

JONAH

P H I L L I P C A R Y



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INTRODUCTION

Christian Readers of a Jewish Book

Preliminary matters about the context of the book of Jonah, its historical setting, the meaning of key terms, and the identity of its characters will be discussed in the comments on 1:1–2, but several features of the interpretive approach I take here are worth pointing out up front, as it were before we begin.

First of all, this is a Christian reading of the Scriptures of Israel, which Christians call the Old Testament because it contains the ancient covenant to be fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Like the whole Bible, the book of Jonah is about Christ and therefore about all those who find their life in him. It is also about the people of Israel, of whom Christ is king. He is not called Messiah, King of the Jews, for nothing. Christians can find themselves in this story only by identifying themselves with the Jews, his people, and thereby with the sole Israelite in it—the same person with whom Jesus identified when he described himself as “the sign of Jonah.” So the point of the story will be found in these identifications: Christians have life only in Christ, who is the King of the Jews, who are the chosen people beloved of the LORD God, represented in this story by Jonah.

There are a great many things to be uncomfortable about in these identifications, and that is why it is good that this story is a comedy, as recent scholarship has often emphasized. Jonah is a comic figure: he does everything wrong, almost, yet through him the LORD God of Israel does everything right. All’s well that ends well, as another great comedian once put it, but of course in the middle of the story things can get to be quite a mess. Jonah is a ridiculous excuse for a prophet—the holy man as screwup—and we are just like him. Why Jesus would want to identify with him is a deep mystery, as deep as his love for the rest of us. We will get to that point a little later, in the excursus on the sign of Jonah. But we

have to begin by being willing to identify with the ridiculous prophet ourselves. Otherwise we miss the point of the joke.

There is an ancient tradition of Christian reading called typology or figural reading that encourages such identifications, but also a strand of Christian moralism that resists them. How many sermons have you heard in which the scriptural screwup is taken as an object lesson in who *not* to be—as if the task of the Christian life is to do better than all those biblical characters who keep getting into so much trouble? It is as if the lesson were: the last thing we want in the world is to think of ourselves as sinners, as if we had anything in common with the stupid, disobedient, unbelieving wretches we see in the biblical story. We must be quite different from people like Peter (how could he *think* of denying Christ?) or Moses (if you're like *him*, you'll never get into the promised land!) or Sarah (don't you *dare* laugh at God!) or of course Jonah (how *could* he be so mean to those Ninevites?). You can do better than these people, the moralistic preacher would have you believe. Instead of identifying with them, your task is to be different from them and thus make yourself immune from the frightful things that happen when God starts to deal with people like that.

Such moralism, in its more scholarly forms, can be breathtakingly anti-Semitic. It is astonishing how regularly Christian commentators have warned other Christians against following in the footsteps of bigoted tribalistic Jews like Jonah. The lesson they would have us learn is to be better than these wrathful Old Testament prophets who do not know how to think merciful thoughts toward other people, the way we Christians do. Such lessons breathe the kind of self-righteousness for which the Bible invented the phrase “holier than thou” (Isa. 65:5 King James Version)—a phrase describing the spirituality of those who set themselves apart from their fellow Israelites by a religion that is better than God's. Any reader who wants to be above the prophetic animus directed against Nineveh is certainly playing at being holier than God, who has many words of wrath to say about Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire of which it is the capital.

How did we get to be so stupid? How did we become so convinced of our moral superiority that we must look down on Jonah as if he had failed to learn an elementary lesson about being nice to other people? An abundance of Sunday school material makes this the moral of the story—be nice to people, unlike Jonah the Jew—as if we are supposed to get our children to believe that God is the kind of dolt who is interested in teaching us such lessons in complacency. Thereby we display not only our self-righteousness but our aesthetic blindness, our thick inability to recognize a good story when it hits us between the eyes. For to perceive what this wonderful story is teaching us requires us to see that the joke's on us. Once we learn to read Bible stories in this way, identifying with the people who get it all wrong, we will be able to understand the real moral lesson about our moralistic misreadings, especially in their anti-Semitic form. There is a deep immorality in Christian moralism, which insofar as it presents itself as superior to Jewish self-righteousness, Pharisaism, and intolerance, is thoroughly

self-righteous, “Pharisaical,” and intolerant—murderous at heart (just ask the Jews), full of dishonesty and self-deception, not to mention wicked defiance of the God of Israel who loves his people.

And in case you didn’t get it, now is the time to laugh. At the risk of explaining the joke (but what can I do? I’m a commentator) let me say: if you have already laughed at least once so far, then you’re getting it. If not, then lighten up. These words about stupidity, self-righteousness, and wrath don’t mean we can’t have a good laugh—a laugh that’s good for us. *Morally* good for us. For the joke really is on us, and it’s about time that we learned to laugh at it.

What’s more, you need to be able to laugh when you enter into situations of unbearable tension, which tend to arise when Gentiles talk about Jews. There is no getting around such talk when Christians read the Bible, especially when the Christians are Gentiles convinced, as I am, that an essential step to finding Christ in the Old Testament is what can be called an “Israelological” reading of the text, one that sees figures like Jonah representing not only Christ, the church, and Christians, but also Israel and Judah. Indeed, I think we cannot see *how* Jonah represents Christ, the church, and Christians without seeing how he represents Israel and Judah. If I am right about this, then a good Christian reading of Jonah will necessarily have a great deal to say about the Jews.

The tension that it would help to be able to laugh about stems from the incapable need of Gentile Christians to read the Scriptures of Israel as if they were *our* Scriptures too, as if all the good and bad things they had to say about God’s chosen people were said also about us. This is rather tactless of us, and if it weren’t for the resurrection of the Messiah of Israel, in whom Gentiles too are justified by believing, we would have no right to read Israel’s story this way. The authorization of such reading can only be a gift, an utterly gratuitous blessing bestowed on Gentiles by the King of the Jews, in whom we believe. Yet now, because of what he has done, it does belong to our obedience to this good and gracious King that we read Jewish stories as being about us, too.

This is not quite so strange as it seems, because the work of Christ is the culmination of God’s gracious election, his choosing Israel to be a blessing for all nations. This is vitally important to understand: it is a good thing for Gentiles that the Jews are God’s elect, his chosen people, just as it is a good thing for the whole world that one Jew, Jesus Christ, is God’s chosen one, his beloved and only begotten Son. Let me say it again: it is good for all of us that the Jews are the chosen people. If we don’t get this, then we will hang on to our anti-Semitic self-righteousness as if our salvation depended on it. Christians have in fact done exactly that for much, much too long, and we need to learn to read the Bible otherwise.

The book of Jonah is a good place to start. For as we learn to laugh at ourselves in the figure of Jonah, we may also notice how much it hurts, which is to say: how much it costs Israel to *be* the chosen people, a blessing for all nations. Just because it’s a comedy doesn’t mean Jonah doesn’t go through hell. He says he does (in Jonah 2), and he’s not kidding. Here we find not just comic suffering but profound

comfort: Jonah does nearly everything wrong and gets into the deepest trouble imaginable, yet all the while he remains God's beloved and chosen one, not to mention one of the most successful prophets in the whole Bible. He is Israel, but he is also us. And we need his story.

It is a story about the relation of Jew and Gentile, whose particular message is embedded in a narrative strategy of parallelism, which it is good to be apprised of from the start. The book of Jonah is divided rather neatly into two halves, in both of which Jonah is a blessing to the Gentiles despite himself. He is indeed the only Israelite in the story, and because of him everybody else is saved from the wrath of God: a boatload of Gentiles in the first half, and the great city of Nineveh in the second half. But there are differences between the two halves, and a central premise of this commentary is that noticing these differences is key to understanding the point of the story.

