

# Subversive Sequels in the Bible



Judy Klitsner

SUBVERSIVE SEQUELS  
IN THE BIBLE

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HOW BIBLICAL STORIES  
MINE AND UNDERMINE EACH OTHER

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*Subversive Sequels in the Bible*  
*How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*

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*To my father, Israel Freistat, whose years,  
like those of the patriarch Jacob/Israel,  
were few and filled with struggle  
and with the giving and receiving of unbridled love.*

*And to my children:  
Akiva, Noam, Nechama, Yisrael, and Amitai;  
their spouses: Ariella, Eliad, and Laurie;  
and to my grandchildren.  
Their lives are composing my father's  
most eloquent possible sequel.*

לְעִשׂוֹת רִצּוֹנְךָ אֱלֹהֵי חַפְצֵתִי וְתוֹרַתְךָ בְּתוֹךְ מְעֵי:

To do what pleases You, my God, is my desire;  
Your Torah is in my innermost parts.

– *Psalms 40:9*

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## *Preface*

### **A NOTE ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

Unless otherwise stated, my translations of the biblical text are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh. In most cases, I deviate from the NJPS translation when I want to highlight word repetitions or to emphasize unusual or problematic language in the original Hebrew verse. What is lost in this approach is a certain degree of colloquial and syntactic smoothness. What is gained is an opportunity to access the many nuances of the original text, which often serve as a basis for deeper insight and creative exploration. In my translations, I have been particularly insistent on translating recurring words in a uniform way, rather than seeking synonyms to break up potential reader tedium. These repetitions form the basis of much of the work ahead. They serve as foundations in spotting patterns within passages and in locating parallels between texts.

Where I have differed from the NJPS translation, I have indicated as much, even if I have changed only a word or two. Thus, my frequent notes indicating “author’s translation” are usually NJPS translations with slight modifications. In one case I have altered the NJPS translation without note. In my analysis of Genesis 1–3, I have substituted the word “humanity” for “man” in cases where I felt the strict sense of the text warranted the change. I did not note this change, as I felt it was



## Preface

consistent with the guiding principles of the NJPS literary style as seen in its many publications. I believe this decision is borne out in NJPS's *The Contemporary Torah*, a gender-sensitive translation of the Bible, in which, wherever necessary, masculine forms are replaced with more neutral terms.

With an awareness of sensitivities to the issue, I refer to God in this book in the traditional form, as "He," a translation of the Hebrew pronoun used in the Bible. I do this only in order to avoid stylistic awkwardness and not to attribute masculine gender to God.

All citations of classic Jewish commentaries are taken from the standard Rabbinic Bible (*Mikra'ot Gedolot*). Translations of Hebrew commentaries are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

The abbreviation "s.v." appears frequently in this volume. It stands for the Latin *sub verbo* ("under the word"), and is used to indicate the word or words in the biblical verse that the commentator is addressing.

In the coming chapters, I conduct close readings of biblical texts. Although I have provided English translations of all relevant passages, I strongly recommend reading this book together with an open Bible, and to whatever extent possible, consulting the original Hebrew.

## Chapter 1

# The Wings of the Dove: Noah and Jonah in Flight from Self

*They are ill discoverers that think there is no land, when  
they can see nothing but sea.*

– Francis Bacon

**N**oah and Jonah: two prophets<sup>1</sup> navigate perilous waters aboard their boats, apart from the doomed populations they might have saved. Names, words, and themes are shared freely by their narratives. In both, rampant injustice, *hamas*,<sup>2</sup> threatens to seal the people's fate;

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1. Neither Noah nor Jonah is ever called “prophet” in the text. Yet because both receive God’s word and, in different ways, convey it to others, I apply this label to them.
  2. Hamas has a wide range of connotations: violence, as in Gen. 49:5; a personal wrong, as in Gen. 16:5; injustice, as in Jon. 3:8; wickedness and ruthlessness, as in Mic. 6:12. I am translating it as “injustice” throughout this work, despite the fact that it will

## *The Wings of the Dove*

both speak of a forty-day period preceding a planned annihilation. Each story prominently features a “*yonah*” – Jonah’s Hebrew name is identical to that of the winged messenger sent by Noah, the dove. Both stories highlight such rare locations as Tarshish and Nineveh. Both narratives focus on the personal chronicles of the prophets themselves, while presenting the barest minimum in the way of the actual prophecy they deliver. And both prophets, as we will soon see, judge themselves and others very harshly. As a result, each sinks into a state of self-induced oblivion: Noah through alcohol, Jonah through a coma-like slumber.

These parallels, once explored, compellingly demonstrate how each story unlocks the other’s mysteries. But there is even more to be mined from the comparison. The stories are not merely parallel; as we move in more closely, we note that they are sharply contrasting as well. For example, while both errant populations, Noah’s generation and the wicked people of Nineveh, engage in widespread *hamas*, the former *continues* on its path until its fate is sealed, while the latter *renounces* injustice and is spared. And while both stories speak of a forty-day period surrounding the coming disaster, in the first story this time period is used to *bring on* destruction, while in the second it serves as an opportunity to *avert* it.

As we will see, the Book of Jonah serves as a subversive sequel to the story of Noah. The Jonah narrative adopts much of the Noah story’s language and many of its themes in order to invite comparison. But then the second story begins to dismantle and revise the first, questioning many of its basic assumptions about the prophet, about God, and about the doomed population. To begin with, the Book of Jonah will ask whether Jonah, with all his similarities to Noah, will be able to rewrite his story. Perhaps this time, the prophet could adopt a more generous view toward others, and by extension, toward himself. In addition, the sequel will question God’s behavior, asking whether God might eschew the strict justice of Noah’s Flood in favor of a more forgiving attitude toward humanity. Finally, the Book of Jonah will revisit the role of the

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not always be the precise translation in context. I have done this in order to retain the deliberate cross-referencing that is evoked by its repeated use.

wayward population, exploring its potential to repent and to repair its actions, thereby achieving its own salvation.

Taken together, the two stories will chronicle a remarkable potential for change within several fundamental relationships. In the divine-human bond, we will note God's emerging desire for human survival as He offers second chances to those who have erred. In the inter-human relationship, we will trace the prophet's struggles in facing his responsibility toward those around him. And in the sphere of intra-human relations, we will observe the hero's progress as he is called upon to begin healing his connection with himself. As he begrudgingly accedes to God's demand to help save others, Jonah will face opportunities to rescue himself as well.

#### **NOAH: FAILED HOPE**

Before we can reap the rewards of the Noah-Jonah comparison, we must first probe the depths of Noah's personal narrative. Noah's story begins with great promise. Of all the people in his generation, God deems him alone to be worthy of survival:

The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with injustice. When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth, God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh for the earth is filled with injustice because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood... For My part, I am about to bring the Flood – waters upon the earth – to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish... (Gen. 6:11–14, 17)

Then the Lord said to Noah, "Go into the ark, with all your household, for you alone have I found righteous before Me in this generation..." And Noah did just as the Lord commanded him. (7:1, 5)

Noah is God's faithful servant, who follows His chilling instructions without hesitation. But is this a clear sign of impeccable character?

## *The Wings of the Dove*

Moving back several verses, we note the text's indeterminate stance on this question in its testimonial to Noah:

This is the line of Noah – Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God. (Gen. 6:9)

The verse's effusive praise is quickly diminished by a hint of disappointment. Drawing from the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 108a), Rashi, the preeminent 11<sup>th</sup>-century French exegete, makes the following oft-cited comment:

There are those among our rabbis who interpret the term “in his age” as praise (to Noah): all the more so, had he lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. And there are others who interpret it (the term “in his age”) to his discredit: in his age he was righteous, but had he been in the age of Abraham, he would have been considered as nothing. (Rashi, Gen. 6:9, s.v.<sup>3</sup> *be-dorotav*)

Troubled by the text's inclusion of the qualifier “in his age,” Rashi offers two interpretations, one more generous to Noah than the other. But even the first, which seeks Noah's “praise,” conveys the sense that he was not all he might have been. Had he lived in a more positive environment, he would have developed more of his potential. In Rashi's view, either way one looks at the verse, it is reticent in its portrayal of Noah's righteousness.

