed by reading the relationship between God and Jonah as a romantic one is that it helps us appreciate the many roles that both of them take on in the course of the narrative. Both of them play roles which are part of the classical genre of romantic comedy. Sometimes God resembles a firm, yet wise and merciful ruler. (Jon. 1:2, 3:10 & 4:6–11) At other times, He seems like a scorned suitor who pursues the

object of his desire with anger and indignation. (Jon. 1:4–16) In still other instances, God appears to be like the cunning comic character who uses theatrical ruses to save the day. (Jon. 4:5–11) So too, God's prophet also resembles a number of the genre's prototypes. Jonah is the rebellious lover who runs away from authority. (Jon. 1) He is the pompous, self-important fool, who makes an ass of himself because of his false assumptions. (Jon. 2) The prophet is the unrelenting stickler for justice who wants other people to be punished. (Jon. 4) And Jonah is the silly, yet adorable person, who is ultimately able to gain perspective on life. What is equally intriguing is that God and Jonah sometimes exchange roles depending upon who is experiencing a particular emotion at any given time. Over the course of the drama both God and Jonah take turns resembling the parental and/or legal voice of the comic father and/or ruler who wants to exert his will over that of his child, or those he regards as antagonistic. (Jon. 1:1–4, 3:1–2 & 4:1–2) Both God and Jonah play the lover who does strange and wild things that the other regards as mean or spiteful. (Jon.1:3, 1:4, 2:1–2, 2:11 &4) And God and His prophet also play the lovers who are finally reconciled after their journey through conflict and difficulty. (Jon. 4:11)

The initial conflict that serves to ignite a romantic comedy is a battle of wills between powerful authorities and those they rule. This conflict, between the commands of authority and the personal desires of individuals, serves as the opening scene of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The law of land, as decreed by the Theseus, Duke of Athens. Theseus, would force Hermia to marry Demetrius, whom she does not love, instead of Lysander whom she does. Helena, meanwhile, loves Demetrius, who does not love her. Hermia's father, Egeus, and Theseus represent both the power of parental will and the power of the state to reinforce it. These powerful men have seemingly little interest in or sympathy for what the young lover's want. The law is the law and their power is absolute — as is the harsh penalty for disobedience, death. According to convention and law, Hermia owes her father Egeus total love and total obedience. Hermia

and Lysander, of course, see things rather differently from these domineering figures and traditions. The Duke and the father, who have such disregard for their feelings are insensitive and cruel, and must be escaped. Therefore, Hermia and Lysander resolve to flee to the woods where they will be safe from the law and powers which forbid their love.[226]

The Book Jonah begins in a similar way. God, in this romantic comedy, is a multidimensional character who takes on many roles. The Almighty at once acts as both the ultimate voice of authority and as Jonah's Beloved. In His role as ruler, God exercises His right to command His prophet to go forth to Nineveh (Jon. 1:2). God, like the Duke and father, seems to be totally uninterested in how the prophet feels about this task. He is not in the habit of asking His prophets whether or not they like their mission, and Jonah's case is no exception. God expects that His prophet Jonah will go to Nineveh simply because He has ordered the prophet to do so. From Jonah's perspective, however, the situation is not so simple. The prophet reveres God, but the Almighty has commanded him to do something that is utterly antithetical his nature. Jonah is does not rebel simply for the sake of rebelliousness, but because he can not face the prospect of preaching to the audience of stupid Ninevites whom he hates.

Alas for the runaway lovers and the runaway prophet, we discover that Authority is not so easily escaped. The law, as it turns out has a long arm indeed! Hermia and Lysander reach the woods, but so too does Demetrius, who will not give up his love for Hermia, nor his claim to the power of Athenian law to secure her as his bride.[227] So it is with Jonah. He has succeeded in sailing away in the exact opposite direction of where he was commanded to go, but God, the law giver, and God, the lover, are intent on taking the wind out of Jonah's sails (Jon. 1: 4). With the tempest, God asserts his power and his anger at the prophet's unlawful and unloving abandonment of his commission. God

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[226] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1967) I.i.ll.22- 167.
[227] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i.ll.188-190.

commands not only Jonah's obedience to His laws, but He also demands that Jonah love Him "with all [his] heart, with all [his] soul, and with all [his] might." (Deut. 6:5) God was spurned by His runaway prophet and the storm serves as abundant evidence that He feels deeply betrayed by His beloved prophet, who owes his Creator complete love and loyalty. Hence, Jonah is like Hermia in his disobident and impetuous flight. The ironic twist of romantic comedies is that the character who flees in the name of love— either with a lover, like Hermia with Lysander, or because of the love of an ideal, like Jonah's commitment to strict justice — always ends up running away from someone else who really loves them as well. Hermia tries to leave her loving, even if difficult, father, and Jonah tries to leave his loving, even if domineering, God.