The important differences to notice, I will suggest, have to do with all the things that do not go as well in the second half of the book as the first. At the end of the first half, Jonah has been saved from the depths of hell and all the Gentiles are sailing safely home, worshiping the LORD as they go. At the end of second half, the Gentiles are saved from destruction but they do not know the name of the LORD or even whether they are saved, and Jonah is in the middle of a confrontation with the LORD God in which it is apparently up to Jonah to decide whether to be reconciled with the mercy of God—which is not really good news, if you think about it. Still, the open-endedness of the book, concluding with a divine question that puts the ball in Jonah's court, is *so* wide open, leaving so much undecided, that we have to look well beyond Jonah himself to see where it is headed. Once we do, the same identifications as before come front and center, and we must ask how the people of Israel might have answered Jonah's question, how we ought to answer it, and (the good news) how Jesus Christ has answered it.

Two other features of the interpretation presented in this commentary are unusual enough to be worth drawing attention to before we start. First of all, I take it for granted that it is always important how the deity is referred to in the text: whether by the generic term *Elohim*, translated "God," or by the proper name of the God of Israel, translated "LORD." In the ancient world everybody knows about God, but very few people outside Israel know the name of the LORD. This is a big deal throughout the Bible, and you would think commentators would pay attention to it, but they don't. Commentaries on Jonah routinely proceed as if all ways of referring to the deity were equal, whereas they plainly are not. If you know about God but don't know the name of the LORD, then you don't really know who God is. This makes all the difference in the world for the fortunes of the sailors in the first half of the book as well as for the Ninevites in the second, and it explains a number of peculiar things in the narrative, such as the odd bit of retrospective information supplied by the narrator in 1:10, which has puzzled commentators so much that some of them have considered drastic measures like removing it from the text. But once we see that the pagan sailors do not

automatically identify “LORD” and “God” as we do, this puzzling piece of the text begins to look like a brilliant and subtle literary device.

Another distinctive point of interpretation, where so far as I know this commentary is unique, is of critical importance for understanding the book’s concluding question. The plant or gourd that protects Jonah in the final chapter and then withers away is, like several such plants in the Old Testament, an image of the lineage of David that seems to have died out. What is at issue in the open question at the end of the story is therefore not only God’s pitying the Gentiles but his apparent abandonment of Israel, his allowing the messianic line to disappear like “a son of the night,” as he himself so poignantly puts it. So as the book concludes, Jonah is a Jew without a Messiah, and he is not happy about it. His anger is not just about a dead plant but about the most important thing in the world, the future Son of David, which only he in the whole story is in a position to know about. The question he must answer concerns Israel’s hope for the coming of a Son of David who is both the King of the Jews and the hidden desire of all nations. The absence of this beloved Son is almost too much to bear. The comedy of Jonah is likely to turn tragedy unless the Messiah himself comes to answer the question by becoming the sign of Jonah.



Several of my debts are worth pointing out, for those who wonder where my particular readings come from. I owe much to Karl Barth’s theology of the word and election of God and to Kendall Soulen’s exegesis of the biblical theme of Jew and Gentile. That Christ could be called the eternal repentance of the LORD (see comment on 4:2) is the sort of thought one has while reading Barth, whereas the importance for *Christian* theology of Israel’s election as a blessing to all nations is something to be learned from Soulen’s *God of Israel and Christian Theology*. In addition to these two prime theological inspirations, I am much indebted for my practical understanding of how biblical narrative works to Robert Alter’s *Art of Biblical Narrative*. Meir Sternberg’s *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is also valuable, providing a theoretically weighty account of the kind of reading that Alter is so good at teaching you how to practice.

For assistance with Hebrew, which I do not read, I have used various interlinear Bibles, but have also found the appendix to Phyllis Tribble’s *Rhetorical Criticism* invaluable, with its painstakingly literal translation of the text, not exactly into English but into a kind of English X-ray of the verbal structure of the original. I am also much indebted to my colleagues and friends, especially Ray Van Leeuwen and Kent Sparks, who know their Hebrew and are willing to share. (I owe thanks to Ray for more insights than I could name, but one that comes especially to mind is his pointing out that Jacob insists on returning the blessing to Esau in the end, a point that unlocked for me much of the meaning of the biblical stories of jealous brothers.) Of course, all the mistakes I have made—I have not always followed their advice—are my own.

The English text of the book of Jonah on which this commentary based is my own modified amalgam of the King James Version, Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and English Standard Version, all of which preserve some sense of the syntax and vocabulary of the original. (I understand there is also now a Christian Standard Version, which has the same aim. Other translations, which purport to give the meaning of the original rather than an approximation of its words, are useless for exegesis.) I have also made much use of the online version of Strong's Concordance (<http://www.elijah.com/lexicon.html>), which lists not only the occurrence of words in the King James Version but also the corresponding Hebrew, so that one can learn, for instance, when a Hebrew word translated "evil" in one verse is the same as one translated "trouble" in another verse and when it is not. The text of the book of Jonah that follows is a product of these discoveries: wherever it has the word "evil," the same Hebrew word underlies it, and where it has the word "trouble," the Hebrew is different—and likewise with words like "call" and "cry," "spoke" and "said," "throw" and "hurl" and "cast," and many other sets of near synonyms. (An important exception is the word "people," which has to do duty for both the Hebrew word for ethnicity, *am*, and the Hebrew word for population, *enosh*, which used to be translated "men.") I have made similar modifications in other biblical passages quoted to illustrate the meaning of the book of Jonah.

Hearing the echoes between texts is one of the most important ways of perceiving the riches of the Scriptures, contributing to the wonderful experience I have had with this powerful little story, which always opened up new depths whenever I trusted an honest question or perplexity to lead me further in. Over and over again I found myself putting into practice the old hermeneutical rule that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. There is a surprising number of discoveries to be made by following this rule to the best of one's ability. For example, the identification of the gourd with the lineage of David, which might be very surprising at first, follows quite naturally from well-established patterns of biblical imagery concerning growing and dying plants and the protection provided by their shade. It has been overlooked perhaps because Christian readers are not really accustomed to an Israeological reading of Scripture, in which the meaning of obscure biblical parables and sayings is rooted in God's love for his people Israel. We are used to ecclesiological readings, discerning typological references to the church, the new people of God, in the Old Testament. But we neglect to situate them in the context of references to Israel, the ancient people of God, which is the rather obvious and primary meaning of much of the Bible including, as I suggest here, the parable of the gourd in the book of Jonah. Since the gourd represents the messianic hope fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the Israeological reading of this text is key to unlocking its christological meaning. This is one more way in which Christians need to read more like Jews if we are to read the Bible well.

TEXT

¹And the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call against her, for their evil has come up before my face.” ³And Jonah arose to flee from the face of the LORD to Tarshish. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. And he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the face of the LORD.

⁴But the LORD hurled a great wind onto the sea, and there was a great storm on the sea, so that the ship was about to break up. ⁵And the sailors feared, and each cried out to his god, and they hurled the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the furthest recesses of the boat, had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶And the captain came and said to him, “What’s with you, sleeping? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will consider us and we won’t perish.”

⁷And each of them said to his neighbor, “Come on, let’s cast lots, so we may know on whose account this evil has come to us.” And they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸And they said to him, “Please tell us on whose account this evil has come to us. What is your occupation and from whence have you come? What is your land and from what people are you?” ⁹And he said to them, “A Hebrew am I, and the LORD, the God of heaven, I fear, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the people feared a great fear, and they said to him, “What is this you have done?” For the people knew that he was fleeing from the face of the LORD, for he had told them.

¹¹And they said to him, “What shall we do with you, so the sea will be calm for us?” For the sea was getting more and more stormy. ¹²And he said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea, and the sea will be calm for you. For I know that it is on account of me that this great storm is upon you.” ¹³But the people dug in to turn to dry land but couldn’t, because the sea was getting more and more stormy upon them. ¹⁴And they called to the LORD and said, “Please, LORD, please let us not perish for the soul of this man and do not lay upon us innocent blood. For

you, LORD, have done as you desired.”¹⁵ And they picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.¹⁶ And the people feared a great fear of the LORD, and they offered sacrifice to the LORD and vowed vows.¹⁷ And the LORD prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the guts of the fish three days and three nights.

