

# Jonah's Genocidal and Suicidal Attitude — and God's Rebuke\*

Alyssa Walker  
Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek  
alyssa.walker@evtos.hr

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## Abstract

*The Bible describes God as a judge and warrior who sometimes uses humans to execute his judgment. These violent texts are difficult, especially when they meet the definition of the modern term “genocide.” And unfortunately, at points in history self-professing Christians have misappropriated such texts to justify genocidal campaigns. Fortunately, Scripture read as canon resists such misuse. Many texts teach God’s people how they should respond to the “other,” and it is never with violence. One such text is the book of Jonah. A literary reading of the book with an eye for intertextuality and with sensitivity to the contributions of liberation theology and post-colonialism reveals a prophet whose genocidal desire for the Ninevites’ destruction was so strong that if they lived, he preferred to die. God rebukes this attitude. Jonah functions canonically to direct God’s people away from hatred and toward compassion.*

Keywords: *genocide, suicide, violence in the Bible, canonical context, Jonah, intertextuality, postcolonialism, liberation theology*

## Introduction

There are many difficulties in the Old Testament, but depictions of God as a “genocidal general” (Seibert, 2009, 32) are arguably the most troublesome. Mak-

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ing things worse is the fact that throughout history some self-professing Christians have used such texts to justify their own genocidal campaigns. One immediately thinks of the Crusades, or the slaughter of Native Americans under the banner of “manifest destiny,”<sup>1</sup> or the nationalistic Serbian poem, *The Mountain Wreath*, which echoed conquest accounts “to validate and valorize the deadly violence visited on Muslims all across the Balkans” (Phillips, 2009, 82-83). These reprehensible moments are dark stains on the history of Christianity.

Nevertheless, using the violent texts of the OT to justify violence is a misappropriation of Scripture based on misinterpretation. People tend to twist God’s words and ignore his clear commands.<sup>2</sup> “Human beings will do what they are bent upon doing; their history manifests this” (Farooq, 2009, 36-37). Fortunately, Scripture read canonically resists such misuse. Many biblical texts teach God’s people how they should respond to the “other,”<sup>3</sup> and it is never with violence. One such text is the book of Jonah. Methodologically, this paper will read Jonah with an eye for intertextuality and with sensitivity to the contributions of liberation theology and post-colonialism, revealing a prophet whose genocidal desire for the Ninevites’ destruction was so strong that, if they lived, he preferred to die. God’s rebuke of this attitude allows the book of Jonah to function canonically to direct God’s people away from hatred and toward compassion.

## **Jonah’s Canonical Context: Violence and Judgment in the Old Testament**

In order to understand the weight of Jonah’s canonical contribution, it is necessary to briefly summarize the pertinent themes of the canon to which it contributes. One central theme of the OT is God’s redemptive plan for the world, and violence is sometimes present as a tool working toward ultimate redemption. Three violent themes tend to make us particularly uncomfortable, and are also themes the book of Jonah can address: *herem* warfare, God as judge, and God as warrior.

- 1 Rhetoric related to manifest destiny often identified Native Americans as Canaanites and Amalekites (Nunpa, 2009, 51-55).
- 2 Paul R. Bartrop says the Ten Commandments leave “no room for the kind of activities that can lead to genocide or justify it,” but points out that even as God was giving the Ten Commandments, the people had turned away from him (2009, 218-19).
- 3 This term is commonly used in genocide studies to refer to groups of people with clear identifying features who are prone to being stereotyped or demonized.

### *Herem Warfare*

In the Ancient Near East (ANE) there was no such thing as secular vs. sacred war. All war—all of life—was sacred. The gods were involved in all parts of life, including warfare, which they commanded and empowered.<sup>4</sup> Israel was like her neighbors in this, except that Israel waged war at the command of only one god: Yahweh.