The genre of romance also helps us to reconceptualize the role and the behavior of the sailors. Romantic comedy loves to use characters like these seamen to sustain our sense of surprise and suspense. The magic of the sailors is that they refuse to conform to the audience's expectations. In this regard they resemble the Outlaws of *Two Gentleman of Verona*, who aid the play's hero, Valentin, despite the audience's expectation that, as convicts, they will rob and slay the "noble" protagonist. To the audience's surprise, they discover in the course of the Outlaws' conversation, that these much feared men, like Valentin, have unjustly been betrayed by friends and fortune, and what's more they are not amoral vagabonds but they actually practice their trade within certain ethical limits.[228] The same basic principle holds true for the sailors. The storm and the game of lots have left Jonah at their mercy (Jon. 1:4–7). Having been designated as the root of their predicament, our expectation is that the sailors will loose little time in thrashing the prophet to death and throwing him overboard with violent curses. Yet, the heathen sailors are not what we expect; as in Shakespeare's *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, an unlikely dialogue ensues in which these possible piratesque idolaters take a keen interest in the seemingly irrelevant

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228 William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.(London: Penguin, 1968) IV. i. ll.1-76.

topic of Jonah's background *before* they ask the pressing questions of what he's done to get them into this mess, and what must be done to get them out (Jon. 1:8–11). When Jonah tells them to throw him overboard we might expect that the sailors would jump at the chance. Yet, as fortune would have it, these sailors are anything but bloodthirsty pirates. So opposed are they to fulfilling this request that they try to get close enough to shore, so that the prophet can swim to dry land. (Jon. 1:13) The sailors figure that if they "row hard" enough, they can get Jonah to a safe place and they will no longer be caught up in the tempest he has brought upon them. Only when this attempt proves bootless do they abandon their efforts and cast the prophet overboard (Jon. 1: 12-15). Thus, like Shakespeare's outlaws, these seafaring idolaters seem to have ethics and values that are actually quite admirable.

Jonah's audience expects that the scene we will move from these strange seamen to find out what happened to the prophet. But once again our expectations are not met. We do not hear about Jonah's fate until another verse later. It seems that Jonah's author so loved these sweet sailors that he couldn't resist leaving the audience with the image of the sailors making sacrifices to God in praise and thanksgiving (Jon. 1:15-16). Our suspicions confounded we are forced to laugh at ourselves for holding such peaceful, righteous, and pious men in such low esteem.

Before I take my leave of these seaman I feel obliged to point out a few more things about them. Strangely enough, despite all the good things we can say about them, these sailors have a serious fault. What is more, theirs is a fault that is strikingly similar to the sin of the man they try to save. Like Jonah, the sailors refuse to accept what God commands them to do *immediately*, without hesitation. Like the prophet, their futile attempts to runaway from the sea storm, seem to imply that they somehow "know better" than does God. Rather than promptly throwing the prophet overboard they try to get him, and/or themselves, back to shore. (Jon. 1:13) This is utter folly, for they have been informed by Jonah that his God rules sea and land. (Jon. 1:10) As long as they have Jonah, these men

are doomed. Their efforts to avoid throwing Jonah into the sea exhibits the same foolishness that Jonah demonstrated in his attempt to escape God's order by sailing for Tarshish. (Jon. 1:3) The ironic part about this common disobedience, however, is that the sailors arrive at their decision to defy God through precisely the opposite reasoning than that of Jonah. The prophet rejects the Almighty's orders because he wants nothing to do with God's deliverance of Nineveh, a vast city with thousands of people. (Jon. 4: 1-2, 11) The sailors, on the other hand, defy God's instructions because they care so much for human life that they are prepared to risk their collective fate to save the life of a man who has brought them to the verge of death (Jon. 1:13-14). In the end, these brave seamen receive a measure of poetic justice for their noble concern. For rather than causing Jonah's death, their casting him overboard leads to Jonah's salvation in the belly of the whale and ultimately, by extension to Nineveh's deliverance as well. Without these lovable sailors, who toss the prophet into the sea against their will, no one in our tale would have been saved. They are, in a sense, Jonah's teachers. The sailors show their passenger that a reluctant obedience to God's will is far better than none at all.