^{2:1} And Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the guts of the fish:

²“I called from my trouble to the LORD,
and he answered me.
From the belly of Sheol I shouted,
and you heard my voice.
³You threw me into the deep,
into the heart of the sea,
and the flood surrounded me.
All your waves and breakers have passed over me.
⁴Then I said, ‘I have been cast out from before your eyes,
yet I will look again to your holy temple.’
⁵The waters encompassed me, up to my soul.
The depths surrounded me;
reeds were wrapped around my head.
⁶To the bases of the mountains I went down;
the earth with its bars was about me forever.
But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD, my God,
⁷when my soul was fainting within me.
The LORD I remembered,
and my prayer came into you in your holy temple.
⁸Those who pay heed to vanities of deceit
forsake their loving-kindness.
⁹But I with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;
I will pay what I have vowed.
Salvation is the LORD’s!”

¹⁰Then the LORD said to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out on dry land.

^{3:1} And the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call to her the call that I speak to you.” ³And Jonah arose and walked to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was a city great before God, a three days’ walk. ⁴And Jonah started to enter the city, one day’s walk. And he called and said, “Forty days and Nineveh shall be overturned!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God, and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

⁶And the word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne and took off his mantle and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. ⁷And he cried and said in Nineveh, by decree of the king and his great ones, saying,

“Let human and livestock, herd and flock, not taste anything, not feed or drink any water. ⁸Let human and livestock be covered with sackcloth and let them call mightily to God; let them each turn from his evil way and from the violence in their hands. ⁹Who knows? Perhaps God may turn and repent and turn from his burning anger and we won’t perish.” ¹⁰And God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil he spoke of doing to them, and did it not.

⁴¹And it was grievous to Jonah, a great evil, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, “Please, LORD! Wasn’t this what I said when I was in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish before. For I know you are ‘a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness,’ and you ‘repent of the evil.’ ³And now, LORD, please take my soul away from me, for it is better for me to die than live.” ⁴And the LORD said, “Is it good for you to be angry?”

⁵Then Jonah went out from the city and sat to the east of the city. There he made himself a booth and sat down under it in the shade until he should see what would become of the city. ⁶And the LORD God prepared a gourd and made it come up over Jonah to be a shade upon his head, to deliver him from his evil. And Jonah rejoiced in the gourd with great joy. ⁷And God prepared a worm when the morning came up the next day, and it struck the gourd and it withered. ⁸And it came to pass that when the sun rose God prepared a strong east wind, and the sun struck Jonah’s head and he fainted, and he asked his soul to die and said, “It is better for me to die than live.” ⁹And God said to Jonah, “Is it good for you to be angry about the gourd?” And he said, “It is good for me to be angry enough to die.” ¹⁰And the LORD said, “You pitied the gourd, for which you did not labor nor did you make it grow great, which was a son of the night and perished as a son of the night; ¹¹and should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred twenty thousand human beings who can’t tell their right hand from their left—and also abounding in livestock?”

JONAH 1

Jonah Goes Down and the Ship Is Saved

The Word of the LORD, Jonah, and the Gentiles (1:1–3)

1:1 And the word of the LORD came

The book of Jonah does not begin with Jonah but with something better—the word of the LORD. It all begins with the word of him who began everything by saying, “Let there be light,” and there was light. This is the same word that was with God in the beginning, as the gospel testifies (John 1:1). Of course the book of Jonah does not proceed like the gospel to speak of the word made flesh. Yet it does speak of the word made manifest, its intentions made clear, setting things in motion and bringing unexpected things to light. The same creative word that brought the world into being also governs history and makes its presence felt in human life, just as it quite visibly drives the events in this text.

This is a story originated, enfolded, and driven by God’s address to his creatures. It begins with the word of the LORD, and in the end this same LORD has the last word. In the middle, his word moves events forward, telling the fish to vomit up Jonah, sending him on to Nineveh with a message, then arguing with the distraught prophet when Nineveh is spared. Jonah’s flight itself is initiated by this word in a negative way—indeed the word often operates in a negative way—for what Jonah runs away from is the commission he has been given by this same word. And the sailors’ throwing him overboard is occasioned by the revelation of the name of the God who sends this word, the name of the LORD. So the whole story is initiated and moved along and shaped by the word of the LORD, without which there would be no story, no movement, no tension, no flight, and no rescue. There is no meaning to the story, and the events of the story are inconceivable, without this word and without the particular deity whose word this is.

It is important to bear in mind that the LORD is the name of a particular deity, the God of Israel. As in most older Bible translations in English, the word “LORD” here, when printed with all capital letters, is not a title like the word “Lord” with only an initial capital letter. The LORD is not just any lord, nor is he merely “God” in general. He is altogether different from the gods of the nations, and “the LORD” is his name, not his title. When the God of Israel says, so often in the Scriptures, “I am the LORD,” this is not an announcement that he is the boss but rather a proclamation of his name (Exod. 3:15; cf. Isa. 42:8: “I am the LORD; that is my name!”).

The complication is that “LORD” is not actually his name, but represents a word used to avoid saying his name. The capital letters in the English text are a reminder that the underlying Hebrew word is the name for the God of Israel, transliterated *YHWH*. This name is, in Jewish reckoning, *the* name, *ha-shem*, the sacred name that is too holy to be spoken. When Jewish readers come upon the written name while reading Scripture aloud (for instance, in synagogue), they do not speak it but instead say *Adonai*, the Hebrew word for “Lord.” This custom is reflected in older English translations of the Bible, where “Lord” stands for *Adonai* and “LORD” for *YHWH*. For English speakers to call God “the LORD” is thus to follow this Jewish practice of calling upon the name of the God of Israel without actually uttering it.

It is right, a good and joyful thing, for Gentile Christians especially to adopt this distinctively Jewish practice, because the name of the LORD is now given to Jesus Christ. Every Christian who confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord is proclaiming the name of Israel’s God—without actually uttering it, just like the Jews—and saying this is the name given to Jesus, the name above every name at which every knee shall bow and every tongue confess (Phil. 2:9–11). The Gentiles’ confession that Jesus is Lord fulfills the purpose of the repeated proclamation of this name in the Old Testament, the ancient witness to Israel’s God: “So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and there is none other” (1 Kgs. 8:60). It is this same name that we hallow, keeping it holy and set apart precisely by not taking it upon our lips, when we pray as our Lord taught us: “Our Father, who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9).

So the God whose word sets this story in motion is not just any God. He has a proper name, and it is not enough to describe him as God in general, as if he were nothing but the supreme Being, the first principle of all things, and the ultimate Good. He is indeed all these things, but we will miss the point of the story if we do not recognize from the beginning that he is first and foremost the LORD, the God of Israel. By virtue of the election of grace, in which he chooses Israel as his own people, the God who speaks in this story cannot be understood or identified apart from the history of Israel in which he is inextricably involved, just as we do not know Jesus if we do not recognize him as the Son of David, the King of the Jews. This is the LORD, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who revealed his name to Moses as I AM or (perhaps more accurately) I AM

WHO I AM or (perhaps more accurately yet) I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE (Exod. 3:14). Like Exodus, the book of Jonah is a story showing us who he will be, and thus at bottom it is about the proclamation of the name of the LORD. Through all the vicissitudes of the narrative, one thing is certain: he will be the God who has always already taken sides with Israel. It is precisely this God and no other—the LORD God of Israel—who sends Jonah to Nineveh, to the people who will eventually destroy Israel, so that even Nineveh might hear the word of the LORD and be saved. We will miss the surprise, the irony and offense of this story, if we do not reckon with the particular God who speaks here.

The word of the LORD *came*. We don't learn how it came: by dream or vision, by inner voice or the voice of another prophet instructing him. As usual, Scripture has little interest in the experience by which the word speaks to us. But insofar as it is experienced at all, it is experienced as an external word, as something that *comes* to Jonah, quite other than the thoughts of his own heart and in fact quite unwelcome. There is no quest for God here, no attempt to demonstrate how knowledge of God is possible, and certainly no desire to experience God's presence in our lives. The story proceeds as if the word of the LORD is unquestionably the most real thing in the world and that the rest of the universe can only catch up with its reality.

