Reading Jonah Backwards: Reconsidering a Prophet's Repentance

STEPHEN COLEMAN

Abstract

The portrait of the angry, bitter prophet that concludes the book of Jonah has long proved difficult to reconcile with the seemingly repentant and obedient prophet who earlier had praised God from the belly of the great fish before fulfilling his divine commission to bring the word of God to Nineveh. This article considers the rhetorical purpose of these disparate portraits by interpreting Jonah's acts of piety through the lens of the concluding depiction of the prophet entrenched in his hardhearted rebellion. There is an irreducibly prophetic purpose to this ironic portrayal of a wayward Israelite prophet who gives praise to God with his lips only later to reveal that his heart is far from him.

Janet Howe Gaines captures something of the abiding appeal of the book of Jonah when she says, "The story of Jonah is simple enough to delight a child and complex enough to confound a scholar."[1] One of the many complexities of this short book that continues to confound scholars centers on the character of the prophet Jonah himself. Jonah, of course, is infamous for his rebellious flight from God and his divine commission to proclaim God's word to the

[1] Janet Howe Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma*, SBLSBL 5 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 8.

Ninevites. Jonah's dialogue with the Almighty that concludes the book reveals a similarly rebellious spirit, as the prophet stridently objects to God's extension of mercy to Ninevites, an objection which is even more reprehensible in light of the mercy Jonah himself had received in the form of a great fish.

In between these two acts of rebellion, Jonah's flight (ch. 1) and Jonah's dialogue with God (ch. 4), two episodes are often interpreted as somewhat mitigating this otherwise dim portrait of an Israelite prophet. In chapter 2, Jonah utters a prayer from the belly of the great fish, a prayer that is remarkable for both its theological profundity and its rhetorical force. This prayer is commonly understood as an expression of the prophet's repentance—which, whatever lingering issues he may have with God, is nevertheless genuine contrition. The prophet's obedience to his divine commission to preach to Nineveh recorded in chapter 3 is seen as confirmation of his repentance.[2] It stands in stark contrast with his earlier flight from the divine presence and is therefore understood by some as signaling a change of heart toward God, if not toward his commission.

These central episodes have led interpreters to treat Jonah as a somewhat more complex character, one who throughout the narrative repents and demonstrates the fruit of repentance in his obedience, yet one who continues to struggle with the mysteries of divine justice, mercy, and sovereignty. This reading essentially places the interpretive weight in the center of the narrative, chapters 2 and 3, and understands its conclusion, chapter 4, in light of its center.

However, this interpretation sits uneasily with the portrait of Jonah that closes the book. Is the embittered Jonah of chapter 4 noticeably improved from the fleeing Jonah of chapter 1? Is Jonah's anger with God defensible or even understandable, and, if so, on what grounds? Unsurprisingly, the two portraits of Jonah have proved difficult to reconcile.[3] At the risk of oversimplifying, one could say that the central chapters present a positive picture of a prophet humbled, grateful, and obedient, while the bookends

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[2] This is a very old interpretation (see Cassiodorus below) and continues to have adherents today. Theodore Perry, for example, writes, "Since Jonah, this second time, does react differently—his acceptance of the Nineveh mission in fact indicates a complete about-face—we must seek to understand his change of attitude. … The point of adding *shenit*, 'a second time,' seems an important reminder of one of the book's major themes, that of repentance: God does give a second chance. Indeed, the theme stresses once again that repentance is grounded in God's generosity." Theodore A. Perry, *The Honeymoon Is Over: Jonah's Argument with God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 41.

[3] James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 77.

present a negative picture of a prophet entrenched in his opposition to God and preferring death over service to him.

This article revisits this question of the characterization of Jonah using insights from rhetorical criticism, especially the discipline's emphasis on exploring what one author calls "the practical persuasive power of the texts in influencing action."[4] Specifically, it revisits the question of the prophet's repentance. Is the main character portrayed as repentant, unrepentant, or something in between? One's answer to this question will, to a considerable degree, determine how one understands the book's fundamental message. In terms of method, the rhetorical function of Jonah's prayer from the depths and obedience will be examined in light of the concluding dialogue between Jonah and God, thereby reversing the common hermeneutical approach to the book, which reads the end in light of the middle. The concluding portrait, therefore, serves as the lens through which Jonah's words and actions will be evaluated.[5] Section one of this article sketches the portrait of the prophet found in the opening and closing chapters. Section two then examines his repentance in light of this emergent portrait.