In fact, the suggestion that Noah was good but not quite good enough finds its origins even earlier in the biblical record of his birth. Noah's arrival is heralded by the prayer of his father Lemekh:

May this one comfort us [*yenahamenu*] from our work and from

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3. As stated in the preface, the abbreviation “s.v.” stands for the Latin *sub verbo*, meaning “under the word.” This term indicates the word in the biblical verse that the commentator is addressing.

the toil of our hands, out of the very soil which the Lord cursed.”<sup>4</sup>  
(Gen. 5:29)

With his words, Noah’s father prays that his son will bring comfort, from the Hebrew root *n-h-m*. He hopes that the world, which has been suffering since humanity’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, will at long last find some relief from its pain.<sup>5</sup> But nine verses later, the *n-h-m* verb, which was used to describe the hopes for Noah’s effect on humanity, returns to present an ironic end to that hope. The same Hebrew root *n-h-m*, which contains Noah’s full name, can mean both to comfort and to regret. Shortly after Noah’s birth, the text reports:

And the Lord regretted [*n-h-m*] that He had made humanity on earth and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the humanity I created – human beings together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret [*n-h-m*] that I made them.” (Gen. 6:6–7)

Not only does Noah’s birth fail to bring comfort to the world; it does not even prevent God’s regret at having created it. Despite Lemekh’s hopes for his son, Noah’s righteousness proves to be self-contained.

The disappointment of Noah is further reflected in a new play on his name, which, while still complimentary to him, mitigates the optimism expressed at his birth: “And Noah found favor, *ve-Noah matza hen*, in God’s eyes” (Gen. 6:8). The Hebrew palindrome – ןח is reversed to חן (*n-h* becomes *h-n*) – hints that the hoped-for impact Noah was to have on the world is replaced by the much more limited, personal impression he makes on God. In fact he will never bring consolation to others. The favor Noah finds in God’s eyes will be enough to save only himself and his immediate family.<sup>6</sup> Thus, already at the beginning

4. Author’s translation.

5. This notion is reinforced by the text’s use of the word *itzavon*, pain, which sends us back to the admonishments in Eden to both the woman (Gen. 3:16) and the man (Gen. 3:17). See Cassuto, *Genesis*, 198.

6. It seems from Gen. 7:1 that Noah’s family is spared because of Noah’s merit: “Then

of Noah's narrative, the text signals that ultimately he will be a worthy individual, but a failed leader.

#### **NOAH AND ABRAHAM**

The view of Noah as failed leader might be enriched by a brief intertextual digression, one that Rashi himself encourages when he contrasts Noah with Abraham. Both figures, after all, confront God's plan of large-scale destruction. Yet their responses reveal significant differences in their leadership efforts.

After Abraham receives warning of God's intention to annihilate the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he launches into a prolonged and impassioned plea to God to try to save the people (Gen. 18:23–33). "Far be it from You!" he declares. "Will not the Judge of the earth deal justly?" (18:25). Abraham bargains with God, suggesting six times that **perhaps**, *ulay*, the situation in Sodom is not as dire as it seems (18:24–32); **perhaps** there are enough righteous people whose merits could mitigate God's harsh ruling and save the entire city. **Perhaps**, *ulay*, there are fifty. If not fifty, then forty, or thirty, or twenty; or **perhaps** ten (18:21–32). By his emphatic repetition of the word "perhaps," *ulay*, Abraham questions the all-too apparent reality that lies before him. He beseeches God to join him in considering an alternative vision – unlikely but still possible – of a smattering of worthy individuals whose combined virtue could turn the tide from the evil decree toward collective survival. Perhaps the innocent few were hidden or dormant; the rampant wickedness around them may have rendered them virtually invisible. In his monumental efforts to save others, Abraham desperately grasps at any possibility, no matter how improbable, and asks God to do the same.

Abraham's extraordinary exertions attest to his faith in the abundant human potential for change. In addition, they convey his belief that human beings bear responsibility toward one another. Though his own survival is never in question, he refuses to submit to a complacent acceptance of God's decree to kill others. Instead he risks bringing God's

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the Lord said to Noah, 'Go into the ark with all your household, for you alone have I found righteous before Me in this generation.'

wrath upon himself as he tirelessly pleads on behalf of the citizens of Sodom (Gen. 18:30, 32).

In the end, God accepts Abraham's proposition that if only ten righteous people are to be found, the entire city would be spared. Yet even by these generous standards, the city proves unworthy, and, as a result, God "rained [*m-t-r*] upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire ... from the heavens" (Gen. 19:24).

We now return to Noah. In his narrative, the verb *m-t-r* is one of several terms that link the destruction of Sodom to Noah's Flood. Both stories also contain the verb *sh-h-t*, to destroy; Noah uses *gofer* wood to build the ark (6:14), while God rains down the phonetically similar *gofrit vamelah*, sulphurous fire, upon Sodom (19: 24). Moreover, in both stories, God gives advance warning of His intentions to His chosen leader.

Yet, despite the linguistic and thematic similarities between the two tales, Noah's response to impending catastrophe contrasts dramatically with Abraham's. This reversal hints at the presence of a subversive sequel. Even *before* we consider the larger Noah-Jonah comparison, we note that in a significant way, Abraham's actions invert those of his predecessor, Noah. While Abraham had vigorously protested God's plans for destruction, the text relates the following about Noah:

Then the Lord said to Noah... "For in seven days' time I will make it rain [*m-t-r*] upon the earth, forty days and forty nights, and I will blot out from the earth all existence that I created." And Noah did just as that the Lord commanded him. (Gen. 7:1, 4-5)

In Sodom, Abraham beseeches God to consider a potentially wider range of human behavior, and to view individuals as interlocking links in a firmly melded chain. Noah, in contrast, wordlessly accepts God's judgment of his generation as absolute. He neither challenges God's conclusion nor asks for mercy within its framework. The question of an alternative reality, of Abraham's "perhaps," *ulay*, does not cross Noah's lips; he accepts the finality of humanity's guilt and the inevitability of its destruction. Nor does Noah ask God to apply his merits to help save others. Such efforts were likely to fail, yet in subtle ways the text hints that



God might be swayed by human intervention.<sup>7</sup> To return to Abraham in Sodom as an example: before God actually destroys the evil city and its surroundings, He announces His intentions to Abraham in a way that seems less than final (Gen. 18:20–21). In what may be a subtle rejection of Noah's silent compliance, God signals to Abraham the possibility of appeal and reversal of the evil decree.

Viewed in isolation, Noah's behavior seems impeccable, and Rashi's evaluation unduly severe. But comparing Noah's behavior at the Flood to Abraham's actions in Sodom confirms Rashi's views. Though irreproachable as an individual, Noah as a leader was a tragic failure. If he had only acted more like Abraham, Noah might have gone on record as a righteous man, not only "in his age," but for all times.

#### **BREAKDOWN OF THE PROPHET**

Soon enough, the devastation that was announced to Noah arrives. Aside from Noah and his family and the animals in the ark, every living thing – "all in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land... man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky" (Gen. 7:22–23) – was obliterated.