In that sense the book of Jonah is concerned with how we know God, but the question is asked from the opposite perspective from what is usual nowadays. We are invited, as it were, to ask the question from the word's own point of view. The world needs all the help it can get catching up with the reality of the word of the LORD—and in fact is doing all it can to run away. So what shall the word do about such hearers? What shall the word do about a prophet who flees from the LORD, sailors who call upon all kinds of gods but are terrified at the name of the LORD, a monster of the deep who swallows up the LORD's servant, an ignorant city that hears the word and repents, a prophet who hates the success of the word he is given to preach and talks back to the LORD? The problem of the book is not how we are to know God but how God is to deal with us and our more or less persistent efforts not to know him. Only a fool is capable of not knowing God—of hearing the word of the LORD and not believing it—and the LORD must deal with such fools somehow. From this book we learn how graciously the LORD deals with fools such as us.

Finally, before we proceed let us go back for a moment to the first word, that unobtrusive little particle “and” (often translated “now” or “but”) whose force depends so much on drawing no attention to itself. It is over before we notice it, so that we can get on with thinking about weightier words such as “the word of the LORD.” But now is the time to look back at the service it has performed. It got us into the story before we knew it, getting us thinking about the events to come as if they belonged to some larger series of events already under way, as if somehow we had just turned the page to begin a new chapter in a much larger book. And of course that is exactly what has happened. Not only does the book

of Jonah belong to the much larger book called the Bible, the book of books, but the story of Jonah is a chapter in the much larger story of the dealings of the LORD God with Israel and the nations. So we begin by getting into the middle of things, *in medias res*, as classical literary theory puts it (Horace, *Ars poetica* 146). For this is how we always begin. Even our birth is always in the middle of an ongoing family history. Only the word of the LORD can begin at the very beginning. We follow.

to Jonah

Jonah's name means "dove." It is a name for someone you love. The beloved in the Song of Songs is called "my dove" (Song 2:14) and is praised for the loveliness of her "dove's eyes" (1:15). We must not forget that through all his troubles and failings, flight and disobedience, Jonah is the beloved of God. Like Israel herself, it can be said of him: "Whoever touches you touches the apple of God's eye" (Zech. 2:8).

Jonah is also a sign of peace, like the dove who comes back to Noah with an olive branch, signaling the end of God's wrath and the subsiding of the waters that for a time overcame the earth (Gen. 8:10–11). When the Holy Spirit descends upon the Lord Jesus coming up from the waters of baptism, it takes the form of a dove as a reminder of this Noachic sign of peace on earth to the one in whom God is well pleased (Matt. 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22). Jonah the dove stands midway between these two signs, both of which signify a renewal of the earth protected from destructive waters: in the beginning stands a covenant with the earth itself, which will never again be flooded by waters that destroy all flesh (Gen. 9:13–17), and at the end a new covenant ushers in a new heaven and earth where there is no more sea (Rev. 21:1). Despite himself, Jonah becomes a sign of peace to those voyaging on dangerous waters and to those in the evil city who, one might have thought, had no prospect but destruction on the last day. Surrounded by chaos and evil, bearing a message that breathes condemnation, desiring only destruction, Jonah is nonetheless by God's appointment the dove of peace. Despite appearances, the book of Jonah—this book of the dove—is in the end a comedy of peace, like the history of the world.

son of Amittai,

The name "Amittai" is related to the word "amen" and means "truth." So Jonah is the dove of truth, sign of a love that is not just warm and soft like a dove but also faithful and reliable as a rock, founded on the truth. One could hardly choose a better name for a prophet of the LORD than "Jonah son of Amittai."

This name also locates Jonah in a particular place and time, providing us with the occasion to deal with some important preliminary matters. We know of Jonah son of Amittai from one other reference in the Old Testament: according to 2 Kgs. 14:25–27, he was a prophet active in Israel (i.e., the northern kingdom) during

the reign of Jeroboam II. He is thus in a double sense a prophet of Israel, and for clarity's sake we must distinguish the two senses.

There is a broad and a narrow sense of the name "Israel." In the broad sense it refers to all the descendents of Jacob, renamed "Israel" after his struggle with God (Gen. 32:28). In the narrow sense, which is much less well known today, it refers to only ten of the twelve tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob. These are the ten tribes that broke away from the Davidic monarchy in Jerusalem after the death of Solomon, forming a separate kingdom in the north with its capital in Samaria under Jeroboam I (1 Kgs. 11:26–12:19). In the historical narratives of the books of Kings and Chronicles, the name "Israel" is typically used in this narrow, less familiar sense, referring to the northern kingdom. This is important for us to bear in mind as we discuss the story of Jonah, because things can be said about Israel in the narrow sense that are not true of Israel in the broad sense: for instance, that the nation of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire, whose capital city was Nineveh.

This feature of Jonah's identity as a prophet of Israel would no doubt have been uppermost in the minds of the original readers of the story, who were almost certainly not from the northern kingdom. They were Jews, also in a narrow and unfamiliar sense. They came from the southern kingdom, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin but named "Judah" (and later "Judea") after the larger of the two tribes. They were therefore called "Judeans," a name that eventually became the English word "Jews."

It is often helpful to remind ourselves of the English word's origin. For instance, when Jesus stays away from Judea because "the Jews" are seeking to kill him (John 7:1), the Greek term is *Ioudaioi*, which is more accurately translated "Judeans." The word "Jews" is inaccurate because it obscures the connection between Judeans and Judea that is obvious in the original, and thus makes it hard to see that one of the crucial sources of friction between Jesus and "the Jews" in the Gospels is geographical. Jesus is from the north and is in that sense not a Judean but belongs rather to Israel, the remnant of a nation that is no more. Hence Jesus is not a Jew in the narrow sense of the term, which explains why in the Gospels he sometimes addresses the Jews as if they were not his own people.

Of course in the broad sense with which we use the word today, in which "Jew" refers to any Israelite, Jesus is emphatically and unmistakably a Jew, and indeed everything in the Christian story of salvation depends on this: if Jesus is not a Jew, then Christianity is false. However, precisely because he is not a Jew in that earlier and narrow sense—not from Judea—the gospel teaching that he belongs to the house of David, the King of Judah, and therefore rightfully claims to be Messiah, the King of the Jews, was particularly stunning in its original context. For the distinction between Israelite and Jew, though unfamiliar to us, was surely not lost on the people who first followed Jesus or sought to kill him. Here was an Israelite, a successor to the northern prophets Elijah, Elisha, and Jonah, heading south to Judea and entering its capital like a triumphant king, as if he also were

successor to David and Solomon. In him the lost northern kingdom lives, and in him also lives the lost royal lineage of the southern kingdom. In him indeed the two kingdoms are resurrected, reunited, and become together one kingdom of God. Such was the claim Jesus made by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, like the Son of David riding in triumph and peace after defeating the enemy, putting aside his warhorse and chariot (Zech. 9:9–10).

The distinction between Israel and Judah was also very much on the minds of the original readers of the book of Jonah. Most scholars think the book is postexilic, which is to say it was written after the Babylonian exile of the Judeans. This means it was written long after the lifetime of Jonah son of Amittai, indeed long after the Assyrian exile of the Israelites and the subsequent destruction of the Assyrian Empire itself. It speaks of Nineveh in the past tense (3:3), as if it were already a thing of the past, which means that the people of Israel (in the narrow sense: the ten tribes) were already a thing of the past. Imagine reading this book, then, as a Judean at a time when your people are all that is left of Israel (in the broad sense: the twelve tribes). Your relatives to the north have been swallowed up by the empire of the Ninevites, which is now destroyed, and your own people were swallowed up by the empire of the Babylonians but have been vomited back out as if from the belly of the beast. And now in this story of a northern prophet swallowed up, vomited out, and sent to Nineveh, you see the story of both Israel and Judea, and you ponder the difference.