A controlling assumption is that the author of Jonah deliberately juxtaposes these seemingly disparate portraits to better get his meaning across. Considered as a whole, the narrative portrays a prophet who delights in his own experience of mercy but is nevertheless so entrenched in his own notions of divine justice that he is unwilling to let God be God. What then is the reader to make of the prophet's prayer and obedience? The prophet's prayer, it will be argued, should be understood as a good prayer (with regards to its theological orthodoxy as well as its appropriateness to the situation) prayed in bad faith, and the prophet's recommissioning can be seen, on one level, as an expression of God's displeasure with Jonah and by implication his covenant people. The purpose of the narrative, therefore, was to serve as a prophetic warning to and condemnation of Israel. They, like the prophet, were quick to rejoice in their experience of God's merciful deliverances, yet slow to be changed by them in such a way that they would fulfill their calling to be a kingdom of priests and a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3; Exod 19:6).

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[4] Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22–30* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17.

[5] This approach closely resembles other literary approaches to the book. Meir Sternberg, for example, argues that the surprise ending of chapter 4 unexpectedly reveals that Jonah's reticence to obey was not due to his softhearted compassion but to hardhearted hatred for the Ninevites. The reversal of expectations—Yahweh turns out to be the compassionate character and Jonah the judgmental—forces readers to reconsider their understanding of events that had transpired previously (Jonah's flight, self-sacrifice, prayer, etc.). Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 318–20.

I. *Portrait of a Rebellious Prophet*

In the opening verses of the book, the author gives a parodic tone to the narrative. While the divine command is fairly typical, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it" (1:2), the prophet's response is almost humorously atypical, "But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" (1:3).[6] As many have pointed out, the author employs *yrd* (ירד, "to go down") as a leitmotif highlighting the nature of Jonah's flight "from the presence of the LORD." The verb is used to describe Jonah's geographical movement "*down* to Joppa" (1:3), "*down* into [the ship]" (1:3), "*down* into the inner part of the ship" (1:5), and "*down* to the land whose bars closed upon me forever" (2:6). Given the *terminus* of the prophet's downward journey, the prophet's geographical movement "away from the presence of the LORD" symbolizes a corresponding spiritual movement away from God and toward the place of death (2:6). In sum, the initial portrait of Jonah is that of a prophet so deeply averse to his calling to preach to the Ninevites and distrustful of the God who would call him to do so that he would rather die than fulfill this commission.

What about the concluding portrait? The author of Jonah employs a number of literary devices and strategies designed to connect the prophet of chapter 4 with the prophet in chapter 1. One such connection is the setting or movement of the prophet. In chapter 1, Jonah flees from the presence of the Lord, heading west first to Joppa, then toward Tarshish. In chapter 4, the prophet somewhat curiously travels east of the city and makes "a booth for himself there" (Jonah 4:5). Uriel Simon suggests that this

> unnecessary geographic precision is probably intended to present his waiting in the east as an antithetical sequel to his westward flight. The rebel who opted for exile in Tarshish in the far west, now restates his protest by going in the opposite direction: instead of return west and going home, he camps out east of Nineveh in a desperate endeavor to prove that he is right and God is wrong.[7]

As Jonah's flight was cast as a spiritual as well as physical descent to the realm of the dead, so Jonah's hut built east of the city takes on a similarly symbolic significance. It is from here that the prophet will take his stand against the Almighty, arguing his case that divine justice demands retributive punishment.

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[6] Unless otherwise indicated, translations and verse numbers are taken from the English Standard Version.

[7] Uriel Simon, *Jonah*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 35.

Through the use of another leitmotif, *r'h* (רעה, "evil, wickedness, disaster"), the author depicts wicked Nineveh turning from their "evil" (*r'h*, 3:10), merciful Yahweh turning from his "evil" (*r'h*, i.e., the "disaster" he threatened to bring upon Nineveh, 3:10), only to have the prophet Jonah inconsolably consumed by "evil" (*r'h*, 4:1) at the conclusion of the narrative. The intensity of Jonah's displeasure with God is indicated by the grammar (the use of a cognate accusative): "it was *evil* to Jonah, a great *evil*" (*wayyera' 'el-yonah ra'ah gedolah*, וַיֵּרַע אֶל־יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה , 4:1).[8] The prophet's success in his mission to avert evil becomes the source of the prophet's own evil.