The prophet's Psalm is a continuation of the outlandish surprises and wild incongruities we have witnessed already. As all of the commentators have noted, what is expected in the song is a penitent lament full of repentance and remorse.[229] Instead Jonah's Song from the belly of the whale is reminiscent of how romantic comedy exploits the self-importance and vanity of a foolish character who erroneously mistakes his situation for something it is not. In *Twelfth Night* the target of this comic scenario is Malvolio, a self-important and self righteous Puritan steward, who is duped into thinking that his employer, Countess Olivia, desires him passionately. Through the ruse of a forged letter, the other servants on Olivia's staff trick Malvolio into dressing, speaking, and acting in

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[229] Every scholar who I have cited in this paper has discussed the incongruity between the song of lament which is the audience anticipates, and the song of thanksgiving which is actually performed.

ways that are totally inappropriate to and incongruous with his station. He flirts with, teases and prompts Countess Olivia with "quotes" from "her letter," until she becomes so agitated by his words that she orders her other servants to get him some professional help.[230]

Malvolio's situation seems highly reminiscent of what Ackerman asserts about the tenor and nature of Jonah's Song. The prophet presents a Psalm of Thanksgiving to his Beloved based on a series of erroneous and self–important assumptions. Firstly, in no way do God's actions, that He "provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah," represent God's answer to Jonah's pleading call, as he believes it is: "In my trouble I called to the Lord, And He answered me." (Jon. 2.3) God saves Jonah because he has a job for him to perform as His prophet. If God responds to any plea here, it is that of the sailors who "cried out" to God asking that they not be responsible for "killing an innocent person." (Jon. 1:14) Secondly, the prophet has no idea of where he is, namely in the belly of a whale. It is his arrogance and self-centerdness that allows him to delude himself into thinking that some special vehicle takes him from the depths of Sheol to God's Temple. (Jon. 2:3–8) This self–delusion leads to Jonah's third shallow assumption, namely that he is going to Jerusalem to make a sacrifice, when, in fact, God is saving him in order to send His prophet to Nineveh, where he should have gone in the first place.[231] From this perspective, Jonah's Psalm reveals the words of a self-aggrandizing fool, who easily deludes himself into assuming an arrogant tone based on an erroneous understanding of how others truly regard him.

In addition to pompous fools with inflated ideas of themselves, love comedies also provide us with fools who flourish through folly. The genre of romantic comedy delights in dramatizing the tremendous success of fools despite their seemingly overwhelming ineptitude. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the audience encounters Bottom and his

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230 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968) III. iv. ll.16-64.
231 Ackerman, p. 222.

partners, who are perhaps the poorest performers on the planet.[232] They are as inept at performing tragedy, as Jonah is at performing prophesy. Yet both the prophet and the players succeed despite themselves, even though the outcome of their work is exactly the opposite of what they are trying to achieve. The Mechanicals want to perform a tear jerking tragedy, which is a parody of Shakespeare's own *Romeo and Juliet*,[233] in honor of the Duke's wedding day. Theseus knows that these morons will fall on their faces and he selects them for that very reason. Theseus, as it turns out, has a wonderful, albeit nasty sense of humor. An astute theater goer, Duke Theseus knows that even a brilliant comedy is nowhere near as funny as a bad tragedy.[234] Indeed the Mechanicals performance is so awful that it leaves everyone in hysterics. The Duke and the rest of the audience are delighted with Theseus' bold, inspired choice of amusement.[235]

Jonah's long awaited message to Nineveh plays itself out in much of the same way as the Mechanicals' performance. Even by the time Jonah begrudgingly acquiesces to God's second command that he prophesy to Nineveh, the prophet still seems to hope, in his heart of hearts, that if he mumbles the mighty message as minimalistically as is possible, then he can honestly claim to have fulfilled the letter of God's command, while sabotaging its spirit. (Jon. 3:1–5) Jonah does his utmost to fail. He says five words. His message has no accusation, no argument and no artistry. He does not even bother to introduce himself or his God by name (Jon. 3:4). In short, this puny prophesy is purposefully pathetic. Yet, despite himself, Jonah meets with a stupendous success, which is so sudden and so surprising that it seems as if we have been slapped silly. Lo and behold, despite the utter ineptitude of the speech, every single soul stops what their doing

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232 *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* V. i.ll.56-81.
233 Ibid V.i.ll.108-138.
234 Ibid. V.i.ll.89-105.
235 Ibid. V. i.ll.118-352. One point of clarification: while the Mechanicals have a vibrant sense of imagination, which seems to make their performance a success, Jonah seems to have no imagination. In this regard, Jonah is distinct from the Mechanicals but the fact that both Jonah and the Mechanicals fail to achieve their goals, and in so doing are successful is the foolish rubric of romantic comedy which I sought to highlight in this comparison.