Assuming the book of Jonah is indeed postexilic, then its original readers were Jews, that is, Judeans, at about the earliest moment in history when that term could be used to refer to the whole surviving nation of Israel, the remnant of God's chosen people. Also, they were Jews at the earliest moment in history when one could begin to speak of a specifically Jewish religion rather than the religion of ancient Israel. It is the religion of a people who had lived for decades in exile without their own land, king, or temple but only the law of Moses—the *Jewish* law, as we can now call it—to govern them and keep them alive as a people. Having been kept alive by that law, they returned to find “the people of the land” (Ezra 4:4), the ignorant folk who had been left by their conquerors and did not know the law of the LORD (2 Kgs. 24:14). So the Judeans were required to teach them also to observe the law (Ezra 7:25). Eventually the teachers of the Jews came to use the term “people of the land” (*am ha'aretz*) to refer to all Israelites (in the broad sense) who refused to observe the law properly. From this Judean perspective, what seems to have been wrong with Jesus was that he was one of “the people of the land,” a teacher who did not promote as strict an observance of Jewish law as the true Judeans.

In sum, then, the book of Jonah was addressed originally to the people of Judah, the returning exiles of the southern kingdom, but it tells a story about a prophet from Israel, the lost northern kingdom, in which the Judeans were no doubt meant to see themselves. Jonah's experience with Nineveh clearly derives its meaning from Israel's experience with the Assyrian Empire, whose capital city was

Nineveh, and just as clearly points toward Judah's experience with the Chaldean Empire, whose capital city was Babylon.

Jonah himself can be located a bit more precisely in the history of Israel. He is the successor of the great northern prophets Elijah and Elisha (in fact he is the next prophet named in 2 Kings after the death of Elisha) at a time that must count as the apogee of the northern kingdom's power. His one recorded act outside the book of Jonah is an oracle, described as "the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher" (2 Kgs. 14:25). In accordance with this oracle, King Jeroboam II expanded the territory of Israel, restoring its ancient borders from Lebo-hamath (located near what is now the northern border of Lebanon) to the Sea of the Arabah (i.e., the Dead Sea), even capturing the city of Damascus, the capital of the Aramean kingdom, which had been the most pressing enemy of Israel in the time of Elisha (14:25, 28). At the same time, however, the prophet Amos was actively preaching against Jeroboam II (Amos 7:9–11) and prophesying that a nation would come to oppress Israel throughout the expanse of these newly restored borders, "from Lebo-hamath to the Brook of Arabah" (6:14). Doubtless he was prophesying the coming of the resurgent Assyrian Empire, which soon overshadowed Israel's brief moment in the sun.

In this one lone reference to Jonah outside the book of Jonah, we are not given the content or wording of the oracle he delivers. We can guess that his message had a very different tone from Amos's, less hostile to Jeroboam. But all that the biblical narrator tells us is that the reason behind the restoration of Israel's borders is not what Jeroboam might think. It is Israel's great national moment in the sun, but the biblical comment is poignantly bleak: "For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam" (2 Kgs. 14:26–27).

What history records as the greatest splendor of Israel, the Bible treats as a time of affliction and helplessness. When Israel had no one to help, the LORD stepped in and saved them by making use even of the wicked Jeroboam II, who followed in the ways of his namesake, Jeroboam I, the king who inaugurated the northern kingdom in a reign of idolatry, complete with golden calves (1 Kgs. 12:25–33). Things are going very badly in Israel at the height of its national glory, and it is only the mercy of the LORD that staves off disaster for a little while, because the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven.

The history of Israel goes downhill from there. After the forty-one prosperous years of the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs. 14:23), the next two kings are assassinated in less than a year (15:8–15). But yet more ominous is the rise of the Assyrian Empire, which was perhaps already behind the waning of Israel's earlier enemy, the Aramean kingdom. From now on, the only successful kings of Israel are those who find ways of buying off Assyria. For instance, King Menahem rules

ten years and escapes assassination, but must pay the king of Assyria to keep his throne (15:17–22). The next long-ruling king of Israel, Pekah, sees many of his people, especially from the area of Galilee, taken captive to Assyria (15:29). He is assassinated and replaced by Hoshea, Israel's last king, who proves to be a disloyal vassal to the king of Assyria and is therefore deposed (17:3–4). There follows an Assyrian invasion of the land of Israel and a three-year siege of its capital city, Samaria (17:5). When Samaria falls, the people of Israel are carried away to exile in the Assyrian Empire, never to return. It is to this empire that the LORD sends Jonah son of Amittai.

We do learn one more thing about Jonah from 2 Kings. He is from the town of Gath-hepher, which is in Galilee, only a few miles from Nazareth. When Jesus describes himself as “the sign of Jonah” (see Excursus) he is associating himself with a prophet whose hometown is within easy walking distance of his own. Of course, no prophet is honored in his own hometown, as Jesus reminds us, citing the examples of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24–27). But this all the more identifies him with the tradition of northern prophets to which Jonah belongs. Jesus, who grew up just down the road from Jonah, succeeds him just as Jonah succeeded Elisha, who succeeded Elijah.

saying,

Now we are about done with preliminaries and ready to get started with the story, which is set in motion by the word of the LORD. But one further distinction is worth introducing before we plunge into the middle of things. It is obvious from the unfolding of this story that what the word of the LORD *says* is not always the same as what it *does*. The content of the word is hostile to Nineveh, and yet its actual effect is to save Nineveh. Since this is a Bible story, we must take this outcome to be providential, which is to say that the intention of the word is revealed by its effect, not just by its content. The content of the word is against Nineveh, but its intent and effect are otherwise. For to speak is to act, and the act of speech is not just the revelation of some content, but is itself a deed that changes things—especially when it is the LORD who speaks.

1:2 “Arise, go

The first thing the word of the LORD has to say to Jonah the Israelite, the prophet, the beloved dove of truth, is: get up and get going. It is as if nothing in this story moves until the LORD speaks. He often speaks like this to the prophets, as for instance to Elijah: “Arise, go to Zarephath” (1 Kgs. 17:9), and “Arise, go down to meet Ahab, king of Israel, who is in Samaria” (21:18), and “Arise, go meet the messengers of the king of Samaria” (2 Kgs. 1:3).

Behind this phrase is an obvious feature of the ancient world that is so unfamiliar to us that it is easily overlooked. They had no post offices, much less telephone and email. If you want to send a message, you must either go yourself or send a

messenger. The latter option is available only to kings and other people of power and wealth, who can command the services of others. So to send a message in this ancient context, the LORD acts like a king commissioning a messenger and sending him on his way. This is the original sense of the term “mission,” from the Latin *missio*, meaning “sending” (see also the Greek verb at the root of the word “apostle,” *apostellō*, meaning “to send out”).

Like all the prophets, Jonah is a man on a mission, just like the apostles sent out from God to speak his word, bearing a message from the great king of all kings. But unlike emails and other forms of communication made possible by modern technology and bureaucracy (the post office being, all in all, one of the most efficient bureaucracies we have), the messenger is a man with a mind of his own who may not only fail to arrive but try to start an entirely different story.

to Nineveh,

Nineveh would be instantly recognizable to the original readers of this story as the capital city of Assyria. Although a great and ancient empire, Assyria was relatively weak in the first half of the eighth century, when Jonah son of Amittai was active during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (786–746 BC). It underwent a resurgence under Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC), who began to reign over Assyria a year or so after Jeroboam’s death. Within a quarter century Samaria had fallen to Assyria (722/721 BC), which carried off the people of Israel into exile, from which they never returned. It is after this, near the beginning of the next century, that Nineveh becomes the capital of Assyria under Sennacherib (705–681 BC). It remained the capital throughout the seventh century, until it was destroyed by the Medes and the Babylonians in 612 BC. It was never rebuilt. Its demise marks the beginning of the new Babylonian Empire, which becomes the nemesis of the southern kingdom, eventually conquering Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century (597 BC), assaulting it again and destroying it in 587 BC, and carrying off the Judeans into exile, from which they eventually returned about half a century later, beginning in 539 BC.¹

The book of Jonah is almost certainly written with these returning exiles in mind, for whom the destruction of both Israel and Nineveh is old news but the future of Judah and Babylon is still an open question. Anachronistically, Nineveh is the city to which the prophet is sent in the book of Jonah, even though at the time of Jonah it is not yet the capital of Assyria. The important point is that it is the capital known to the book’s original readers, who may have been hazy about which city was the capital of Assyria during the reign of Jeroboam II in the early eighth century but who knew all about Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire when it was destroyed for good near the end of the seventh century.