In 4:6–11, Yahweh turns his attention from the evil of Nineveh (now remedied) to the evil that has taken root in the heart of his prophet and seeks to ameliorate Jonah's great evil through the object lesson involving the *qiqayon* plant (קִיקָיוֹן). Both the giving *and removing* of shade was designed to "deliver [Jonah] from *his evil* [*mera 'atho*, מֵרָעָתוֹ]" (4:6, author's translation). Tragically, and in contrast to Nineveh, Jonah responds with even greater anger toward God as he says, "It is good for me to be angry unto death" (4:9). The "evil" which began the story, as it were, finds its final resting place in the heart of Jonah.

Also at the lexical level, Jonah's appeal to "my word" (*devari*, דְּבָרִי) in 4:2 stands in stark contrast to "Yahweh's word" (*devar-yhwh*, דְּבַר־יְהוָה) in 1:1. Leslie Allen describes the implication of Jonah's expression well:

> "My word" was correct, claims Jonah, and God's was ill-advised. The egocentricity sets a keynote for the prayer as a whole: "I" or "my" occurs no fewer than nine times in the original. … Appointing himself theological advisor to the Almighty, Jonah pronounces himself completely out of sympathy with divine policy.[9]

In 4:2, the prophet appeals to his earlier word as the ultimate (and now vindicated) standard of justice, and in so doing sets his judgment over against the judgment or word of Yahweh which he was commissioned to deliver.

Moving from the lexical level to the conceptual or thematic level, continuity of character is also seen in the prophet's twofold death wish in chapter 4, which recapitulates his death wish of chapter 1. That the prophet is acting out a death wish in his flight from God is evident from his instructions to the sailors in 1:12, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest

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[8] Translation taken in part from T. Desmond Alexander, "Jonah," in David Baker, Bruce Waltke, and T. Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 126, n. 1.

[9] Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 229.

has come upon you." Jonah would rather die than fulfill his divine commission.[10] Twice in chapter 4, the prophet reiterates his desire to die: "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (v. 3) and "Jonah asked that he might die, and said 'It is better for me to die than to live'" (v. 8; cf. v. 9). If anything, the twofold expression of Jonah's death wish in chapter 4 signals a deeper entrenchment in his anger toward God and his resistance to God's sovereign will to extend mercy to the Ninevites.[11]

The prophet himself connects his complaint in chapter 4 with his earlier actions: "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish" (v. 2). Jonah's motivation for fleeing from the presence of God is deliberately left unstated for narrative or rhetorical effect. While the reader is left to surmise Jonah's rationale for his flight in chapters 1–3, in chapter 4 the prophet himself reveals that his true motivation is rooted in his knowledge of the character (and therefore the likely actions) of Yahweh. Phyllis Trible summarizes the rhetorical effect of the author's gapping Jonah's motivation until the conclusion:

> When in his prayer (4:2–3) hardhearted Jonah belatedly fills the gap, the reader is nevertheless appalled. Jonah accuses and condemns YHWH for being YHWH. He castigates divine mercy to justify himself. His anger attacks God's compassion. Thus he is far more "wrathful" than the reader suspected. His reason(s) for fleeing the command has to do, then, not with Nineveh itself, not with his views about foreigners, but with the very character of God.[12]

The revelation of Jonah's motivation for his earlier flight and its foundation for his complaint in chapter 4 provides a strong connection between these two chapters. This connection suggests that the basis for the prophet's flight in chapter 1 persists as the driving force in his complaint to God.

Finally, the author develops Jonah's character by means of allusion to other biblical texts. In Jonah 4:2, the prophet expresses the motive for his

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[10] George Landes's contention that the prophet did not have a death wish in chapter 1 because the lexeme for "death" or "to die" does not appear is unpersuasive. This is a classic example of the word-concept fallacy. George Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," *Interpretation* 21 (1967): 23. The view that Jonah's death wish in chapter 1 is a continuation of his rebellion and not the first glimmers of a change of heart is based on his twofold death wish in chapter 4, which is clearly a sign of the prophet's rebellion.

[11] To be sure, Jonah's death wish does waver as he recounts in his prayer from the belly of the fish that he had prayed for deliverance (Jonah 2:8).