and responds to this subversive servant of a foreign Sovereign with complete solemnity and total seriousness (Jon. 3:5). Like Bottom and the Mechanicals, Jonah's serious intentions meet with comically incongruous results. With his unwilling warning he wins every heart, human and beast alike. (Jon. 3:7-8)

The miraculous nature of Jonah's success includes Nineveh's King as well. The unanticipated behavior and/or judgments of a ruler are also basic ingredients of romantic comedy. An audience's fundamental assumption about monarchs is that they will always defend their own power above everything else. Changing one's mind or humbling themselves before a foreign power is totally antithetical to a Royal character. For monarchs to act cooperatively and even submissively to another's rule, could potentially undermine their own power by making them look weak or uncertain. Rulers are supposed to stick to their guns and never give in to anyone. Romantic comedy, however, delights in contradicting this practical, real world assumption. The happy ending, the reconciliation between the needs of the individual and the law of Authority, requires the ruler to reverse himself or, at least, our expectations of him. Both Theseus and the King of Nineveh do precisely that, making for a laughable and joyful conclusion.

Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, out for his morning stroll, coincidentally accompanied by Hermia's angry father, discovers the silly lovers sleeping on the ground. Egeus reminds the lovers about the Athenian law and tells them that their time is up: "I beg the law, the law upon his head. They would have stolen away, they would, Demetrius, Thereby to have defeated you and me — You of your wife and me of my consent."[236] After Hermia's and Lysander's wild night in the forest, authority reasserts itself with seemingly tragic implications. Demetrius, however, informs the Ruler that he has given up his claim for Hermia and now loves Helena. That being the case, the Duke

[236] Ibid. IV.i.ll.152–158.

swiftly overrules the power of Hermia's father and permits her to marry Lysander.[237] Love has triumphed!

The King of Nineveh's behavior is highly reminiscent of his Athenian colleague, Theseus. Nineveh is Israel's arch enemy. They are the most powerful nation, a "great" and "enormously large city." (Jon. 3:2–3) As was noted earlier, Hebrew prophets have a dismal record of abuse at the hands of their own rulers. God only knows what will happen to Jonah at the mercy of a foreign one! By telling us how large the city is, the biblical author artfully reinforces the audience's fear and dread of Nineveh's people and its ruler.[238]

Surprisingly, As it turns out, the Ninevites and their ruler are not at all what we expected them to be. Everything about Nineveh seems to be utterly upside-down. Note the order and way in which things happen, for instance. Normally the King sets a standard or a practice of behavior which is then followed by his subjects. In this crazy town, however, its the other way around. The King takes his cue from his subjects. The text tells us about the people of Nineveh's reaction first: "The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, great and small alike put on sackcloth." (Jon. 3:5-6) We might have expected that the King would tell his people to ignore this funny prophet from a foreign land and assert his power by pronouncing a prompt pullback from their penitent posture. One would think the King could ill afford to have his people listening to Jonah when they ought to be listening to him. But the opposite proves true. Like, Theseus, the Ninevite ruler gives in to the instinct of his subjects rather than imposing his will upon them. The people begin their repentance and then "when the news reached the King of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes." (Jon. 3–7) By exchanging his royal robe for sackcloth and his mighty throne for ashes, the King clearly

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[237] Ibid. IV.i.ll.126-180.
[238] Good, pp.47-48.

demonstrates that, under the circumstances, at least, penance is more important to him than power (Jon. 3:6).

Additionally, the King's own decree is a further extension, in three main ways, of the radical incongruity at work within the narrative. His words seem absurd on every level. Firstly, as Mather points out, the purpose of the edict seems primarily aimed at granting a royal blessing to what people were already doing (Jon. 3:5-8).[239] Perhaps, this act is the last remnant of the King's regal ego asserting itself. The King hopes that by joining the fast and officially endorsing it that it he can somehow keep it under his control. Secondly, the decree is ridiculous considering the extent to which he tries to expand upon the penitence that people are already performing. Perhaps the King's addition gives him the sense that he is contributing an original element, a broader scope, and a greater intensity to the communal repentance already underway. Possibly he tells himself: "If the trend of the day is repentance then obviously I have to look more penitent than everybody else." The way in which he accomplishes this objective, however, is totally ludicrous. While Simon is correct in that in the Bible animal life and human life are linked, he can not actually cite any biblical evidence to show that animals are ever obligated to fast or mourn.[240] Numbers 29:7-11 describes a day of atonement on which human beings are required to fast, cease from labor and make sacrifices. While there is an animal role in this — in the place of the sacrificial offering — it can hardly be regarded as similar to the human one. In Numbers, animals are the means by which an human owner's atonement is acquired. Animals deaths do not represent repentance for their own sins. Indeed, even when an animal is destroyed for taking human life, it master is held accountable as well. Even when animals do terrible things, the Bible does not use the word "evil" or "sin" to describe their actions. (Ex. 21:28–35) Hence, when the King of Nineveh orders animals to participate in the acts of repentance, it seem that he is simply upping the ante so that he can assuredly save his soul