Multiple times in the OT the Israelites waged a battle or war where they killed every man, woman, and child (Nu 21, Joshua, 1 Sam 15). According to the UN definition, these texts describe genocide.<sup>5</sup> However, we must avoid rushing to use a modern term to describe an ancient practice. Doing so misses the historical and cultural contexts, which are the basis for understanding, though not for excusing, the practice. Gary Phillips urges deep engagement with violent texts, but wisely cautions that it must be historically grounded.

Unless we confront sacred texts with eyes wide open, reading for what they say, we will not understand with requisite specificity how scripture in the name of religion scripts violence, and how it can be subverted. . . *Such reading must be historically grounded.* Responsible readers must understand the historical origins of the scriptures read and lived with and the forces at work that brought them into being. (2009, 86, italics mine)

So let us examine the historical context. In the ANE, war waged with the intent to kill whole people groups was common, and ancient Israel was both victim and aggressor.<sup>6</sup> In Hebrew and Moabite the root describing this was *hrm* (Lohfink, 1986, 5:190).<sup>7</sup> The concept included three ideas: 1) devoted to God, 2) banned

- 4 “Nebuchadnezzar asserts that Marduk has given many peoples into his hand. The same divine activity in history is attributed to the sun goddess of Arinna on behalf of a Hittite king, Mur-sulis I (1330–1295 b.c.)” (Carpenter, 2009, 464).
- 5 “Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (Resolution 260 [III] A of the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948).
- 6 On the Moabite stone Mesha says he devoted 7,000 Israelite prisoners to “Asior Kemos” (Lilley, 1993, 177). Genocide is reported unemotionally in the Mari letters, “all the members of the tribe of Ya’ilanu were killed,” and in Egyptian descriptions of the exploits of Thutmose I, a “supposedly more merciful” pharaoh, who left “not a single survivor” (Lohfink, 1986, 5:192).
- 7 Philip D. Stern argues extensively that *herem* was “part and parcel of Moabite religion, not just a recent borrowing from Israel (1991, 218, see 19-56 for his full argumentation).

from common use, and 3) to be destroyed.<sup>8</sup> It is often translated “devoted to destruction.” It was applied to goods which would have become war spoils or to people who would have become slaves (Lilley, 1993, 177). As brutal as the practice seems today, by diminishing the material benefits of waging war it actually mitigated against war-mongering.

### ***God as Judge***

Yahweh’s purpose in commanding *herem* warfare was to execute judgment on wicked groups of people known for violence and abuses of human rights.<sup>9</sup> Today, for the majority of people living in Western cultures the concept of a judgmental God is difficult. The biblical portrayals of God as judge are de-emphasized in favor of biblical portrayals of God as love. What is fascinating is that this squeamishness toward judgment is cultural. Liberation Theology rejoices in images of God as judge.<sup>10</sup> Knowing that God judges brings hope to the oppressed—that their oppressors will not be allowed to persist in their evil ways forever. In order for God to love the oppressed, he must act as a judge to the oppressors.

For example, one of the greatest moments of liberation and redemption in the OT was also a moment of great judgment: the Exodus. On the same day the Israelites celebrated the first Passover, “the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt” (Ex 12:29).<sup>11</sup> The killing was the leverage that caused the Israelites to be released from slavery. And then the parting of the Red Sea saved the Israelites while drowning the Egyptian army (Ex 14:26-28). In order for God to liberate (love!) the oppressed people of Israel, he had to judge their oppressors—the Egyptians.

8 The verbal form can be used in a simplified meaning “to destroy,” but the noun always carries the fuller religious force (Lilley, 1993, 177).

9 We see this in Gen 15:16 when God explains why the Conquest will be delayed 400 years: “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” God is patient—he does not bring judgment lightly or quickly. Furthermore, Israel is not exempt from God’s warfare. God sends Babylon to judge Judah through war (Jer 25:9). The issue that caused God to go to war was never ethnicity or nationality, but always justice. And when God does judge, it is with grief (Jer 8:18-9:11). “We can be sure that God . . . grieved for the loss of the Canaanite children, as well as their parents” (Holloway, 1998, 62).