[12] Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 204. Sternberg observes that the book of Jonah "is the only biblical instance where a surprise gap controls the reader's progress over a whole book." Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 318.

earlier flight and the basis for his present anger: "I knew that you are a gracious [*khannun*, חַנּוּן] God and merciful [*werakhum*, וְרַחוּם], slow to anger [*'erekh 'appayim*, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם] and abounding in steadfast love [*werav-khesed*, וְרַב־חֶסֶד] and relenting from disaster." Jonah's creedal formula clearly invokes Yahweh's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:6: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful [*rakhum*, רַחוּם] and gracious [*wekhannun*, וְחַנּוּן], slow to anger [*'erekh 'appayim*, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם] and abounding in steadfast love [*werav-khesed*, וְרַב־חֶסֶד] and faithfulness." Throughout the Bible, the "name of the LORD" (Exod 34:5) revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai serves as the basis for prophetic intercession (e.g., Num 14:18) as well as the cause for Israel's worship (e.g., Ps 86:5). On Jonah's lips, however, the reader finds a dark parody of conventional usage. The prophet employs the creedal formula neither to stay God's hand of judgment nor to issue praise to God for his compassionate character. Rather, Jonah appeals to God's self-revelation as the basis for his complaint about God's actions. Here, the prophet reveals that the heart of his objection has to do not so much with Yahweh's forgiveness of Nineveh, but with Yahweh's character itself.

Furthermore, many interpreters have seen in Jonah's death wish an allusion to Moses in Numbers 11:10–15 or, more commonly, to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4–8.[13] Having become overwhelmed by the futility, burden, and seeming hopelessness of their God-given tasks, these two towering figures of Old Testament prophetism despair of their lives and ask the Lord to bring them to an end. It should be noted, however, that in neither case is the prophet's despair and subsequent death wish cast in a positive light. For both, it is the result of a profound sense of failure in their ministry. In all likelihood, the point of the allusion in Jonah 4 is not to justify or even mitigate the seriousness of the prophet's behavior, but to portray Jonah as a parody of his prophetic forbearers.[14] Instead of his failure, it is Jonah's success in his prophetic ministry that plunges him into a state of suicidal despair. If Elijah's and perhaps Moses's despair was, if not excusable, understandable, Jonah's is patently absurd.

Jonah stands in striking contrast to other prophets who enter into a dispute with God. Abraham memorably challenged the Lord in his intercession for

[13] The allusion to Elijah is reflected in the Syriac Peshitta translation, which "obtrusively imports Elijah's explanation about not being equal to his fathers." Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah,* AB 24B (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 305. See also, Daniel Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Mission, Salvation and Spirituality in the Book of Jonah*, NSBT 26 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 124.

[14] According to Bruce Vawter, "Jonah's sullen death wish is surely a parody of Elijah's profound discouragement." Bruce Vawter, *Job and Jonah: Questioning the Hidden God* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 51.

Sodom when he asked, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?" (Gen 18:23b–24). Similarly, Moses, on multiple occasions, objects to Yahweh's stated intention to destroy Israel for her disobedience as he does, for example, in the golden calf episode in Exodus 32:10–11. Though ministering after Jonah, the prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk also dispute with Yahweh as they struggle to understand his dealings with his people and their enemies (e.g., Jer 12:1–13; Hab 1:12–2:5). The prophetic dispute with God in its classic form has in view staying God's hand of judgment, even, as with Abraham in Genesis 18, God's judgment against pagan cities. Furthermore, the prophetic dispute typically objects to God's revealed course of action *on the basis of* his revealed character or covenant promises. The prophet reasons that it is precisely because of who God is and what he has promised that he should heed the prophet's petition and turn from his announced course of action (e.g., Gen 18:25; Exod 32:13). In contrast, Jonah's objection is not the inconsistency of Yahweh's course of action with his revealed character, but the consistency of it, again portraying Jonah as a parody of a faithful Israelite prophet.

In sum, the author of Jonah employs an array of literary devices to draw a line of continuity between the prophet who fled from the presence of the Lord in chapter 1 and the prophet who confronts the Lord in chapter 4. What the reader learns about the prophet in chapter 4 fills out the character that was presented in chapter 1 but does not present a fundamental change in his character. If there is any development at all, it is in the direction of hardening and a deepening of the prophet's bitterness and anger. The portrait of Jonah in chapter 4, therefore, is of a prophet entrenched in his conviction that he is in the right and God is in the wrong. These connections force the reader to reconsider the nature of the prophet's words and actions in chapters 2 and 3.

II. *Jonah's Repentance Reconsidered*

If we had only Jonah chapters 1 and 4, the character of the prophet would evidence little by way of development or complexity. As argued above, the Jonah of chapter 4 is presented as an intensified version of the Jonah of chapter 1. Little has changed for the prophet, and nothing has changed for the better. Complexity, however, is introduced with the prophet's words (ch. 2) and actions (ch. 3). It is mostly on the basis of these two realities—the prophet's prayer and his obedience—that the notion of Jonah's repentance has emerged.