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[239] Mather, p.282.
[240] See Simon, p.70–71

and his ego at the same time. True, from a purely technical point of view, the King also adds the actions of "crying mightily to God and turning back from evil ways." (Jon. 3:8) But these actions are hardly original since crying out and refraining from evil are the logical, emotional and practical extensions of mourning and penitence. The third main way in which incongruity is evident in the King's edict is the theological comment and question with which he ends his decree: "Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish. (Jon. 3:9) This theological aspect of the King's behavior suggests that while he may be trying retain a measure of regal importance, the Ruler's response to the prophesy is essentially unassuming and sincere. He does not guarantee that these penitent actions will merit success but he earnestly hopes that God will take note of the Ninevites response and that He will turn back. There is an element of absurd irony in the King's philosophical tone. Kings are supposed to do a bit more than just hope for success. We expect them to take decisive and powerful steps to ensure their goals. They are supposed to make promises, not pray for miracles. Normally the King would end his decree by stating the consequences for disobeying his word. But the Ruler of Nineveh can not close his proclamation this way because any threat of punishment would be redundant. Given the prophet's threat of total destruction what more can the King possibly add? Therefore, rather than ending his edict with an emphatic exclamation point, the poor monarch is forced to finish it with an equivocal question mark. (Jon. 3:9)

All this comedy not–withstanding, the King's actions carry some serious implications as well. The Ruler's surprising responsiveness, and his readiness to accept God's word, serves as a foil to the rebellious prophet. Furthermore, his decision to heed Jonah's warning, when he could have easily had him killed, foreshadows the mercy that Nineveh receives from God, who could destroy the city at will.

In contrast to these graceful rulers, whose flexibility and generous mercy wins the day, romantic comedy also provides us with sore losers intent on spoiling it. Such sore

losers have some interesting common traits. They generally have a very strict, unchanging definition of justice. They insist on others being severely punished. And they are so concerned with getting their way that they fail to see the self–destructive implications of their arguments. Consider our friend Egeus in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, the angry father hauls his daughter before the Duke because she will not do what he says.[241] Yes, the law is on his side, but what about what Hermia wants? Does she not deserve some consideration as well? And besides, is not Egeus taking his power a bit too far? Surely a disobedient daughter who loves you is better than a dead daughter can not, or even an obedient one, who will resent you for the rest of your life.[242] But the law is the law and Egeus wants it immediately enforced. Caught in an ugly situation, Duke Theseus wisely bides for time and grants Hermia a day to think over her choices. Four acts and infinite laughs later, Egeus has not changed a wit. What he does not know, however, is that Demetrius *has* changed and no longer wants to marry his daughter. Egeus interrupts Lysander's account of all that has taken place and demands his version of justice once again, this time demanding that Lysander be killed for kidnapping his daughter![243] Poor Egeus, his position never changes and he fails to see how destructive his accusations actually are. If Lysander were to be killed, Hermia, Egeus's own daughter, would forever be miserable, and an innocent man would be slain for nothing. Ultimately, however, the true irony of Egeus's argument is that it reveals that he is ignorant as to what love really is. Even if Egeus could force Hermia to marry Demetrius, he could never force her to love him.

Jonah, Like Egeus is a sore looser. He runs away from his commission because he fears God will be merciful with the people of Nineveh rather than punishing them (Jon. 4:2). According to the prophet's sense of justice Nineveh deserves no mercy and he

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241 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i.ll.22-30.
242 Ibid.
243 Ibid. V.i.ll.153-158.