10 Gustavo Gutiérrez says, “The prophets announce a kingdom of peace. But peace presupposes the establishment of justice . . . It presupposes the defense of the rights of the poor, punishment of the oppressors, a life free from the fear of being enslaved by others, the liberation of the oppressed” (1988, 97).

11 All Bible quotations will be from the NRSV.

### **God as Warrior**

God's role in war is to act as a divine king and warrior who commands Israel to engage in *herem* warfare and then leads them in it.<sup>12</sup> The way God the warrior leads in battle is significant. It is through miracle and not through the latest war technologies. In this way the Conquest is an extension of the miraculous events surrounding the Exodus.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the battle of Jericho is very un-battle-like, with the decisive event being a few group hikes around the city walls! And as the first battle of the Conquest, Jericho is symbolic for the whole war, which is peppered with miraculous events.<sup>14</sup>

The miraculous nature of the Conquest reminds us to not isolate it as a messy human event but rather to place it within the broader context of the OT. *Herem* warfare was both sacred and cosmic, a way of creating an orderly sphere of sacred space where people “could live and thrive.”<sup>15</sup> The world had become corrupt, but the Exodus and Conquest together represented re-creation and the possibility for restored relationship with God—not just for Israel but for all nations. So the canonical context of Jonah—at least in relation to violence and judgment—is one in which a warrior God exacts judgment on evil in order to liberate the oppressed and further his redemptive plan for the world.

### **Solutions To The Problem Of Biblical Genocide**

A few of the things said above may help us to better understand violence in the Bible, but it does not fully relieve the problem.<sup>16</sup> Others have also felt this way,

- 12 God works within human structures. “To say that God uses war is to say in effect that God uses sinful man for His purposes. . . if we were to expect to see God working only in what we might call an absolutely ‘ethical’ manner, we would in effect be denying the possibility of seeing him at work at all” (Craigie, 1978, 97).
- 13 We see this in the fact that Rahab expects God to act at Jericho in the same way he acted at the Red Sea (Josh 2:9-1).
- 14 An implication is that any use of these texts throughout history to justify violence was flawed if that violence used the war technologies of their time (and they did). “The required renunciation of military supremacy by Ancient Israel, as an expression of faith in Yahweh the Warrior, discounts the heralding of military might as a traditional Christian value” (Holloway, 1998, 68).
- 15 This view of *herem* warfare was typical in the whole ANE (Stern, 1991, 219).
- 16 Some, notably Leonard B. Glick, think that there is no solution. “It appears that if we are ever to reach the point where genocidal massacres will have become a thing of the past, it will not be owing to religions: they are part of the problem” (2009, 113). This assessment ignores the fact that the majority of 20<sup>th</sup> century victims of genocide were killed by non-religious authoritarian regimes (e.g., the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia). For a full argument against Glick, see

and it is to their solutions that we turn next. The images of God as a “genocidal general” are so difficult that the increasingly common scholarly “solution” is to find a way to entirely discredit those portions of Scripture. The approaches can be grouped into three:

*Dehistoricization/Spiritualization:* OT war narratives should not be read as accurate history. A war certainly took place, but the number of enemy deaths was exaggerated and the rhetoric of *herem* was developed during the reign of Josiah in order to strengthen Israel’s religious and national identity (Lohfink, 1986, 5:193-9).

*Textual God vs. Actual God:* OT narratives were historically accurate, but not theologically accurate. God never commanded such a thing. Instead “the Israelites used their theological rhetoric to justify their brutality” (Cowles, 2003, 13-44). Christians must read the OT with a “Christocentric hermeneutic” to discern the actual God from the text (Seibert, 2009, 183-208).