1. For details of this history, see *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 3.2: *The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and Other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries B.C.* (ed. John Boardman et al.; 2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Thus the book of Jonah is not a historical report about the activity of the prophet in the time of Jeroboam II but a parable written for returning Judean exiles about what might have been—and indeed about what could still happen, depending on how the original readers, the Judeans coming back to their homeland in the sixth century, handle their equivalent of Jonah’s situation at the end of the book. To turn this story into a historical account of the prophet being sent to a city that is not yet the capital of Assyria would disrupt the parallel on which the whole book is based. For what the book of Jonah aims to get us thinking about is the situation faced by the Judeans with respect to Babylon, the capital of the empire that has swallowed up Judah, as it is illuminated by the situation of Jonah with respect to Nineveh, the capital of the empire that swallowed up Israel. It is a book about the suffering of the chosen people and what that has to do with the salvation of the Gentiles.

that great city,

The repeated epithet “great city” in the book of Jonah is always associated specifically with a God’s-eye view of Nineveh. The epithet appears twice more in the LORD’s speeches (3:2; 4:11), and the greatness of Nineveh before God is also mentioned in 3:3. Here, where it first appears in the story, it might be taken to mean nothing more than what we would now call “greater Nineveh” (see comment on 3:3). But the phrase will acquire more resonance as it recurs over the course of the book of Jonah. And of course we cannot forget its resonance with the eschatological lament over the evil city in the last book of the New Testament: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! . . . Alas, alas for the great city!” (Rev. 18:2, 16). From what we have surmised of the original readers of the book of Jonah, they too could not but think of Babylon the great when they read of the great city of Nineveh.

and call against her,

The reference to Nineveh in the feminine is striking but hardly unusual. The capital of a mighty empire is called “she,” just like a huge, well-armed battleship. All ships and cities and peoples, it seems, are “she,” no matter their size and power, as if all had need of some tender lover and protector like the LORD, who is a husband for Israel, a people called “she” many times in the Bible despite bearing the name of a man.

Could the LORD possibly aim to take Nineveh as his beloved also? The prophets of Israel have said stranger things before. Witness Isaiah: “In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.’” (19:24–25). But such strange blessing does not yet appear at the beginning of the book of Jonah. In fact, as we begin, things are looking mighty ominous for Nineveh.

At this point we do not hear the content of what Jonah is to say to her, only its manner or (we could say) its communicative or rhetorical form. He is to *call*, the same verb used to describe a prayer of invocation: calling upon a god (1:6), calling to the LORD (1:14; 2:2), and calling mightily to God (3:8). It implies speaking up so as to get someone's attention. But instead of calling *to* her (as in 3:2, when Jonah's commission is renewed) the wording here would have him calling *against* her (more literally, "upon her"). It sounds like Jonah is not so much to address Nineveh or appeal to her as to make an announcement or even a cry for help, shouting Nineveh's evil aloud for all the world to hear, giving voice to the outcry of her victims.

Here is another unfamiliar feature of the ancient world to bear in mind: there is no such thing as a police force. Except for rulers and aristocrats who have their own soldiers or private guards, a person being attacked has no recourse but to call aloud and wait for the help of whatever people nearby are strong and just. Hence the original meaning of the English phrase "hue and cry": it is the shout that goes up in a peasant village calling everyone to drop their work in the fields and pursue some thief or murderer. The Bible speaks often of this kind of crying, as when the LORD hears the cry of his people enslaved in Egypt (Exod. 3:7, 9) or when the great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah comes up to him (Gen. 18:20; 19:13), so that the LORD himself comes down "to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has reached me" (18:21). For when the violent make up a whole city (and it is evident from Gen. 18–19 and Ezek. 16:49–50 that the sin of Sodom consists primarily of violence rather than sexual perversion), the outcry can do no good unless it comes to God in heaven, who is king and judge over the whole world.

for their evil has come up before my face."

The face of the LORD is his presence. To come before his face is like entering the presence of a great king, for he is indeed "the great king above all gods" (Ps. 95:3). Since it is the work of a king to render judgment, one of the things that comes before the face of the LORD is the evil of injustice. We shall see that the word "evil" designates the core of what is fearsome about the encounter between the LORD and human beings. Here at the beginning of the story, what comes before the face of the great king above all gods is human evil. The implication, to which the story does not yet give words, is that more evil is to come because of this evil, for the judge of the whole earth is one who does justice, rendering evil for evil.

The nature of Nineveh's evil is not mentioned, but it hardly needs to be. It is more infamous than the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. As the prophet Nahum says at the end of his oracle against Nineveh, "Upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?" (Nah. 3:19). Nahum in fact provides just the background we need to understand Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh. "Woe to the city of blood," he says, "full of lies and plunder, never without victims" (3:1). He celebrates its destruction as good news, a confirmation of the goodness of the LORD:

The LORD is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble.
 He knows them who take refuge in him. . . .
 Behold! On the mountains the feet of one
 who brings good tidings,
 who proclaims peace.
 Celebrate your festivals O Judah,
 fulfill your vows,
 for never again shall the wicked invade you;
 they are utterly cut off. (Nah. 1:7, 15)

The destruction of Nineveh means the salvation and peace of Judah, still threatened by the Assyrian Empire in the interval between Israel's exile and her own. So even the feet of those who bring the news of Nineveh's downfall are greeted with words of gladness (made familiar by the quotation from Nah. 1:15 found in Isa. 52:7 and set to music by Handel in *The Messiah*).

What the book of Nahum tells us about the book of Jonah is what it meant for Israelites or Judeans to rejoice in the goodness of God in the face of the evil of Nineveh: it meant expecting to hear the good news that Nineveh is no more, so it can never again invade their land and drench it with the blood of their children. So when we discover toward the end of the book how much Jonah hates Nineveh and desires its downfall, we must not imagine that it is because of some transient grudge or chauvinistic prejudice. This is the empire that would wipe his people off the face of the earth. Unless we do not care for our own children and do not desire to protect them from enemies coming to slaughter or enslave them, we are in no position to think our morality so superior to Jonah's as it is usually made out to be. The justice of the LORD in toppling empires and vindicating the oppressed is a thing to be celebrated. That is a given in the Bible. The deeper question is how much better the LORD's mercy is than his justice, how much farther it goes toward overthrowing evil and setting things ultimately to rights (see comment on 4:2).

1:3 And Jonah arose

We hear of no response that Jonah makes to the word of the LORD. Does he talk back? Does he say *anything*? If so, we do not learn what it is. Perhaps a secret here is withheld from us. Certainly his thoughts are withheld from us. All we see is how he gets moving.

The first move he makes is right. Just as the LORD commands, he gets up and gets going. "Arise," says the LORD in 1:2, and in 1:3 we read that "Jonah arose." When God speaks to you, you cannot sit still. But there Jonah's obedience ends.

to flee from the face of the LORD

We might well wonder what Jonah could be thinking. How can anyone flee from God, who is everywhere? The psalmist's prayer is surely not lost on Jonah:

“You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar” (Ps. 139:2). But what Jonah and his readers know—they practically feel it in their bones—is that there is more to the presence of the LORD than omnipresence and omniscience. There is a specific place where the God of Israel meets his people, hears their petitions, and judges their cause (1 Kgs. 8:27–40), a place, we could say, of the LORD’s presence in person. When the original Judean audience of this story heard of Jonah fleeing from the face of the LORD, they would have thought immediately of the temple in Jerusalem. Scripture calls the temple “the house of the LORD”: it is the place of his name, where his eyes and heart are always directed (9:3). It is in effect the palace of the LORD, the King of kings, and the sanctuary or holy of holies is his throne room, a place that is still called the “presence room” in palaces today, for it is where one comes into the presence of the king in person. The biblical idiom for this presence in person, as we have already noticed (see comment on 1:2), is “the face of the LORD.” For to meet the king in person is to face him, to be confronted by him face to face. To be before his face is to be near enough to hear the word of his mouth.