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7. One might argue that God's comments before destroying Sodom are designed to elicit Abraham's intervention. First, God speaks (apparently to Himself) of including Abraham because "I have singled him out that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right..." (Gen. 18:19). It seems that God wants Abraham to exhibit his ability to purvey justice by speaking out on behalf of the sinners of Sodom. Next, God tells Abraham that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah have reached Him and that dire consequences are likely to follow. Unlike Noah, Abraham does not need to make arrangements for his own safety. Why then does he need advance warning? This may be another invitation for Abraham's intercession on the people's behalf, in which God informs Abraham of His plans so that Abraham might try and prevent them. For a similar phenomenon, see Exod. 32:10. Before Moses prays on behalf of the errant people for the sin of the Golden Calf, God warns, "Now, *let me be*, that my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them..." Rashi comments (Exod. 32:10, s.v. haniha li): "...Here God created an opening and informed him that the matter rested on him; if he would pray, God would not destroy them." By commanding Moses, "Let me be," God hints that Moses has the power to dissuade Him from destroying the people. He hints further that Moses should make use of that power by petitioning God to save them.

What is the prophet's frame of mind in the wake of such wholesale destruction? Does he maintain his belief in absolute justice while all of creation perishes? A comparison of Noah's entry into the ark at the Flood's beginning with his exit at its end offers a small window into the prophet's psychological state. Just prior to the Flood, God instructs Noah:

And I will uphold my covenant with you; and you will come into the ark, *you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you.* (Gen. 6:18)<sup>8</sup>

Instead of the expected order of man and wife, the verse speaks of man and sons, and then wife and daughters-in-law. This anomaly prompts Rashi to comment:

Men and women separately, because sexual relations were forbidden – since the world was steeped in suffering. (Rashi 7:7 s.v. *Noah u-vanav.*)

By inverting the expected syntax, God informs humanity that they are to remain celibate while the world was being destroyed. A later verse, which records the family's entry into the ark, echoes the unusual word order of Noah, his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives (Gen. 7:7). The repetition suggests that the family entered as instructed, with men separate from women.

After the Flood, however, God's instructions change:

“Leave the ark, *you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you.*” (Gen. 8:16)<sup>9</sup>

In line with his earlier observation, Rashi comments:

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8. Author's translation and emphasis.

9. Author's translation and emphasis.

## *The Wings of the Dove*

Man and wife. Here God permitted them sexual relations. (Rashi 8:16, s.v. *atta ve-ishtekha*.)

By reverting to the more expected formula of men and wives God suggests that the time for abstinence is over, and that it is now time to resume living full lives.

But curiously, instead of following God's wishes, the family exits the ark in the same order in which it entered:

And Noah exited, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. (Gen. 8:18)<sup>10</sup>

If Rashi is right and the verse's word order signifies the condition of marital unity, Noah and his family are surprisingly unwilling to resume sexual relations. A further hint of this reluctance appears later in the text, when God twice exhorts Noah to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:1, 7), though this command was given only once to humanity's first couple. God's insistence points to Noah's unspoken hesitation. Perhaps the trauma of witnessing destruction has led to deep reservations about beginning life anew.<sup>11</sup> Although he had expected to stand safely aside as "all existence on earth was blotted out" (7:23), perhaps now Noah feels a belated pull toward his fellow human beings, along with a sense of deep loss at their demise. In this frame of mind, the act of procreation, with the physical pleasure and optimism for the future that it represents, seems impossible.

In addition to his unexpected pain, perhaps Noah feels guilt at

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10. Ibid.

11. This reading is based on Nehama Leibowitz's analysis of Rashi (although she claimed that Rashi's initial difficulty was sparked not by the anomalous word order of Gen. 7:7, but by the text's changing that order in 8:16). Leibowitz brings support for this reading from Genesis Rabbah 34:6: "So God said to Noah, 'Leave the ark,' but he did not agree to leave. He (Noah) said, 'Will I leave and procreate for cursed purposes?' (He held this position) until God swore to him that He would not bring another Flood upon the earth, as it says (Isa. 54:9) 'For this to Me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah would never again Flood the earth.'" See Reiner, *Mo'adei Nehama*, 612.

his own survival, compounded by the knowledge that as God's prophet and confidante, he had held the potential to avert the wholesale suffering. It is possible that in failing to defend his guilty generation, Noah now shares with it a bond of guilt. If Noah is to be consistent in his harsh view of the unchangeable nature of the human psyche, he might feel that he, like his sinful generation, is now irredeemable. As a result, like them, he must die.

The idea that Noah is resigned to his own death finds support in his behavior following the Flood. In an act of escapism that leads directly to the biblical account of his demise, Noah plants a vineyard, drinks from its produce, and gets drunk:<sup>12</sup>

Noah, the man of the earth, began to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside.<sup>13</sup> (Gen. 9:20–22)

There is irony in the “man of the earth” planting something as inessential as grapes in the aftermath of the world's destruction, instead of a more basic crop such as wheat. But his actions highlight his desperation to escape his unbearable reality, to simulate death by living in self-induced unconsciousness. The next logical step, his actual death, is recorded immediately afterwards,<sup>14</sup> despite the fact that it occurs many years later:

Noah lived after the Flood 350 years. And all the days of Noah came to 950 years; then he died. (Gen. 9:28–29)

God had wanted to spare the prophet from the Flood, but in a sense Noah, like all those around him, drowns. It is not God, but Noah who extinguishes his own breath of life by inundating his body with liquid.

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12. I am grateful to Shmuel Klitsner for connecting Nehama Leibowitz's analysis of Rashi (see note 11) with God's repeated charge to procreate and with Noah's subsequent drunkenness.

13. Author's translation.

14. The account includes Noah's reactions to his children's handling of his drunkenness and the ensuing blessings and curses (Gen. 9:25–27) he bestows upon them.

Noah may have been spared initially because of his relative righteousness, but he ultimately meets a fate very similar to the rest of his generation.

**THE BOOK OF JONAH: SUBVERSIVE  
SEQUEL TO THE STORY OF NOAH**

Unable to imagine forgiveness for the sinful people, Noah remains unforgiving toward himself. Although his personal narrative ends tragically, many volumes later, the Book of Jonah presents his story anew. The new story, which contains different names and an often inverted format, will offer a divergent direction, and the hope of a nobler conclusion.

We have noted some of the obvious parallels between the stories of Noah and Jonah: water, boats, and the threat of impending destruction. We have alluded, as well, to some of the striking *differences* between them.

These differences suggest an inverse relationship between the stories, in which the second story serves as a subversive sequel to the first. If, in stories that are initially parallel, the language and details of one narrative invert those of another, we may argue that one story seeks a more sweeping reversal of the other by overturning its attitudes and outcomes as well.

In general, Noah's story reverses that of Jonah in its approach to destruction. In the Noah narrative, humanity's annihilation was neither negotiable nor avoidable; God and His prophet were united in viewing death as inevitable. The inverted details of the Book of Jonah will lead us away from destruction as a narrative necessity. They will point instead toward a more generous view of humanity adopted by God and by humanity itself.

Before we arrive at the broader thematic contrasts between the two narratives, we must first look closely at the specific details that lead us there. To begin with, we note the opposing uses of the verb *n-h-m*, to regret. In the Flood story, as we have seen, God's decision to *destroy* the world is expressed with this word:<sup>15</sup>

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15. At a conference some years ago, I delivered a paper based on this chapter. I was then approached by David Arnow, who directed me to his article "Reflections on Jonah and Yom Kippur," which appeared in *Conservative Judaism*, pp. 33–48. I was gratified to see that in his essay, Arnow points out many of the same literary and

The Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings whom I have created – human beings together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret [*n-h-m*] that I made them.” (Gen. 6:7)

In the Book of Jonah, God’s intention to *spare* humanity its destruction is expressed with the same word:

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God regretted [*n-h-m*] the evil He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.<sup>16</sup> (Jon. 3:10)

Playing on the tropes of the Noah story, then, the Jonah story reverses its outcome, demonstrating a newly forgiving attitude on the part of God. God’s greatest regret is no longer the living presence of sinners, but the death of His human creations.