*Change between OT and NT:* The God of the OT may have been violent and ethnocentric, but Jesus Christ changed all that (e.g., Merrill, 2003, 63-94).

To the first approach we must ask, how does it help to relegate genocide to the realm of wishful thinking (Preuss, 1995, 136)? Especially wishful thinking developed under the reign of the godly reformer Josiah (2 Kgs 22-23)! The second approach subjects the Bible to reinterpretation through subjective and ever changing societal criteria about what is acceptable.<sup>17</sup> Both the second and third are Marcionite-type approaches that sideline the OT. They also have a shallow Christology—ignoring NT depictions of Jesus as warrior and judge (Matt 24:48-51; 25:31-46; Luke 21:20-28; 1 Thes 5:3; 2 Thes 1:5-10; Rev 5-20). All three approaches use different methods to reach the same end: downgrading certain portions of the Bible to a lower importance.

Because of this, from a pragmatic standpoint the above solutions are not likely to subvert violence in the name of Christianity. Why not? Because the type of person who would behave violently in the name of Christianity is either 1) knowingly manipulating religious rhetoric to justify their actions or 2) thinking

David Patterson’s article, “Getting Rid of the G-d of Abraham: A Prerequisite for Genocide.” He argues that without religion morality is determined by the powerful. “Once G-d is eliminated from our thinking, then power is the only reality and weakness is the only sin, so that the perpetrators are not in error; rather, the victims are in error for being weak. Once G-d is eliminated from our thinking, we need not become more righteous in order to be in the right; we only have to become more dangerous” (2009, 202).

17 For an excellent rebuttal of the second approach, see Suderman, 2011, 151-162.

of themselves as dutifully obeying the Bible which they take very seriously. In the case of the first, nothing will stop people from using religious rhetoric to further their aims—though the Church certainly needs to do a better job of speaking loudly against this. In the case of the second, someone who takes the Bible seriously enough to kill for it is not likely to accept the idea that parts of the Bible are wrong or unimportant. We call these people fanatics or extremists. In discussing the problem of violent or oppressive extremists, Tim Keller helpfully points us toward a solution:

Think of people you consider fanatical. They're overbearing, self-righteous, opinionated, insensitive, and harsh. Why? It's not because they are too Christian but because they are not Christian enough. They are fanatically zealous and courageous, but they are not fanatically humble, sensitive, loving, empathetic, forgiving, or understanding . . . Extremism and fanaticism, which lead to injustice and oppression, are a constant danger within any body of religious believers. For Christians, however, the antidote is not to tone down and moderate their faith, but rather to grasp a fuller and truer faith in Christ. The biblical prophets understood this well. (Keller, 2008, 57-58)

So what is needed is not for the Church to find ways to dismiss difficult texts, but for the Church to balance those texts by emphasizing other texts that teach forgiveness and understanding.

## **Reading Canonically as a Solution**

To say it another way, a better solution is to read difficult texts in light of the canon. The Bible admits that it is open to dangerous misinterpretation. Peter says that parts of the Bible are “hard to understand” and that “the ignorant and unstable twist [it] to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:16). James and John are guilty of this when they try to follow the biblical example of Elijah (2 Kgs 1:12) by offering to call down fire on the Samaritans. Jesus rebukes them for this (Luke 9:54-55). Nevertheless, the tendency of James and John is repeated throughout church history. About a former Yugoslavia war criminal who justified his actions with religious language, Nancy C. Lee says, “In co-opting religious traditions, such leaders exploit the people’s real suffering and God’s concern for them by claiming that God is only on their side and so justify their own genocidal response against the perceived oppressor. Such co-opting tacitly selects some biblical texts *while conveniently ignoring all others that would place serious ethical restraints on such behavior*” (Lee, 1998, 79). Individual biblical texts are vulnerable to selectivity, misinterpretation, and the resulting misappropriation. That is one reason we have a canon with 66 books written by dozens of authors, who give theological

insights from different angles, complementing each other to form a kaleidoscopic whole. In its entirety, the various books of the canon balance each other out and protect against misuse.<sup>18</sup>