All this imagery hovers in the background when the text speaks of fleeing from “the face of the LORD” (usually translated a bit more abstractly as “the presence of the LORD”). The imagery gives Jonah’s flight a definite direction in sacred space: he is running away from the temple, the holy city, the holy land—away from all that signifies the presence of the LORD in person. It is as if he were doing his best to turn his back on the face of the great king and run out of the throne room, afraid to look him in the face and unwilling to hear the word of his mouth. His flight is not an attempt to escape divine omnipresence so much as an effort not to heed this word.

It is, of course, equally foolish and doomed. The point is that in fleeing the face of God Jonah is not making a mistake about the metaphysics of divine omnipresence, but committing the deeper error of disobedience. Jonah’s literal, geographical movement away from the face of the LORD in Jerusalem gives a visible trajectory to his heart’s refusal to hear the word of the LORD and obey it. But it also contains implicitly this good news: Jonah can no more escape obedience to this word than he can escape the omnipresence of God. That is what Jonah apparently does not yet know.

But aside from the sheer brazen foolishness of the thing, we need to consider more closely the motives of Jonah’s flight. Everything in the story up to this point suggests that Jonah’s mission represents the one and only opportunity for an Israelite to put an end to the Assyrian Empire. Going by what little we have heard so far of the word of the LORD concerning Nineveh, Jonah has every reason to hope that its future will be just like Sodom and Gomorrah’s. Any Israelite who trusted in the LORD and had an ounce of fighting spirit would be eager to go and announce her doom. It has all the appearance of a mission to save his people, as if the LORD finally woke from his long slumber to keep covenant with Israel, to be faithful and righteous and execute judgment against the great ones of the earth

who would swallow up his chosen people so that they are no more. But instead Jonah chooses to save his own skin.

Or so it appears. Later Jonah will offer a very different explanation for his flight: he wants to give the LORD no opportunity to have mercy on Nineveh (4:2)! Perhaps this counts as a nobler motive than sheer cowardice. But Jonah is quite an unreliable character, and we cannot really trust his account of things. Furthermore, there is no doubt that at this early stage in the telling of the story, we are meant to be lured into thinking that Jonah is running away because he is scared. We are supposed to think that he is driven by the same fear and unbelief that would drive any of us: faced with the prospect of calling out to the great city of Nineveh in the name of the LORD God of Israel, he does not believe the word of the LORD and does not trust that the LORD can deliver him from Nineveh's evil. So he runs in the other direction.

Let us, then, allow the story to lure us. Let us assume that Jonah flees the face of the LORD because he is afraid. It is a reasonable enough emotion under the circumstances. Sending an Israelite to preach to Nineveh in the eighth century BC is a little like sending a Jew to preach to Berlin in the 1930s. Short of a stupendous miracle, the prospect of success is not high, and a forlorn, gruesome death looks much more likely. Jonah flees because, in effect, he is not ready to be crucified just yet.

Hence it is all the more important that the great crucified prophet identified with him so explicitly (see *Excursus*). Jonah, like father Abraham and all Israel, is chosen by God for the blessing of all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 28:14; cf. Acts 3:25), but he is a chosen one who flees his election and the mission that comes with it, as chosen ones are wont to do in the Bible. The only absolute exception is the chosen one whose mission, it turns out, is to identify with Jonah. Jesus Christ, the chosen one who never for a moment turns in the opposite direction from where God sends him, has the mission of identifying with Jonah, the chosen one who flees his mission, and thereby redeeming all those who flee and exile themselves from the presence of God. To be the uniquely obedient chosen one, Jesus must stand in the place of the prophet Jonah, the disobedient fool, the elect one who tries his best to refuse the task of the elect but ultimately fails. One must suspect that Jonah ultimately fails to escape his election because the word of the LORD that comes to him is none other than the word that ultimately takes his place, taking upon himself the sin of Jonah, his flight and disobedience, and his three days in the abyss.

So let us follow where the story lures us. We will get to Jonah's own account of his motives soon enough.

to Tarshish.

Jonah heads toward Tarshish, in the opposite direction from Nineveh, in the Mediterranean instead of Mesopotamia. Unlike Nineveh it is a city famous for wealth not power, one that trades with Israel but poses no military threat. No

doubt it is a cosmopolitan place where he can hope to find a few fellow exiles with whom to keep company, far from home but still able to get news through the famous ships of Tarshish, which carry goods from everywhere in the Mediterranean (1 Kgs. 22:48; 2 Chr. 9:21; Isa. 60:9).

Tarshish is not so well known today. Indeed, modern historians can only guess where it really was. The most favored guess is the Phoenician port in Spain known to the Greeks as Tartessos, which would be far away indeed. But the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, writing in Greek (*Jewish Antiquities* 1.6.1 §127), makes a different proposal and identifies Tarshish with the city of Tarsus, which is not far from Antioch on the eastern side of the Mediterranean, north of Israel. If that is so, then Jonah's destination has New Testament resonances: he is fleeing his inevitable mission by heading toward the city from which Paul the apostle, originally known as Saul of Tarsus, came to take up his unexpected mission.

And that is not the only New Testament resonance. On his way to Tarshish, Jonah passes through a city associated strongly with the memory of the apostle Peter, who is literally "the son of Jonah" (Matt. 16:17) as well as the successor of Jonah the prophet in the LORD's mission to the Gentiles.

He went down to Joppa

The LORD says "arise," and Jonah arises: he gets up in order to go down. He goes down not just in the sense of going down to sea level like all those who "go down to the sea in ships" (Ps. 107:23), but also in a striking movement on the map of sacred geography. From a Judean perspective, all travel away from Jerusalem means going *down* from the temple mount where God is present. This hint at the holy place from which Jonah descends is as much as we hear of Jerusalem, on which Jonah resolutely turns his back. Neither Jerusalem nor Israel is even named in the book of Jonah. Evidently Jonah is trying not just to leave them behind but to forget them. Yet they are always there behind his back, exerting an unseen but palpable pull on everything he does.

The action of the whole story takes place outside sacred space: first in the commercial, multicultural town of Joppa, then in the unhallowed waters of the sea, an abyss of death and destruction, and then in the great, wicked city of Nineveh and its environs. Yet as Jonah's flight is defined by what he flees from, so all the world outside sacred space is defined by the sacred space it is not, and the question of the story is whether that place of sacred presence is a good thing even for these other places. Can it be that an ethnic hodgepodge of people at sea, or even the greatest city of the world, might find its true blessing in the holy place from which Jonah descends and flees? Could Jonah's flight and self-imposed exile actually give them the emissary from this place that they have long needed?

This much is clear: for Jonah to head down to the coast is to head toward the Gentiles. It was along the seacoast just south of the Phoenician port of Sidon that Elijah, the great prophet of the northern kingdom, restored life to the son of the widow of Zarephath, who was not one of the people of Israel (1 Kgs. 17:8–24;

cf. Luke 4:25–26). Retracing Elijah’s footsteps, the yet greater prophet of the north, Jesus of Nazareth, also went down to the coastland of Tyre and Sidon and healed the child of a Syrophenician woman whom Matthew startlingly describes as a “Canaanite,” using the name for a people whom the law of the LORD labels an abomination to be utterly destroyed (Deut. 7:1–5). This is the woman who, rebuffed by Jesus because “it is no good taking the children’s bread and giving it to the dogs,” won his admiration by replying, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30). Evidently she was not the only one of her people who sought him out, for among the crowds following him around was a great multitude from Tyre and Sidon (Mark 3:8; Luke 6:17). Perhaps this is why, when Jesus warns the cities of Galilee about the day of judgment, he holds out Tyre and Sidon as examples: if they had seen the same works of Christ that were preformed in Chorazin and Bethsaida of Galilee, he says, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes (Matt. 11:21–22; Luke 10:13–14). They would have responded like Nineveh, as we may put it—indeed as Jesus himself puts it (Luke 11:32; Matt. 12:41). Perhaps part of the reason he chooses to mention these two cities in particular is because so many people from that coastland actually did follow him, repent, and believe. At any rate, these are the kind of people that Jonah finds as companions on the boat into which he descends, the kind of Gentiles who seem to have a proclivity for believing the prophets of Israel and being healed by them.