Central to the consideration of Jonah's repentance is the prophet's prayer from the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2:2–9). In this prayer, the narrative moves from prose to poetry, and the prophet rehearses his drowning ordeal and celebrates God's gracious deliverance. Formally, Jonah's prayer is an almost pristine example of a psalm of thanksgiving. In contrast to psalms of praise, psalms of thanksgiving commemorate, celebrate, and express gratitude for a *particular* act of divine deliverance.[15] Douglas Stuart notes the following correspondences between Jonah's prayer from the depths and the five-part structure of the prototypical thanksgiving psalm:[16]

Thanksgiving Psalm Structure	Jonah 2:2–9
Introduction to the psalm	Verse 2
Description of past distress	Verses 3–6a
Appeal to God for help	Verse 7
Reference to the rescue God provided	Verse 6b
Vow of praise or testimonial	Verses 8–9

In addition to these formal correspondences, Jonah's prayer is replete with traditional phraseology, images, and expressions. For example, Jonah 2:2 ("I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried and you heard my voice") echoes biblical language and imagery (see Pss 18:7 [= 2 Sam 22:7]; 120:1; 130:1–2a; Lam 3:55–56; Ps 116:3).[17] Similar lists have been compiled for every verse of Jonah's prayer from the depths.[18] Brevard Childs is certainly correct when he describes Jonah's prayer as "a veritable catena of traditional phrases from the Psalter."[19] The psalm is both appropriate to the particulars of its narrative context and

[15] Tremper Longman notes that psalms of thanksgiving flow out of lamentation: "The desire to express gratitude to the Lord for answered prayer is frequently found in the psalter." Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 30. For the classic taxonomy of Psalm types, see Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms*, completed by Joachim Begrich, trans. James Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

[16] Taken from Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, WBC 31 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 472. Bernhard Anderson designates Jonah's prayer as "a good example to guide us in the study of [thanksgiving] psalms." Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 105.

[17] Sasson, *Jonah*, 168–69. Sasson notes that these are simply illustrative and that more passages could be marshalled.

[18] Sasson (*Jonah*, 168–99) offers illustrative passages under his discussion of each verse. See also R. Reed Lessing, *Jonah*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 210.

[19] Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 423.

recognizable as a conventional psalm of thanksgiving that would no doubt have been familiar to the original audience. The significance of this phenomenon will be developed below.

What follows is a summary of a few of the more common ways of relating Jonah's prayer to his character in the surrounding narrative. First, an approach with good pedigree has been to treat Jonah's prayer as an expression of genuine repentance.[20] Commenting on the prayer, the early church father Cassiodorus says, "What an outstandingly and wholly glorious repentance, a humility that experiences no fall, grief that rejoices people's hearts, tears that water the soul! Indeed this depth, which conveys us to heaven, has no inkling of hell."[21] Similarly, John Calvin's judgment is that Jonah's prayer "was a wonderful and incredible example of faith."[22] On this view, the prophet has peered into the abyss of Sheol and has as a consequence learned his lesson, humbled himself before Yahweh, and promised right worship and (by implication) obedience to the divine command in the future.[23]

Naturally, this interpretation requires a more positive evaluation of Jonah's dispute with God in chapter 4 than the one adopted here. One approach has been to interpret Jonah's anger as indicative of his zeal for God's honor and reputation. Jonah is angry that his prophecy in 3:4, "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" would be regarded as a false prophecy and Jonah himself regarded a lying prophet.[24] In this view, the prophet's prayer from the depths is understood as essentially genuine and, as a consequence, the prophet's dispute with Yahweh is at some level an expression of piety (albeit misguided in some respects).

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[20] For a thorough treatment of the history of interpretation, see Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Thomas Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined*, JSOTSup 236 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997).

[21] Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. Patrick G. Walsh, quoted in Alberto Ferreiro, *The Twelve Prophets*, ACCSOT 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 137.

[22] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 3:74. Calvin explicitly denies any hypocrisy in Jonah: "We hence see that Jonah prayed not at random, as hypocrites are wont to take God's name in their mouths when they are in distress, but he prayed in earnest; for he was persuaded that God would be propitious to him" (ibid., 3:75).

[23] More recently, Richard Patterson has adopted this view: "Jonah's repentance and faith would be revealed as the Lord plucked him out of the 'jaws of death.'" Richard Patterson, "Jonah," in Richard Patterson and Andrew Hill, *Minor Prophets: Hosea-Malachi* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 269–70.

[24] This was a standard Rabbinic explanation for both Jonah's flight in chapter 1 and his anger in chapter 4. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 18, 24. This was also, in essence, Calvin's view. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets*, 3:117.