certainly does not want to be a part of giving it to the them. Just like Egeus, Jonah never relents on his claim on a true understanding of justice. Indeed, the prophet even has the audacity to tell God: "See, I told you so!" Jonah, like Hermia's father, fails to comprehend the self–destructive consequences of his position. If Nineveh deserves no mercy, then neither does he. His responsibility as a prophet is to preach where and what he is told, yet he willfully attempted to shirk his responsibility by sailing away (Jon. 1:1-3). Instead of squashing him, however, God grants the runaway prophet salvation and a second chance. (Jon. 2:1, 3:1-2) Therefore, lesson of the gourd which happens at the end of the Book, should be completely unnecessary because Jonah should now better by that point in the story. Jonah's deliverance from the whale's belly should have taught him that God redeems sinners out of His sense of mercy and that forgiveness, both Divine and human, is a wonderful thing. But it seems that Jonah thinks that mercy should be reserved for him alone, and that Nineveh should be punished according to a strict sense of justice. The same mercy which God grants Jonah, and Jonah happily accepts, is the very same mercy which Jonah despises when it is granted to Nineveh. He fails to see how similar he is to the Ninevites in deed and in name. Like the people of Nineveh, Jonah has sinned. The name of the prophet and the name of the city contain the exact same letters, Y–W–N–H and N–Y–N–W–H. Yet despite the striking similarities, the prophet refuses to see that the Ninevites are human as he is.

Rather than taking pride in his accomplishment at causing these sinners to change their ways, the prophet begs God for death. Much has been made of his morbid request. While I agree with those who see Jonah's death wish to be absurd in and of itself, I believe that the request reveals a more serious existential and theological message as well. Like the readiness of Egeus to assert the sad fate of his daughter and/or her lover, Jonah's wish to die is a reminder of the tragedy that lies latent within the conflicts of comedy. The statement that he would rather die than live in a world where Nineveh is pardoned is truly a powerful

testament to the depth of Jonah's self–righteousness and his simultaneously comic and tragic inability to learn from his past mistakes.[244]

As the unrelenting sore losers lash out against the world, the audience resumes wondering, even if only briefly, whether the lovers and their antagonists are beyond any hope of ever working things out. Fortunately, romantic comedy artfully produces brilliant ways of getting its malcontents out of their rut. The purpose of the gourd pericope is to help Jonah regain, or perhaps develop, a mature perspective on life, and, as Simon says, return the prophet to himself and to God.[245] Romantic comedy loves to resolve conflicts by presenting stubborn characters who stumble into reality checks in the form of crafty and theatrical ruses, which facilitate the restoration of harmony between these foolish characters and those who love them.

Moliere, in particular, delights in ending his plays with this type of reconciliation. In *The Imaginary Invalid*, the protagonist Ardin is a ridiculous, hypochondriac, who is so absurdly self-absorbed and devoid of common–sense that he willingly allows himself to be swindled by his physician, and cuckolded by his wife, while disowning his loyal daughter because she will not marry the quack he has chosen for her.[246] It takes a brilliant ruse, concocted by Toinette, the family maid, to make Ardin snap out of his pathetic position of self–pity. By getting her employer to play dead, Toinette shows Ardin who truly cares for him and who is brazenly leading him on to get his money. Empowered his new knowledge, of his allies and enemies, Ardin drives the fakers out of his home and gives his daughter and her suitor his blessing.[247] Once Ardin gains perspective, his actions ensure that happiness and truth can triumph over misery and deceit.

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[244] Mather, p.283.
[245] Simon, pp. 86-87.
[246] Jean Baptiste Poquelin Moliere, *The Imaginary Invalid*. Merrit Stone, Trans. (New York: Samuel French,1939) Act III, p. 68.
[247] Ibid. pp. 68-72.

The short but dramatic existence of the gourd facilitates a similar life lesson for Jonah. The progression of the ruse is more subtle than Toinette's, but it is still a highly manipulated game with a completely calculated conclusion. Indeed, the lesson is so seamlessly designed that it allows Jonah to play two parts at the same time. Like Ardin, Jonah plays along and learns from the ruse, while simultaneously being taken in by the game, like the invalid's deceivers. Jonah's playing along is evidenced by the way he takes to the gourd immediately. Rather than being suspicious or afraid of this miraculous gourd that springs up ex–nihilo, the normally skeptical prophet is delighted by the plant. (Jon. 4:6) Just as the sudden "death" of Ardin, tricks the fakers into revealing their true feelings with irrevocable force, here too, the sudden death of the gourd prompts the prophet into exposing his deficient and shallow notion of what really matters. (Jon. 4:7-9) Indeed, as Good points out, the gourd is the first living entity in the story Jonah for which the prophet takes a stand.[248] His pro–gourd position reveals the absurdity of his thinking. How can Jonah blame God for His passionate, even if absurd, love for human beings, when the prophet is so moved over a gourd? Or, to put it another way, if Jonah thinks that God's pardoning Nineveh is foolish, perhaps the prophet should consider the wisdom of grieving over a plant?[249] Just as Ardin learns that he is not really sick, Jonah learns that his definition of justice is not really just. Both these men of folly recognize that their eccentric way of thinking has made them needlessly miserable and anti-social. Ironically, in his song, Jonah speaks ill of those "who cling to empty folly" and in so doing "forsake their own welfare," when it was really his own running away and his own "empty folly" which has caused him to "forsake" his "own welfare." (Jon. 2:9) The imaginary illness and the Godly gourd provide the protagonists with new–found insight; both Jonah and Ardin come to the realization that their view of humanity has been highly mistaken. Thus disabused