Jonah finds his boat specifically at Joppa (now Jaffa, near Tel Aviv), which is the only Mediterranean port easily accessible to a Judean, situated on the only natural harbor on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean between Phoenicia and Egypt. It was the place to which the cedars of Lebanon were shipped for the building and rebuilding of the temple (2 Chr. 2:16; Ezra 3:7). Assigned to the tribe of Dan in the biblical apportionment of the land of Israel (Josh. 19:46), it was usually under Philistine control, as the tribe of Dan could not control the seacoast and migrated further north (19:47–48; cf. Judg. 18). It seems that the people of Israel were not sailors (when Solomon builds a fleet, it must be manned by sailors from Tyre; 1 Kgs. 9:26), and Jonah evidently meets none of his countrymen in Joppa. So we must imagine a city claimed by Israel but inhabited by Gentiles, important for what little contact Israel has with the sea, busy with commerce and occupied by many peoples, languages, and gods. It is not secular but pluralist, as multireligious as it is multiethnic, a microcosm of the known world, as port cities tend to be. Here no one god rules all and money talks.

Joppa figures in the New Testament as one of the first places the gospel spreads among the Gentiles. Many of its people believe in the Lord after Peter comes and raises a disciple named Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:36–43), and it is in Joppa that Peter has the inspired dream that teaches him that even Gentiles can be clean (10:9–16, 28). We could think of it as the place on the borders of the Holy Land where the mercy of the Lord Jesus begins to overflow beyond Israel, pouring out to the whole world. In doing so it follows in Jonah’s footsteps.

Of course Jonah has no intention of preaching good news to the Gentiles when he goes to Joppa, heading for Tarshish. But neither did Peter when he went to Joppa, nor Saul when he came from Tarsus. The prophet is precursor to the apostles precisely in the intensely ironic relation between his intention and God's sending. The mission that God has for his people is often quite different from the mission statements they write for themselves. But the LORD God of Israel has a way of getting his way with his people, for the blessing of the nations. Hence it is essential that Peter and Paul, like Jonah their precursor, did not choose their status as apostles or missionaries. As their Lord made clear, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). This is his story, not theirs, which is why it is in the end not the story of something vain and unreliable like human religious experience but rather of something glorious and triumphant, the grace of God for all nations.

and found a ship going to Tarshish.

Jonah has moved from sacred to profane, from the presence of the LORD in the holy place of Israel to the world of commerce and technology, emphasized by the threefold repetition of the word "Tarshish," the name of Jonah's destination, in this one verse (1:3). In the ancient understanding of sacred space, "profane" does not mean obscene or wicked, but simply outside the sacred precincts, in an area not consecrated to a god but also not necessarily unclean. It is the sphere where humans go about their business not burdened by the immediate awareness of divine presence. It is the place where they build ships, which are perhaps the most advanced technological achievement of the ancient world—especially the ships of Tarshish, which were famous for carrying heavy cargos of precious metals over long distances, together with all kinds of luxury items: "gold and silver, ivory and apes, and peacocks" (1 Kgs. 10:22). So here at Joppa, Jonah finds some of the most impressive achievements of human craft, power, and wealth. He has a use for these things, though they prove to be not strong enough to save him.

And he paid the fare

We must remember that money itself is a relatively new and sophisticated element in the ancient economy. Not everybody has it, and much of the village economy of the Middle East operates without it, paying its debts in kind—for instance, when peasants pay rent by giving up much of their harvest to an overlord. The very fact that Jonah can pay a fare puts him on the high end of ancient society, an upscale customer. He has mobility and can belong, if he wishes, to a larger world than the holy land of Israel.

and went down into it,

In one sense, we could suppose that Jonah is moving up in the world, heading in the direction of wealth and power. But the text warns us against that supposition

by repeating its description of Jonah's movement as a descent: he "goes down" into this ship of Tarshish, falling yet further away from the face of the LORD and thereby drawing that much closer to death, like those who, as the Bible often puts it, "go down to the pit" (Ps. 28:1; 30:3; 88:4; 143:7; Prov. 1:12).

Some memorable passages about the ships of Tarshish in the books of the prophets reinforce this warning. Isaiah, for instance, pictures the LORD bringing down everything the world looks up to, including the ships of Tarshish:

For the LORD of hosts has a day
 against all that is proud and lofty,
 against all that is lifted up and high,
 against all the cedars of Lebanon,
 lofty and lifted up,
 and against all the oaks of Bashan,
 against all the high mountains
 and against all the lofty hills,
 against every high tower
 and against every fortified wall,
 against all the ships of Tarshish
 and against all the beautiful craft;
 the loftiness of man shall be brought down,
 and all the haughtiness of men shall be made low,
 and the LORD alone shall be exalted on that day. (Isa. 2:12–17)

And then there is a passage from the oracle Ezekiel addresses against Tyre, the Phoenician city on the Mediterranean seaboard north of Joppa. Also known for its wealth and splendor, Tyre will go down like a ship sinking on the high seas, carrying all its cargo to the bottom:

The ships of Tarshish carried your wares;
 you were filled up and heavy in the heart of the sea.
 Your rowers have brought you to the high seas;
 the east wind has wrecked you in the heart of the sea.
 Your riches, your wares, your merchandise,
 your sailors and your pilots,
 your caulkers, your merchants,
 and all your warriors within you,
 with all the company that is with you,
 sink into the heart of the sea on the day of your ruin. (Ezek. 27:25–27)

The prophet has his finger on the pulse of every rich person's nightmare. What if our cities, our civilizations with all their technology and power and wealth, go down like a ship foundering at sea? The whole infrastructure of our opulence is frailer than we like to imagine, buoyed up over the heart of the sea like a fragile wooden vessel that could easily be swallowed up by the abyss tomorrow. This is

the nightmare evoked by the eschatological lament over Babylon the great in the last book of the Bible:

And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood afar off and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning:

“What city was like the great city? . . .

Alas, alas for the great city,

where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth!

In one hour she has been laid waste.” (Rev. 18:17–19)

Fleeing in the opposite direction from Nineveh, Jonah is nonetheless descending into the heart of the nightmare that always threatens the wealth of the great city.

to go with them to Tarshish, away from the face of the LORD.

Jonah thinks he is going with these Gentile sailors to Tarshish, the land of profane wealth and success, far from the face of the LORD, but of course the LORD has other plans. This is a good point at which to consider the larger significance of Jonah’s flight. Throughout this story Jonah represents Israel among the nations, Israel indeed alienated from Israel, the people separated from the land, going down to exile among the Gentiles. In Jonah 1 (Jonah 2 will be different) this exile is depicted as Israel’s own movement, a flight from before the LORD in which the people of God turn their backs to his face, seeking respite in what turns out to be danger and chaos and destruction, putting their trust in the frail inventions of human craft, power, and wealth.

All the more striking, then, that the Lord Jesus, Israel’s God in the flesh, chooses to identify with this fool of a prophet fleeing the face of the LORD. It is a choice of great humility, indeed humiliation. The church in her moments of greatest pride, which are far too many, would rather not follow her Lord in such choices, but separates herself in her own estimation from wayward, disobedient, and unbelieving Israel. Precisely in this separation from God’s chosen people, which her Lord did not will, she finds herself among Gentiles, almost wholly Gentile herself. She thus finds herself willy-nilly in exile with Jonah. There is no escaping this path of exile in history—not for God’s chosen people. And so also individual Christians may follow Jonah’s story, knowing that they have often enough followed Jonah’s path downward, away from the face of the LORD.

At Wit’s End (1:4–6)

1:4 But the LORD hurled a great wind onto the sea, and there was a great storm on the sea,

The second round of the LORD’s altercation with Jonah begins. We have heard the word of the LORD to Jonah and Jonah’s response (or rather nonresponse) of