A second common approach to resolving the tension between the prayer and narrative is to attribute Jonah's prayer to a later editorial hand.[25] Speaking of the "insertion" of Jonah's prayer, Bernhard Anderson writes,

> We say "inserted" because the psalm is obviously out of place in its present context. In the belly of a "fish" a cry for help (i.e. a lament) would be appropriate, but not a thanksgiving for deliverance already experienced.[26]

In this view, an editor has inserted the pious prayer of chapter 2 in order to redeem an otherwise irredeemable character and provide a moral lesson for an otherwise morally questionable story. Hans Wolff, for example, describes the rhetorical force of the prayer as follows:

> Thus the interpolator shows readers of the book of Jonah the repulsive picture of the old Jonah over against a new picture—the picture of Jonah the man of prayer and the teacher, who recognizes the foolishness of his backsliding—not least in contrast with the counterpicture of the heathen in chaps. 1 and 3—and who allows the stubbornness of chap. 4 to be overcome by Yahweh's persistent goodness. But what taught him most of all was his rescue from the sea.[27]

The result is a final form of Jonah which offers no resolution to the disparate portraits of the main character. The prayer from the depths, on this view, essentially superimposes a veneer of piety onto the rebellious prophet that is designed to provide a moral lesson to a tale void of didactic value.

A third line of interpretation, and one that is closest to the view adopted here, is to understand Jonah's prayer as in some respect deficient and thus more or less in accord with the general characterization of the prophet as hardhearted throughout the entire narrative. The deficiency of the prayer is typically attributed to the absence of any explicit confession of sin.[28] While admirable in many respects, the prophet fails to get to the heart of the issue, namely his hubris and sinful rebellion. For example, Robert Chisholm says, "Jonah's prayer is surprising. We expect a penitential psalm in which the prophet confesses his sins, but, much to our surprise, he did not acknowledge his disobedience. He simply celebrated his deliverance, boasted of his

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[25] Beginning with Johannes G. A. Müller (1794), Bolin rehearses the history and development of the multiple source theory of Jonah. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness*, 42–53.

[26] Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 105.

[27] Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 138.

[28] See, e.g., Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 52.

superiority to the pagans, and made promises."[29] In other words, Jonah's genre mistake is indicative of his hard and unrepentant heart. However, George Landes has astutely observed that Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving references an earlier unrecorded petition (presumably a lament) in verses 2, 4, and 7.[30] Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving is his response to God's answer to his earlier prayer. As such, Jonah's psalm is perfectly appropriate to the situation.

There is, however, another sense in which Jonah's prayer may be said to be deficient: that is, it may be deficient with respect to the petitioner. Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving may in and of itself be proper and yet Jonah, as the story unfolds, is revealed to have uttered it in bad faith.[31] Though Jonah appears perfectly sincere in his gratitude in chapter 2, the concluding dialogue in chapter 4 reveals that his earlier expression of faith and piety was the result of a great deal of self-deception. As Jonah rails against God, he reveals that he does not really believe his concluding words, "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (v. 9).

This proposal essentially treats Jonah's prayer in the same way as his two other expressions of faith. The prophet responds to the sailors' queries into his identity saying, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9). As mentioned above, in Jonah 4:2 the prophet rehearses the traditional "name of God" revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6–7. In neither instance is there a problem with the theological orthodoxy of prophet's expression. In both instances, the clear problem resides in the heart of the expresser.

Jonah's prayer from the depths may be interpreted in the same manner. The problem with the psalm is not in its orthodoxy or even its propriety; the problem, rather, is with the singer of the psalm himself. In this view, the psalm's traditional phraseology serves to situate it firmly in the stream of orthodoxy, and its genre as a thanksgiving psalm makes it recognizably appropriate for the circumstance (God's prophet is mercifully and miraculously delivered from death). The rhetorical force comes from the irony created by the psalm being sung by this intractably rebellious and hard-hearted prophet.

All three of the prophet's expressions of faith exhibit an ironic element, as Jonathan Magonet observes:

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[29] Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 412.

[30] Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," 15.

[31] I use the term "bad faith" only in its general sense of someone being of two minds or two hearts, with its associations of intentional or unintentional self-deception and hypocrisy.