*Hamas* is another term that weaves its way in a contrasting manner throughout both stories. In Noah’s narrative, the fate of the people is *sealed* because of the injustice, *hamas*, that people inflict upon each other:

God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with injustice<sup>17</sup> [*hamas*] because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.” (Gen. 6:13)

In the Book of Jonah, the evil decree is *reversed* because the people turn back from the *hamas* that they were practicing:

By decree of the king and his nobles... Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice [*hamas*] of which he is guilty... God saw what they did, how they were turning back

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thematic similarities – and some of the contrasts – between the stories of Noah and Jonah that I have listed above. In addition, he notes as central themes in the book God’s move toward greater mercy, the interconnectedness of all living beings, and the human capacity for change.

16. Author’s translation.

17. Ibid. See note 2 for the different connotations of the word *hamas*.

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from their evil ways. And God regretted the evil He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.<sup>18</sup> (Jon. 3:7, 8, 10)

Here again, the same term is used to achieve opposite effects, this time in presenting the attitude of humanity at large. The Book of Jonah will revisit humanity's ability to assume responsibility for its own future. As opposed to the story of Noah, this time the doomed population is able to conceive of and carry out a reversal of its behavior and consequently to overturn its fate.

In yet another inverse parallel, both stories highlight a forty-day period, but to opposite ends. The destruction in Noah's Flood *lasts* for forty days:

The Flood continued forty days on the earth... all existence on earth was blotted out. (Gen. 7:17, 23)

In contrast, the destruction in the Book of Jonah is *averted* by a forty-day warning period:

Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overturned!"<sup>19</sup> (Jon. 3:4)

Taken together, these literary contrasts are central to the relationship between the stories. In the first, humanity, steeped in injustice, will assuredly meet their destruction within the space of forty days. God, the prophet, and it seems the population itself, accept this as unalterable fact. In the second story, these details unite for antithetical purposes. This time, with a new attitude by God toward humanity and by humanity toward itself, there is great potential for survival.

Another inverse parallel centers on plants that appear with seeming suddenness. The story of Noah features a fast-growing vineyard (Gen.

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18. Author's translation.

19. Ibid.

9:20, 21),<sup>20</sup> which leads Noah to drunkenness and to the biblical account of his *death*. In contrast, Jonah encounters a spontaneously-sprouting gourd (Jon. 4:6), which will symbolize his renewed chance at *life*.

Furthermore, both stories highlight the importance of beasts, *behemah*. In the Noah narrative, beasts blend with humanity in meeting their common doom:

And all flesh that stirred on earth perished – birds, cattle, beasts [*behemah*] – and all the things that swarmed upon the earth and all humankind. (Gen. 7:21)

The Book of Jonah has beasts and humanity cooperating to *escape* their shared fate, as in the following peculiar, almost comic description:

By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast [*behemah*] – or flock or herd – shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth – man and beast [*behemah*] – and shall cry mightily to God. (Jon. 3:7–8)

Both stories link the destiny of humanity with that of the world's other living creatures. This linkage highlights the interconnected nature of all of God's creation, a relationship that both Noah and Jonah are reluctant to recognize. At the end of Jonah's narrative, God emphatically draws this connection:

And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts [*behemah rabba*] as well! (Jon. 4:11)

As we study Jonah's story more closely, we will look for signs that Jonah

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20. The text presents a curious account of Noah planting a vineyard in which Noah drinks wine immediately following his act of planting. Thus the text skips over the intervening years.



is able to see himself as an integral part of God's world. If he could, perhaps he would be ready to reverse Noah's sense of detachment from his surroundings, thereby enacting a subversive sequel to Noah's unfortunate end.

### **GOD'S HEART**

In order to reach a more expansive appreciation of Jonah's story as subversive sequel to Noah's, we take a close look at the first chapter of the Book of Jonah:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up and go to Nineveh the great city, and call before it that their evil has risen up before Me. (Jon. 1:1)<sup>21</sup>

The first verses of the book already point to a significant difference between the stories of Noah and Jonah. Instead of merely informing the prophet of the world's doom as He did with Noah, here God commands the prophet to take definitive action on humanity's behalf. God expresses His wishes with three brisk verbs: get up, *kum*; go, *lekh*; and call, *kerā*.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the generation of the Flood, the people of Nineveh must receive a warning that they are in danger of annihilation, along with a chance to appeal. What accounts for this divine about-face?

A brief return to the Flood narrative reveals the first signs of change. In the verses leading up to the Flood, God takes stock of the hopelessly wicked state of the human heart:

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21. Author's translation.

22. How does one "call upon" a city? Targum Yonatan (Jon. 1:2) translates "*kerā aleha*" as "prophesy against it," a reading that is supported by several other verses, including Deut. 15:9. If one refuses to assist the needy in the year approaching the Sabbatical shemittah year, the needy kinsman will "cry out against you," *ve-kara alekha*, and you will incur guilt." The implication here is that Jonah must inform the city of its guilt, so that it will be forewarned about the impending consequences. This reading is borne out by the ensuing events of Jonah 3. Jonah finally "calls" to the city about God's intentions to destroy them. The people interpret the proclamation as a warning, and as an opportunity to reverse the decree.

The Lord saw how great was humanity's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by their heart was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted having made humanity on the earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said: "I will blot out from the earth the people whom I created – people together with beasts, creeping things, and the birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them."<sup>23</sup> (Gen. 6:5–7)

The link made between the human heart and God's heart is absolute and deadly. Humanity's evil heart saddens God's heart, and the treatment for God's ailing heart is the obliteration of the world.

After the destruction, however, God draws a new parallel between the hearts of humanity and the heart of God:

And the Lord said to His heart: "Never again will I doom the earth because of humanity, since the devisings of the human heart are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done."<sup>24</sup> (Gen. 8:21)

Here, instead of succumbing to a "saddened heart," God speaks to His heart, resolving never to repeat the Flood's ravages. Mass annihilation is no longer a necessary response to widespread human evil. Although the wicked nature of humanity remains largely unchanged, destruction has reshaped God's response to it. Strict justice and death now give way to mercy and life.

To appreciate the full significance of the heart metaphor, we turn to the Book of Ezekiel, which appears in the canon after the story of Noah and before the Book of Jonah. Ezekiel takes the heart metaphor to a new level as the prophet heralds further divine movement toward the rehabilitation and survival of humanity:

Cast away all the transgressions by which you have offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may

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23. Author's translation.

24. Ibid.

## *The Wings of the Dove*

not die, O House of Israel. For it is not my desire that anyone shall die – declares the Lord God. Repent, therefore, and live! (Ezek. 18:31–32)

In this optimistic passage, the human heart is no longer a stumbling block, inevitably leading humanity toward evil and requiring God's mercy. Now it is an instrument of change. Although it tends toward evil, if humanity so decides, the heart can be refashioned.

In the story of Noah, God's attitude to humanity is at first dispassionate and judgmental: "I will blot out from the earth the people I have created." Then it is merciful: "Never again will I doom the earth because of humanity." Later, in Ezekiel, God expresses an unmitigated partiality toward life: "It is not my desire that anyone shall die ... repent, therefore and live!" This preference underlies God's actions in the Book of Jonah, beginning with His very first words to the prophet. In this story, unlike the Flood narrative, there will be no destruction without warning and without the opportunity for repentance and salvation.

### **MESSENGERS**

We turn back to the Book of Jonah to see if the prophet's attitudes toward the world's errant people have changed along with God's, and if Jonah will find the resolve that Noah lacked to help spare them.