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248 Good, pp. 52-53.
249 Ibid.

from their self–righteous anger, Ardin can now return to an affectionate relationship with his daughter, and Jonah is now free to revere and love God as he should.

While the denouement of Moliere's play explicitly details Ardin's transformation and reconciliation with others, the case for Jonah's accomplishing this romantic feat is presented implicitly and with great subtlety. Nevertheless, I believe that if we are ready to read closely and listen carefully, we can demonstrate that this reconciliation is precisely what the text is trying to communicate to its audience. We know that Jonah has changed because he stops acting according to his typical manner.

In chapter one, Jonah hates God's command so much that he attempts to runaway. (Jon. 1:3) In chapter two, Jonah is so haughty that he mistakes the entire context of his deliverance, speaking to God like a cocky lover, rather than as a penitent supplicant. (Jon. 2) In chapter three, Jonah is obedient, but still so resentful of God's command that he can barely stand to get God's message out of his mouth. (Jon. 3:4) And even throughout most of chapter four, the prophet sits around sulking about how awful God's mercy is. (Jon. 4:1-9)

Finally, after the game of the gourd, Jonah stops protesting, stops running away and stops talking back. God too has changed. Rather than picking on the prophet and exposing him to further ridicule through His wild surprises, God invites His prophet, His dove, His beloved, to laugh *with* Him. Our author not only wants to ensure that God gets the last word, but that God *and* Jonah can share the last laugh. "And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?!" (Jon. 4:10-11)

The subject of the text's last joke is not Jonah, but the Ninevites. While it is true that God has granted His mercy upon them, it hardly exempts the Ninevites from being the topic of an occasional joke now and then. As many of Jonah's modern commentators have pointed out, the Ninevites are as ridiculously overzealous in their penitence as Jonah is in

his self–righteousness.[250] The sight of fasting beasts, dressed in sackcloth and ashes is just too hilarious for God to resist. Just as Theseus invites the runaway lovers to join him in a little amusement at the Mechanicals uproarious tragedy,[251] so too, God invites His runaway prophet to join Him in laughing at the comical city and its buffoonish beasts. (Jon. 4:10-11) Just as Jonah learns to think more generously of Nineveh, let us try to think graciously of him. Our text provides us with no clue as to how Jonah responded to God's last line. Let us lovingly imagine that after this pregnant pause, Jonah burst out laughing, adding his great guffaws to that of God, his Beloved.

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[250] Good, p. 49; Mather 282; Miles 176-177.
[251] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.ll.27-41.

~ Humor and Prayer: An Epilogue ~

Thus far my thesis has employed a literary critical approach to elucidate and explore various readings of the Book of Jonah. My discussion of the Book of Jonah would be lacking were I not to consider the setting in which the text is traditionally chanted in a Jewish milieu. Unlike Shakespeare's plays which may be read and performed at any point in time, the Book of Jonah is linked to a specific sacred time within the Jewish calendrical and ritual system. To study Jonah simply as a work whose meanings transcend the particulars of time is to fail to examine an important dimension of its life as a text, its place within a liturgical context which itself endows the Book with special meaning. I place this discussion, of Jonah's life as a text, in an epilogue because it is not one which I can finish in these few pages but rather one which I hope to explore, both in theory and in practice, in my life and work as a rabbi, an artistic and spiritual vocation which I will begin in earnest upon the completion of this project.