> [The author] puts into Jonah's mouth certain pious affirmations, that stem from his tradition, yet each comes out in a peculiarly ironic way in its context in the book. The description of God as He who "hath made the sea and the dry land" is ironic since Jonah has fled to the sea to escape his mission. The citing of the magnificent attributes of God, of patience and compassion and mercy, in Chapter 4, is ironic because Jonah hurls these at God in his anger. … So Jonah inside the fish recites his pious Psalm of Thanksgiving in anticipation of being restored to dry land, and in confession of his dependence upon God. Nevertheless we must expect this "psalm" also to have its ironic element to it.[32]

Irony, however, can serve a variety of rhetorical purposes. The primary purpose of the ironic portrayal of Jonah's piety is related to the book's irreducibly prophetic purpose. Specifically, the irony of the Jonah narrative, especially the prophet's prayer from the depths, was designed to expose the hypocrisy that was endemic to the covenant community and to invite that same community to a renewed relationship with Yahweh through repentance.

The traditional language of the prayer contributes, therefore, to its rhetorical force. Childs notes that "Jonah prays in the stereotypical language of the psalms which every faithful Jew had always used."[33] The prophet resembles the people whom he represents, and about whom God says, "This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men" (Isa 29:13). The rhetorical force, therefore, is found not in its deficiency, but in its sufficiency because its sufficiency or conventionality as a psalm of thanksgiving locates Jonah's problem (and Israel's problem) not at the level of external rites, but at the level of the heart. Jonah is uttering what are recognizably correct words, yet clearly, Jonah's heart remains far from God.

That all is not right with Jonah's prayer may be signaled as early as Jonah 2:11: "And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it *vomited* Jonah out upon the dry land" (2:11, emphasis mine). The verb translated "vomit" (*qy'*, קיא) is only used nine times in the Old Testament, three times in Leviticus with reference to Israel's tenure in the promised land. For example, Yahweh says, "You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not *vomit* (*qy'*) you out" (Lev 20:22, emphasis mine; cf. Lev 18:25, 28). Unsurprisingly, vomiting in the Bible is never a positive thing, and it is almost exclusively used in the context of God's judgment on his people (e.g., Job 20:15; Jer 48:26; Isa 19:40). Jonah's climactic conclusion ("Salvation belongs to the Lord," 2:9) immediately

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[32] Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 52.

[33] Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 423.

precedes the notice of this divinely induced vomiting (v. 10) and may therefore stand in a causal relationship to it.

What then is to be made of Jonah's obedience to his divine commission in Jonah 3:1–5? Admittedly, it does seem promising when the text reads, "So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD" (3:3). The lexical parallels in 3:2, "arise, go" (Heb. *qum lekh*, קוּם לֵךְ , cf. 1:2) invite us to contrast Jonah's response to his second commission with that of his first. However, when read in light of the concluding portrait of the prophet, Jonah's obedience appears to be anything but indicative of a prophet chidden, humbled, and submissive to his covenant Lord.

From a biblical-theological perspective, the prophetic ministry to Gentiles under the Mosaic covenant is a complex phenomenon.[34] It is certainly true that the numerous examples of a prophet's extension of grace and mercy to Gentiles signal a partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise that God's blessing would extend through Abraham to the nations: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).[35] This aspect of the prophetic ministry also serves as a foreshadowing of the eventual inclusion of the Gentiles that would characterize the new covenant (Matt 8:10).

This positive message of the prophetic ministry to the Gentiles needs to be balanced with a corresponding negative message. During the Mosaic theocracy, God's extension of grace toward the Gentiles is, in many cases, also a sign of his displeasure with and impending judgment of his covenant people. John Stek observes,

> Still vivid in the memory of Jonah's generation were the dealings of God with Israel in the days of Elijah and Elisha when He had sternly disciplined His people, in part by the sword of surrounding nations, in part by the ministry of the prophets, *and in part by the bestowing special blessings on the neighboring Gentiles*."[36]

To illustrate this last category, Stek cites the following: Elijah's caring for the widow of Zarephath during a famine (1 Kgs 17:8–24), Elisha's healing the leprous Naaman, the Syrian officer (2 Kgs 5:1–14; cf. Luke 4:27), Elijah's

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[34] For a lucid discussion of the covenantal context and content of Jonah, see Bryan Estelle, *Salvation through Judgment and Mercy: The Gospel According to Jonah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 15–27.

[35] I am following the widely accepted translation and interpretation that reads "shall be blessed" (*wenivrekhu*, וְנִבְרְכוּ) as a passive over the reflexive ("all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by you.") For a defense of this translation, see C. John Collins, *Reading Genesis Well: Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 113, n. 22.