The early signs are not encouraging. Despite God's more forgiving relationship with His world, the prophet is decidedly *less* inclined toward compassion, as seen in the following verses from Jonah 1. These verses follow immediately upon God's command to Jonah to get up, go, and call upon the offending city of Nineveh:

And Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from before the Lord. He went down to Jaffa and he found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid its fare and went down into it to come with them to Tarshish, from before the Lord. But the Lord cast a great wind upon the sea and there was a great tempest in the sea, and the ship was in danger of breaking up. The sailors feared, and they cried out, each to his own god; and they flung the ship's cargo overboard to make it lighter for them. And Jonah had gone down into the

hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went over to him and cried out, “How can you be sleeping so soundly! Get up and call to your god! Perhaps he will be kind to us and we will not perish.”<sup>25</sup> (Jon. 1:2–5)

Like Noah, Jonah refrains from warning the people of the coming catastrophe. In this version of the story, however, the prophet is not simply inactive; he is *actively opposed* to intervening on the people’s behalf. God wants Jonah to “get up,” seemingly to meet eye to eye the evil that has “risen up” before Him (Jon. 1:1). In response to God’s order to “get up,” Jonah gets up. But instead of getting up to “go to Nineveh and call before it,” Jonah gets up *to flee* God by going as far as he can in the opposite direction, to Tarshish.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in contrast to God’s order to “get up,” Jonah “goes down, *y-r-d*,” three times. First, he “goes down” to Jaffa. Next, he “goes down” into the ship. Finally, he “goes down” into the lower hold of the ship, where he “fell into a deep sleep” (v. 5)<sup>27</sup> The Hebrew word *va-yeradam*, he fell deeply asleep, plays phonetically on the word *va-yered*, he went down.<sup>28</sup> Jonah seeks to escape God’s merciful command

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25. Ibid.

26. Ibn Ezra brings an opinion that Tarshish is Tunis, the most distant corner of the Mediterranean, which was the farthest known western part of the world (Jon. 1:3 s.v. Tarshish). God had said to go in the opposite direction, eastward to Nineveh in what is now Iraq. With his chosen destination, Jonah makes the utmost geographic effort to “flee from before the Lord.”

27. Further evidence of Jonah’s active resistance to God’s desires can be found later in the verse. Instead of complying with God’s wishes to denounce the evil that had risen “before Me [l’efanai]” (Jon. 1:2), Jonah repeatedly flees “from *before the Lord* [mi-lifnei Adonai],” a detail that is mentioned twice in v. 3, and again in v. 10. How can one flee from before God? Uriel Simon suggests that although his flight takes a physical form, what Jonah really seeks is emotional and psychological distance from God. His physical motion symbolizes his psychic condition, much as Abraham’s “here I am [hinnehi]” (Gen. 22:2) signifies his emotional readiness to do God’s will. See Simon, *Mikra le-Yisrael*, 41. Support for the notion that “fleeing God” reflects an internal distancing from the divine can be found in Gen. 4:16, in which Cain, in his estrangement from God following the murder of his brother, goes out “from before the Lord.”

28. I heard this suggestion in a lecture by Nehama Leibowitz on the Book of Jonah.

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by sinking into a deep slumber, an extreme psychological manifestation of the flight he began in verse 3.<sup>29</sup>

The Book of Jonah has begun to revise the story of Noah, presenting a more compassionate attitude by God toward His world, combined with a less charitable perspective by God's prophet. The result is Jonah's desperate attempt to avoid the divine charge, as he seeks to escape from God in any way possible.

But the Book of Jonah recasts the story of Noah in another way: by taking a new look at the emotional toll exacted on the prophet as a result of his refusal to help humanity. While Noah *ended* his career in a state of self-induced unconsciousness soon followed by his death, Jonah *begins* by putting himself to sleep. This is the first expression of an ongoing death-wish, further exhibited in Jonah's request that the sailors cast him overboard (Jon. 1:12), and in the final chapter of the book, by his cry, "Please Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live" (4:3).<sup>30</sup>

The Book of Jonah questions the inevitability of Noah's end. It asks not only if a failed society can be rehabilitated, but if a failed prophet can be reformed as well. This time God refuses to let the prophet ignore his responsibility to the world, to wallow in his own self-destructive feelings, and to die. Instead, God sends messengers to pursue Jonah into his exile. Their task is to shake Jonah out of his slumber, to urge other choices upon him, and consequently, to return him to life. If God's messengers can help Jonah to acknowledge his oneness with the world, he might act to save it. And by striking a more compassionate stance toward the rest of humanity, this time the prophet might find forgiveness within himself as well, thereby avoiding the tragic fate of Noah.

We turn back to the story's beginning, to Jonah's role as defiant messenger. Jonah's refusal to do God's bidding is laden with irony. As we have seen, Jonah shares his name with Noah's dove, both *Yonah* in Hebrew. The dove is the Bible's prototypically faithful messenger, appropriately chosen by Noah to bring some sign of the earth's condition fol-

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29. Reiner, *Mo'adei Nehama*, 365.

30. For further expressions of Jonah's death wish, see Jon. 4:8-9.

lowing the Flood (Gen. 8:8–12).<sup>31</sup> From the title of Jonah’s book, we might expect it to feature a prophet who delivers messages. Instead, the story unfolds as a series of messages delivered *by others to the prophet*. God dispatches His many messengers: human beings, animals, and forces of nature, to wear away at Jonah’s resistance.

God’s opening speech introduces certain key terms, which lay the literary groundwork for the agents He will send to Jonah. God orders Jonah to “*get up* and go to Nineveh the *great* city and *call* before it,” (Jon. 1:2) words that soon find their echoes in unexpected ways. Jonah will not *get up* to go to the *great* city, nor will he *call* upon it. Instead, these terms will be ironically assigned to God’s messengers, who will apply subtle pressure on Jonah to do God’s bidding. First, God casts a “*great* wind” upon the sea, followed by a “*great* storm,” reminders of the “*great* city” that awaits him. Next, the ship’s captain serves as God’s mouthpiece, reiterating two of the three verbs in God’s order to Jonah. God had said, “*Get up*, go, and *call* [to the people of Nineveh]” (v.2); now the captain says, “*Get up* and *call* [to your god]” (v. 6).<sup>32</sup> From the very beginning of the story, there are literary hints that while Jonah will not deliver God’s messages, others will deliver messages to *him*.

Of all the book’s messengers, it is the sailors who are the most compelling and surprising. We return to the text of Jonah 1 in order to closely examine their behavior.

The sailors feared, and they cried out, each to his own god; and they flung the ship’s cargo overboard to make it lighter for them. And Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went over to him and

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31. Noah first chose the inappropriate raven, which did not complete its mission (Gen. 8:7).

32. Although twice ordered to “call” in Jonah 1 – once to save the people of Nineveh and then again to save the people on the boat – Jonah never does. In the first chapter of his book, he steadfastly refuses to save Nineveh by calling to them, or to save the ship by calling out to God. Significantly, the only people who actually do call in this chapter are the sailors: “Then they called out to the Lord: O please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life” (v. 14).

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cried out, “How can you be sleeping so soundly! Get up and call to your god! Perhaps he will be kind to us and we will not perish.”

The men said to one another, “Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this evil thing has come upon us.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. They said to him, “Tell us, regarding whom has this evil thing befallen us? What is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?” “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I fear the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made both the sea and the land.” The men felt a great fear, and they asked him, “What have you done!” because the men knew he was fleeing from the Lord – for so he had told them. They said to him, “What must we do to you to make the sea calm around us?” For the sea was growing more and more stormy. He said to them, “Lift me up and cast me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know [*yode’ a ani*] that this great storm came upon you on my account.”