The pages which precede these are focused upon the comedic dimensions and implications of the Book of Jonah. Perhaps the greatest irony of the Book's life is the fact that this comedy is chanted on the most serious and sacred of days within the Jewish year. The Book of Jonah is traditionally read at *mincha*, the afternoon service, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The parallels between the Book of Jonah and the rituals and theology of Yom Kippur have been noted by scholars and sages for centuries.[252] Just as

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[252] "We can not tell … how far back in Jewish history the Book of Jonah began to serve as *haftarah* for the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; It is certainly enforced

the Book of Jonah focuses on the image of the Ninevites repentance through fasting, and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes, so too Yom Kippur is a day entirely devoted to Israel's self–affliction and atonement. Jonah's affirmation of the Holy One's nature, as "a merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing of punishment" (Jon. 4:2), is precisely the language repeated throughout the liturgy of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. Just as Jonah recognizes these attributes in God, Israel is to acknowledge them, on the most holy of days and sacred of times. Like Jonah, and the people of Nineveh, who are blessed recipients of God's abounding mercy, the Jewish people pray for God's mercy and forgiveness at the time of Yom Kippur. How, then, are we to reconcile the literary critical understanding of Jonah as a comedy with the powerful and somber associations evoked by the "awesome and dreadful"[253] day on which it is read?

I conclude with personal interpretation of how we may take the comedy of Jonah into the liturgical space and theological time of Yom Kippur:

As the final reading from scripture for the High Holidays, the Book of Jonah elaborates on the liturgical themes of the season. God's majesty, remembrance, and revelation are omnipresent. God gives the orders: commissions the prophet, raises the storm, sends the whale, pardons the city, and plants the gourd. The people of Nineveh quickly heed God's message and atone. Yet, despite this seriousness, the narrative can also be regard as a comic rendering of the testing motif at the heart of the Binding of Isaac

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when the Babylonian Talmud states, 'On the Day of Atonement … at *minhah* [afternoon service] we read the section of forbidden marriages [Leviticus 18] and for *haftarah*, the Book of Jonah.' By Philo's days (early first century C.E.), it had come to be customary among Jews to spend the Day of Atonement in a synagogue, fasting and beseeching God …. Today, prayers run seamlessly into prayers until late in the afternoon. A few minutes after reading the full text of Jonah, worshippers reach the 'Closing of the Gates' devotional just as God seals the fate of individuals for the coming year. The surcease that God allots sinful Nineveh gives worshippers hope that they too will partake of divine mercy." (Sasson, p.28)

[253] *Unetaneh tokef*, a prayer attributed to Rabbi Amnon of Mayence and chanted as part of the High Holiday liturgy.

narrative, which we read on Rosh Hashanah. While Abraham tests God with his obedience, Jonah tests God through his disobedience. While Abraham speaks to God with diplomatic reverence, Jonah talks to God like a troubled adolescent. Indeed, given the prophet's behavior, God's patience with him is so great that it borders on the absurd. Just as Father and Son spent three days to reach Mt. Moriah, Jonah spends three days in the belly of the whale before he reaches out in prayer to God. Just as God spares Isaac from death, so too, the All Merciful pardons the city of Nineveh, which was doomed for destruction, and keeps granting the runaway prophet another chance. Despite the fact that these stories share much in theme and motif, the Binding of Isaac leaves the audience trembling at the tension between God and family which can never be fully resolved, while the Book of Jonah, in contrast, leaves the audience rolling in the aisles, smiling at God's sense of humor and at the absurdity of Jonah, who represents all humankind. On Rosh Hashanah we begin an intense period of repentance, focusing on our shortcomings and misdeeds, by Yom Kippur we reach the climax of this process, seeking forgiveness and seeking to forgive. Yet as we reach the end of Yom Kippur and we participate in the reading of the Book of Jonah, rather than regarding ourselves as hopelessly devoid of merit and imperfect, the Book reminds us that our faults are human, and as humans we have the potential to change and to learn.

We fast on Yom Kippur because a full stomach makes for sleepy mind. We subject our bodies to hunger so as to ensure that we will be particularly attentive to the prayers and stories which fill our mouths and ears. Fasting is intended to help us maintain a serious and somber frame of mind. Yet, our Sages also teach us that we should rejoice and be happy in the opportunity for atonement that Yom Kippur provides. The Rabbis chose the Book of Jonah for this day, and for this service, to make sure we didn't loose our sense of humor, just because we've been fasting and praying all day. The Rabbis knew that they could not give us a snack, so they decided to fill our bellies with the laughter the Book of Jonah can provide.

It isn't easy to keep our sense of humor on a day like Yom Kippur, but the challenge makes the effort all the more worthwhile. It isn't easy to keep one's sense of humor in Yom Kippur's sacred hour, when we are about to begin the Yizkor service and recall our loved ones, who are no longer with us, but perhaps the comic nature of this story can help us to recall the joy we shared with them while they were with us. It isn't easy to keep our sense of humor when we feel we have been wronged, but a little bit of laughter may help us put things in perspective. It isn't easy to keep our sense of humor when we know that we must ask the forgiveness of those we may have hurt; But perhaps, the Comedy of Jonah will give us the humility to try.

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