[36] John H. Stek, "The Message of the Book of Jonah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 4 (1969): 25, emphasis mine.

anointing of Hazael, king of Damascus, thus giving Syria an even stronger king than Ben-hadad I and one who would prove an even greater threat to Israel (2 Kgs 8:9–15).[37] That God would bless the nations around Israel in order to judge his disobedient people is promised in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32: "They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation" (v. 21).[38]

This is almost certainly part of the complex of motivating factors that compelled Jonah to flee his calling to Nineveh in chapter 1. Simon says, "The Hebrew prophet's refusal to go to Nineveh is explained by his fear that the anticipated repentance of the gentile city will cast a heavy shadow on the stiff-necked Israelites."[39] God's potentially gracious word to the Ninevites was, at the same time, a word of judgment against Israel. When seen in this light, Yahweh's second commissioning of Jonah for the task of bringing his word to the Ninevites is a reaffirmation of his judgment upon Israel. Jonah's obedience, like his psalm, may be interpreted as an outward expression of piety void of the proper internal realities of faith and repentance.

From a rhetorical perspective, both the "vomiting" fish and the recommissioning of the prophet carry this dual meaning. On the one hand, both contain the positive message of God's unwavering commitment to fulfill his promise to Abraham to bless the nations through his offspring. Even Jonah's disobedience (or Israel's disobedience) could not thwart God's settled purposes in that regard. However, the same events carry a negative message for Israel, reminding them of the reality of God's covenant curses that will come upon them should they persist in faithlessness and disobedience. The repentance of the pagan sailors and the gentile Ninevites on the basis of so little by way of prophetic revelation serves to condemn Israel who, like Jonah, failed to repent though they had so much. The book of Jonah issues the prophetic warning that should Israel fail to respond to God's prophets with repentance, the land will vomit them out, and the surrounding nations will be blessed to the end that they might bring God's covenant curse upon them.

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[37] Stek notes, "All this left Syria in a position to subject Israel to the most humble circumstances in the early years of the Jehu dynasty." Stek, "The Message of the Book of Jonah," 25–26.

[38] Ibid., 26. Meredith Kline makes a similar point; see Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 142.

[39] Simon, *Jonah*, viii.

Conclusion

The book of Jonah is, by almost any measure, a literary masterpiece. Like every great work of literature, it employs a variety of features designed to draw readers into a deeper engagement with the text and its message. One such feature is the seemingly contradictory portrait of the prophet Jonah, who in short order moves from singing a heart-stirring psalm of thanksgiving to God to berating the Almighty in the most vitriolic tones. Against proposals which argue that the Jonah's psalm is a secondary addition to the text, and against proposals which seek to exonerate Jonah on the basis of the faith expressed in this earlier psalm, this article has argued that the prophet's prayer plays a critical rhetorical role of establishing an ironic contrast between the prophet's expressions of piety and his acts of rebellion.

This interpretation is based, in part, on the premise that the book of Jonah is irreducibly prophetic. That is to say that whatever else the story is doing (instructing, informing, entertaining, and so on), the narrative at its most basic level is designed to fulfill a uniquely prophetic function of prosecuting the terms of the Mosaic covenant vis-à-vis national Israel (Deut 18:15–22). This article has revisited the issue of Jonah's prayer from the depths with a view toward understanding its contribution to the larger prophetic message.

Jonah accomplishes its prophetic purpose by dramatically displaying in the recalcitrant prophet the rebellious spirit that characterized Israel both in Jonah's day and after. In Jonah's prayer from the depths, the reader witnesses the divinely appointed prophet honoring God with his lips, only to discover at the conclusion of the narrative that his heart is far from him. In this way, the prophet resembles the nation he represents. Like Israel, the prophet makes good confessions, sings majestic psalms, and even obeys the command of God, yet at the same time grows increasingly more resistant toward Yahweh's revealed purposes for his people and the nations.

Though, as I have argued above, the prophet is presented as fundamentally unrepentant, the rhetorical purpose of painting such a dim portrait was to induce repentance in the readers or hearers of this book. The Israelites were meant to see themselves in the character of Jonah, not allegorically, but representationally and symbolically. The biting irony of Yahweh's rebellious prophet performing acts of piety (confessions of faith, singing of psalms, and so on) is designed to expose the systemic hypocrisy that had taken root in Israel's culture and to move the nation to genuine repentance and proper worship. The central purpose of the narrative, therefore, is not

to rehearse Jonah's sin as a point of historical interest, nor even simply to rehearse God's mercy toward Nineveh (as important as that is to the message of the book), but rather to extend God's mercy to Israel as they hear of God's pursuit of his wayward and rebellious prophet.