And the men rowed hard to return to the shore, but they could not, for the sea was growing more and more stormy about them. They called out to the Lord: “Oh, please Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person! For you, O Lord, by Your will You have brought this about.” And they lifted Jonah and cast him overboard, and the sea stopped raging. The men feared the Lord greatly; they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and they made vows.<sup>33</sup> (Jon. 1:5–16)

These unusual men first appear as “sailors” (Jon. 1:5), people defined solely by their profession. Gradually, they evolve into “men” (vv. 10, 16) who are capable of remarkable personal development.<sup>34</sup> Their progress is evident in the different types of fear they experience. At first, as simple sailors, they fear nature’s might (v. 5) and call out to their various gods for salvation. Then, when Jonah informs them of the all-powerful God he worships, “the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land” (v. 9), they fear again, this time as men. As a result of Jonah’s words they are

33. Author’s translation.

34. Reiner, *Mo’adei Nehama*, p. 368.

moved to consider the possibility of one God, more powerful than any they had imagined. Finally, they achieve a “great fear of the Lord” (v. 16), bringing sacrifices and making vows to Him.<sup>35</sup>

The sailors’ development, both religious and moral, is extraordinary. At first, when the stormy sea threatens their lives, they pray to their gods and heave overboard, *t-v-l*, all excess weight. They also draw lots, hoping to find the person responsible for their peril. They will presumably cast off the offender with the other jetsam that endangers their ship. But when the lots implicate Jonah, they instead ask him a string of questions, including, “What must we do to you to make the sea calm around us?” Jonah instructs them to “lift me up and cast me – using the root *t-v-l* again – into the sea” (Jon. 1:12). Yet, instead the sailors frantically try to row back to shore (v. 13), risking their own lives in order to spare his. Only when all hope is lost do they finally throw him into the sea in order to save themselves.<sup>36</sup> And even then, the sailors continue to hold out hope for the survival of the man who has imperiled them. They call out to God: “Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person” (v. 14). Although Jonah has explicitly admitted that he is *not* innocent (v. 12), they continue to consider him as such and to search for a way to spare his life. This exceptional ability to consider charitable alternatives to what their own eyes and ears perceive is the defining feature of the sailors.

A midrashic source offers an intriguing angle on the sailors’ transformation into *anashim*, the Hebrew term for “men,” or more inclusively,

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35. Ibid.

36. The extraordinary efforts of the sailors draw the attention of the authors of the midrash, leading them to the following embellishment of the story: “What did they (the sailors) do? They lifted Jonah and held him over the sides of the boat and said, ‘God who is Lord of the world, do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person, for we do not know the nature of this man – though he says he is the cause of this trouble.’ They held him in the water up until his ankles, and the sea stopped raging. They brought him back to them, and the sea grew more and more stormy. They held him in the water up until his navel, and the sea stopped raging. They brought him back to them, and the sea grew more and more stormy. They held him in the water up until his neck, and the sea stopped raging. They brought him back to them, and the sea grew more and more stormy, until they threw him in completely” (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 9, *Tanhuma* 96). These sources are brought in Reiner, *Mo’adei Nehama*, 369.



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“people.” In this view, the boat’s occupants are *all* people; they are a symbolic microcosm of humanity at large.<sup>37</sup> Read this way, the moral excellence exhibited by the sailors hints at a universal potential for selfless, righteous behavior. Moreover, the image of a floating universe with a prophet on board presents yet another contrast with the story of Noah. In the Flood narrative, the *prophet floated* safely in his boat as the world around him drowned. In the Book of Jonah, the *world floats* as the prophet faces death by drowning. Furthermore, in an ironic narrative twist, the world is now more moral and more compassionate than the prophet. Rather than leaving the doomed to die at sea – as Noah did with his contemporaries – the boat’s inhabitants strive mightily to keep their fellow human being dry and safe.

The sailors ask nine questions, with the question “what,” *mah*, recurring most often: “Because of *whom* is this evil; *what* is your business? *Where* have you come from? *What* is your country, and of *what* people are you? (Jon. 1:8) *What* must we do to make the sea calm around us?” (v. 11). These remarkable men are open and honest questioners. This is underscored not only by the interrogative inflection of their speech, but by the use of the word “*ulay*,” perhaps, by the ship’s captain. Though unfamiliar with Jonah’s god, the captain is willing to consider the possibility of His unparalleled power and mercy: “perhaps [*ulay*] the god will be kind to us and we will not perish” (v. 6). The captain’s use of the word *ulay*, with its sense of expansive potential, evokes Abraham’s pleas on behalf of the people of Sodom. In both cases, there is no tangible sign to suggest that reality might be different than it appears. Yet Abraham is able to imagine the presence of righteousness lying hidden among the pervasive evil of the city. Likewise, the ship’s polytheistic captain, who knows nothing of Jonah’s God, is willing to consider the possibility that He will prove powerful, benevolent, and responsive enough to save their ship. The openness displayed by Abraham, the ship’s captain, and the sailors contrasts starkly with Jonah’s stubborn certainty throughout the book. Unlike the sailors, who speak in questions, Jonah expresses

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37. When the text says, “Each man called out to his god,” certain midrashim conclude that all 70 nations of the earth were represented on the boat. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 10, *Yalkut Shimoni* 550.

himself with declarative certainty:<sup>38</sup> “for I know [yode’a ani] that this terrible storm came upon you on my account” (v. 12).<sup>39</sup> Later, he again speaks with absolute assuredness: “for I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God (Jon. 4:2).”<sup>40</sup>

The sailors’ receptiveness to God reaches its peak at the chapter’s end when they bring sacrifices and make vows, *va-yideru nedarim*. Perhaps their actions provide a literary contrast to those of the close-minded prophet. In his efforts to escape God and to cling to his certainties, Jonah began a moral and religious descent, *va-yered*, וִירַד. With their extraordinary openness, the sailors replace Jonah’s downward motion with the phonetically inverse *va-yidderu*, וִידְדְרוּ, they made vows. Their response to Jonah’s descent is their emphatic display of spiritual and moral ascent.

#### JONAH SON OF AMITTAI

While the sailors are open and growing, evolving from simple “sailors” to God-fearing “men,” Jonah remains fixed and unyielding. The sailors, as representatives of all of humanity, are ready to consider new truths, fearing a previously unknown God and ultimately worshipping Him. As suggested by his patronymic “Amittai,” derived from the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, Jonah stays rooted to truth as he defines it. He lives his life as the “son of Amittai,” the offspring and purveyor of his own inexorable truths.<sup>41</sup>

It is in this light that we might best understand Jonah’s objection to delivering God’s warning to the people of Nineveh. Jonah reasons that if human nature is fixed, if truths once learned are never questioned,

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38. I first heard this contrast in the modalities of Jonah and the sailors presented in a lecture by Avivah Zornberg.

39. The sailors break from their interrogative style only twice. The first time is when they state that they “know” that Jonah was fleeing God, because Jonah had told them. This statement reflects Jonah’s certainty, not their own. The second time is when they plead to God for Jonah’s life. They state, “For You, O Lord, by Your will, have brought this about” (Jon. 1:14). This declaration is really a submission of their own decision-making capabilities to God’s greater wisdom and power.

40. Although it would seem that Jonah’s certainty regarding God’s mercy is laudable, we will see that Jonah pronounces these words as a complaint, not as praise.

41. I first heard this suggestion in a lecture given by Nehama Leibowitz.

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then repentance is impossible. To offer a second chance to the people of Nineveh would be to indulge in an illusion.

Jonah's penchant for "truth" comes into conflict with his perception of God's functioning in the world. In fact, when Jonah later articulates his reason for fleeing, he hints at the absence of truth in God's actions:

That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know [*yadati*] that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)

With this statement, Jonah invokes the formula Moses used in addressing God after the sin of the Golden Calf in the Book of Exodus. There, Moses called God "a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and *truth*"<sup>42</sup> (Exod. 34:6).

But Jonah adopts this convention only to alter it for his own divergent intentions. Through his slight modification of Moses' words, Jonah sounds his objection to God's running of the world, in which God's attribute of "truth" is replaced by His "renouncing of punishment."<sup>43</sup> Jonah's rendition of God's attributes reads not as praise, but as an accusation. For Jonah, God has inexcusably strayed from His own exacting standards of truth.

Jonah's full name, "Jonah son of Amittai," a "dove the son of truth," suggests a deep conflict that lies at the heart of the book that bears his name. On the one hand, Jonah is to be God's faithful messenger, a quintessential "*Yonah*," called upon to deliver God's message of mercy to the wayward people of Nineveh. But, on the other hand, Jonah is also a man of truth, the "son of Amittai" who yearns for a strict correlation between actions and consequences. Thus far, like Noah before the Flood, Jonah's sense of truth leads him toward detachment from his fellow human beings. He looks on from a safe distance, secure in his conviction that the guilty should receive what they deserve.

Jonah seems unaware of God's post-Flood forbearance and His

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42. Author's translation.

43. Ibid. See also Reiner, *Mo'adei Nehama*, 374–75.

pledge never again to destroy every living thing, despite the continued unworthiness of the human species (Gen. 9:21). The sailors act as God's messengers to Jonah, demonstrating humanity's capacity for self-transformation. These anonymous "men" respond to God's word, delivered by Jonah, with alacrity and sincerity. Yet Jonah himself remains firmly attached to his implacable "truth," the immutable nature of the human psyche.

Both Noah and Jonah are guided by their sense of certainty. They "know" that the human heart is unalterably as God describes it in Genesis: "only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5), and that death is the only corrective to such persistent depravity. But this conviction faces serious challenge in the Book of Jonah, the sequel to the story of Noah. Instead of upholding the prophet's orderly world view, God sends messengers who provoke Jonah by posing question after question. In a very real sense, their mode of discourse is their message: life, conscious of its own possibility, is a question rather than an answer. Human motives are not simply self-reinforcing and static. They are hidden, unpredictable, and endlessly dynamic.

#### **NINEVEH: THE GREAT CITY OVERTURNED**

For further insight into the development of Jonah's character, we examine his interaction with another population that is emblematic of humanity, the people of Nineveh. The third chapter of the Book of Jonah begins: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time" (Jon. 3:1). Reading closely, we note the double entendre contained in these words. In one sense, God's word is intended for the people of Nineveh, as Jonah is again instructed to warn them of the coming destruction. Jonah, then, is God's agent, and the word of the Lord comes to him so that he might convey it to others. But on another level, Jonah *himself* is the intended recipient of God's word, and the people of Nineveh are God's messengers. Read in this way, the first time Jonah received God's "word" was in Jonah 1, through the remarkable behavior of the sailors. Now the text announces that the word of God is about to visit Jonah again, this time by means of the exceptional actions of another "messenger" population, the people of Nineveh.

We now turn to the full text of Jonah 3 in order to explore the

effect that God's messengers, Jonah and the people of Nineveh, will have on one another. We will consider whether Jonah will manage to stir the people to repentance, and whether the people will cause Jonah to reconsider his unyielding position on the human capacity for change.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Get up and go to Nineveh the great city, and call upon it the calling that I will tell you." Jonah got up and went to Nineveh in accordance with the Lord's command. And Nineveh was a great city to God – a three days' walk across. Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and called: "In another forty days Nineveh shall be overturned!"

The people of Nineveh believed in God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast – of flock or herd – shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth – man and beast – and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows [*mi yode'a*] but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish."

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God regretted the evil He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out (Jon. 3:3–10).<sup>44</sup>

In Jonah 1, God had commanded Jonah to "get up, go, and call." But Jonah refused; he "got up" only to flee God's presence. When God now issues a nearly identical command, Jonah complies: "Jonah *got up* and *went* to Nineveh in accordance with the Lord's command... and he *called*." We see the first stirrings of change in Jonah. But whether his outward obedience is accompanied by an internal shift remains to be seen.

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44. Author's translation.

To find out, we look closely at Jonah's speech to the people of Nineveh, remaining mindful from the outset of the symbolic value of that city. Twice within the space of two verses (Jon. 3:2, 3) we are reminded that Nineveh is "the great city." In fact, this designation is given four times in the four chapters of this book, and once at the time of its inception as a city, immediately following the story of Noah in Genesis (10:12).<sup>45</sup> Nineveh is the quintessential metropolis, a place of teeming humanity, a symbol, like the ship in Jonah 1, of the entire world. In fact, the two words in Hebrew – **אֹנִיָּה** and **נִינְוָה** (ship and Nineveh respectively) are near anagrams. For the second time in his book, Jonah comes face to face with the world.

Jonah delivers a succinct prophecy: "In another forty days Nineveh will be overturned," which is astonishingly effective. Whole volumes of the prophets have been devoted to impassioned, verbose, and ultimately unsuccessful warnings intended to move the people to repent. Yet here, Jonah, the reluctant prophet, utters five Hebrew words and the city undergoes an immediate spiritual transformation. Why?

Jonah uses language that draws on two known catastrophes. First, the forty day warning period recalls Noah's Flood, which continued for forty days and forty nights. Next, with the word "overturned," from the Hebrew root **h-f-kh**, Jonah's prophecy graphically evokes the devastation in Sodom:

And God overturned [**h-f-kh**] those cities and the entire plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground... God removed Lot from the upheaval [**h-f-kh**] where he overturned [**h-f-kh**] the cities in which Lot dwelled.<sup>46</sup> (Gen. 19:25, 29)

It would appear that Jonah chooses these frightening images because

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45. It is unclear from the verse in Genesis to which city the term "great city" refers: Resen, Kelah, or Nineveh. Although in its context, Nineveh is the least likely referent, it is significant that from its very inception, Nineveh is tied to the adjectival phrase "great city."

46. Ibid. Author's translation.

they reflect his conviction that the people of Nineveh deserve to meet the same end as the victims of Noah's Flood and of God's destruction in Sodom. Jonah's terse, declarative tone supports the notion that he views the impending devastation as the city's inevitable and well-deserved fate: "In another forty days Nineveh *will* be overturned."

But Jonah's tenor reflects an attitude that is at odds with God's intentions. In the Flood narrative, God did not give His prophet any role in warning the people of the coming disaster. But here God twice orders the prophet to "call upon"<sup>47</sup> the people. As we have seen, it is likely that God's wish, which underlies His appointment of Jonah as messenger, is that Jonah's "calling" would lead to the people's repentance, which would, in turn, bring about their salvation.

Jonah finds himself in a difficult position, because he has been ordered to do something he does not believe in. And so he strikes a dubious compromise. In deference to God's power, he technically follows His orders, announcing the threatened devastation. But although Jonah may have no control over the basic content of God's message, he does control its mode of delivery. Instead of issuing a rousing address to inspire the people toward repentance, Jonah pares his words down to the barest minimum, revealing his own wishes by including graphic literary images of the Flood and of Sodom. And instead of offering the people a plan for escaping annihilation, Jonah announces their destruction as inevitable fact. In these ways, Jonah undermines the very repentance he has been summoned to initiate, as he continues to stubbornly resist the notion of sincere and enduring change.

If Jonah intends for his words to convey the certainty of God's punishment, how do the people of Nineveh receive them? Rashi points out that the root *h-f-kh* can denote not only destruction and devastation, but can also signal an overturning of actions and a reversal of consequences.<sup>48</sup> This bears itself out elsewhere in the Bible, such as in the

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47. In Jonah 1, God says "*u-kerā aleha*;" in chapter 3, "*u-kerā eleha*." Despite the shift from *ayin* to *aleph* in *aleha* and *eleha* respectively, the meaning is essentially the same.

48. Rashi on 3:4, s.v. "*nehefakhet*." Rashi claims an intended double entendre on the part of Jonah. Both choices – destruction or turnabout through repentance – stand before you, and one will occur within forty days. When faced with such certainty, the people naturally opted for repentance and survival.

verses “You turned [*h-f-kh*] my lament into dancing” (Ps. 30:12) and its converse, “Our dancing is turned [*h-f-kh*] into mourning” (Lam. 5:15). While Jonah may have intended a single, deterministic statement of fact, the people of Nineveh hear something else, an optimistic double entendre. On the one hand, they might persist in their evil ways. In that case they will be met with total Sodom-like destruction. But, on the other hand, they hold the power to avoid that destruction. If, within the space of forty days they *overturn* their actions and sincerely repent, their fate, too, will be *overturned*. Although he does not intend it, Jonah’s words ring out with the sounds of untold possibility, of *ulay*. The people, open to life’s mysterious potential, seize the possibility and immediately repent.

Like the sailors, the citizens of Nineveh show a remarkable capacity to explore and embrace the unknown, including a belief in God<sup>49</sup> (Jon. 1:16 and 3:5). Both populations, moreover, have leaders who play an integral role in their openness to the unforeseen. When the ship’s captain said: “Get up! Call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish” (1:6), he modeled his sailors’ open attitude toward the world. In a similar vein, the king of Nineveh says: “Who knows [*mi yode’a*] but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we will not perish” (3:9). The captain and the king stand in contrast to Jonah and Noah, who, in their insistence on accepting only what is outwardly apparent, that which they “know,” resist the challenge of effecting change. Instead, the two prophets stand apart from their charges, leaving them to meet a fate separate from their own.

Ultimately, though Jonah did not think it possible, the people of Nineveh achieve genuine repentance, their words backed up by unasailable deeds:

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God regretted the evil He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. (Jon. 3:10)

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49. The sailors discover “the Lord,” while the people of Nineveh speak of God (*Elohim*). The precise distinctions between these terms, while very significant, are beyond the scope of this work.



## *The Wings of the Dove*

In response to the people's renunciation of their evil ways, God annuls His evil decree. But it remains to be seen whether the people manage to affect Jonah as well, reversing his deeply-rooted assumptions about the immutability of the human psyche.

### THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

We have seen many inverse parallels between the Book of Jonah and the story of Noah. These literary inversions, along with the modeling of the outstanding heroes of the Book of Jonah, point to humanity's inexhaustible capacity to reverse its direction and its fate, a capacity insistently denied by the book's title character. What separates Jonah from the populations he encounters is the latter's ability to embrace a sense of "*ulay*." The sailors on the boat and the people of Nineveh, both of whom are worlds in miniature, hold the capacity for radical change, since they never cease to consider such change possible.

What, then, becomes of Jonah? Throughout his book, although God repeatedly exposes him to humanity in transition, Jonah clings to his absolutes, looking for consistency and truth instead of nuance and flexibility. As we have seen, the two worlds Jonah has encountered, the ship and Nineveh, beckon Jonah to recognize the world's transformative ability and then to view himself as a natural part of the equation. Jonah's name, *Yonah* in Hebrew, completes the book's play on names: **יונה-אוניה-נינה**. In fact, the letters of the Hebrew name *Yonah*, **יונה**, are fully contained in both the words **נינה** (Nineveh) and **אוניה** (ship).<sup>50</sup> This wordplay hints at a boundless opportunity for human growth shared

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50. Moreover, on the basis of these similarities, one might suggest yet another possible reading of Jonah's decree: "In forty days **נינה** will be overturned." The goal is for **יונה** (Jonah) to see himself in **נינה** (Nineveh), an act symbolized by the transposing or "overturning" the letters of **נינה** into the letters of Jonah's name, **יונה**. Read this way, Jonah's announcement is an unwitting proclamation of his own ability to be transformed along with the people. In another forty days, Nineveh will be "overturned," i.e., Jonah will come to see himself as a transposed form of the people of Nineveh; thus he will see himself as one who shares their fate. Not to be relegated to mere fanciful wordplay, this biblical technique of transposing letters in order to connect words and concepts is particularly evident in the Jacob stories of Genesis. See Shmuel Klitsner's analysis of the words Jacob and Jabbok, *minha* and *mahane*, *bekhora* and *berakha*, *gid* and *gedi*, etc., in *Wrestling Jacob*, 140.

by all its characters. If Nineveh and the ship are microcosms of an ever-evolving world, so too, is Jonah himself.

As we approach the end of Jonah's book, we wonder whether or not he will see things this way. If he is able to adjust his perspective, perhaps he could escape Noah's self-destructive descent into oblivion. Perhaps as a result, he might spread his wings and fly, like Noah's dove, to the promise of new beginnings.

Appropriately, the Book of Jonah ends with a question, this time posed by God.<sup>51</sup> God's rhetorical question comes after the appearance of additional "messengers" to Jonah. First, God caused a gourd<sup>52</sup> to grow spontaneously, offering Jonah shade and causing him great happiness. God then appointed a worm to attack the gourd and dry it up. Jonah is so distressed by the loss of the gourd that he expresses his wish to die. At this point, God responds with the question that closes the book:

Then the Lord said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?" (Jon. 4:10–11)

The interrogative form recalls the inflection of the sailors and the king of Nineveh in previous chapters. Moreover, it highlights God's role as the initiator and chief proponent of a new mode of operation in the world. Since the Flood, God has stretched His "heart" and made room for humanity to change its heart as well. As it turns out, what God declares need not come to pass; seeing the world in a godly way is often the very opposite of seeing it in absolute terms. Perhaps God hints at this by offering the rainbow as a symbol of non-aggression toward the world. After the devastation of the Flood, God signals that henceforth

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51. In fact, all of God's utterances to Jonah in chapter 4, though rhetorical, are in interrogative form.

52. NJPS offers "gourd" as a secondary definition of the difficult word "*kikayon*," after "*ricinus* plant." The remainder of the above translation is in line with NJPS.

## *The Wings of the Dove*

His will, like the rainbow, is pliant, and that colors can shade into one another with room for nuance.

In this sequel to the story of the Flood, doubt and possibility, gentler responses to the vagaries of human nature, replace declarative statements and inflexible judgments. This time, the world, following God's lead, conducts itself according to the principles of *mi yode'a*, who knows, and *ulay*, perhaps. God's use of the words *asher lo yada*, "persons who do not yet know" (Jon. 4:11) points both to humanity's weakness and greatness as presented by the Book of Jonah. On the one hand, human beings are clueless. Like the animals, they are frequently given to expressions of their deepest, darkest nature and so will inevitably fail again and again. Yet, on the other hand, their lack of absolute "knowing" is their greatest strength. Like Abraham, the people in this book are endlessly imaginative about humanity's capacity to renounce its evil leanings and to reinvent itself.

Jonah hears God's final argument, but fails to respond. The messages have been delivered, first by God's agents and now by God Himself, but we do not know if Jonah receives them. It is not clear if Jonah can see himself as one with the world, with the same limitations, the same need for mercy, and the same inexhaustible capacity for improvement.

When we reach the end of his book, we are faced with Jonah's resounding silence, a silence that reverberates for us, and will reverberate throughout the stories we will analyze in this volume of subversive sequels. In this silence lies the hope and the opportunity of *ulay*. This word represents the potential of human beings to imagine themselves as other than they have always been and to undertake the courageous task of corrective repair that will reverse, *h-f-kh*, their standing before themselves and before God.

The open question with which the Book of Jonah concludes suggests that while there is no guarantee that humanity will embrace the opportunities for self-transformation, it is indeed possible for them to produce constructively subversive sequels within their own lives.