## Jonah as a Case Study

The book of Jonah is one such text that balances the Conquest narratives.<sup>19</sup> God's rebuke of the prophet Jonah's genocidal and suicidal attitude stands as a rebuke for anyone who might be tempted to use earlier OT narrative texts to justify their hatred or violence toward others.<sup>20</sup>

### *Contributions of Liberation and Post-Colonial Perspectives*

In the past fifteen years, liberation and post-colonial perspectives<sup>21</sup> on the book of Jonah have begun to appear. They accuse traditional readings of ignoring "the power structures that historically existed within the Jonah narrative" (De LaTorre, 2007, xi). The criticism is just. Most of the thousands of pages written on Jonah since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century do not deeply consider how Assyria's role as a violent, colonizing empire should impact our reading of the book.<sup>22</sup>

It is significant, then, that the four recent liberation and postcolonial readings all take the prophet Jonah seriously (De La Torre, 2007; Riley, 2012; Ryu, 2009; and Timmer, 2009).<sup>23</sup> This moves away from a tendency in recent scholarship to

- 18 Some may argue that different theological angles in Scripture contradict rather than complement each other. This would result in a similar conclusion to #2 above, where societal criteria are used to select which of the contradictory texts should be given precedence as truth today. My approach to canon is similar to Brevard S. Childs, who sees Jonah as a "genuine Old Testament witness directed against a misunderstanding of the election of Israel" (1978, 127).
- 19 There are many. Deuteronomy, for example, explicitly limits the application of *herem* warfare to the land of Canaan (Deut 20). "The texts of Deuteronomy 20 and 7 were designed to help make the *herem* a thing of the past, without application" to any subsequent time (Stern, 1991, 217).
- 20 I am not saying that this is the only theology that can be drawn from the book. As Ehud Ben Zvi points out, "texts that are suitable for continuous rereading show at least some degree of double meaning, ambiguity and literary sophistication" (2003, 10).
- 21 I follow R. S. Sugitharajah in considering these "perspectives" rather than "methods" (1999, 3-5).
- 22 This is the author's assessment, based on a review of the literature available to her.
- 23 It may also be significant that these readings align better with those from the first to fourth centuries AD, which despite reflecting interpretive variety, read Jonah seriously and sympathetically (see Limburg, 1993, 99-104; or Ferreiro, 2003, 128-48). One recent commentary that understands Jonah seriously and sympathetically without representing a liberation or post-colonial perspective is by James Bruckner (2004, 23-25, 121-24).



view Jonah as petty and ridiculous and find humor in virtually every move he makes. One of the most recent commentaries describes this as a near consensus: “Most would agree that the book of Jonah wants us to laugh at the prophet’s incongruity and senselessness even as we are appalled by his behavior and attitude” (Walton, 2009, 104).

The tendency to laugh at Jonah is closely related to the current trend in scholarship to label the book of Jonah a parody or satire (Walton, 2009, 104). “There is in parodic writing a self-indulgent pleasure which aims not only to criticize, but to provoke laughter” (Band, 1990, 185). It seems that the more scholars read the book of Jonah as a parody/satire, the more they laugh, and vice versa. However, arguments for Jonah as a parody or satire have a significant flaw: they are unable to offer a convincing solution for why a parody on Scripture (or a satire on the prophetic institution) would subsequently be canonized as Scripture.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, there is no consensus about what is being parodied. Jonah has been labeled anti-Abraham, anti-Moses, anti-Elijah, and anti-Noah (Kim, 2007, 503). The multiplying options suggest that none are individually all that convincing.

For our purposes it is enough to say that the book of Jonah is narrative, that it has a didactic purpose, and that canonically it is prophetic. It is a prophetic didactic narrative,<sup>25</sup> most similar to the narratives describing the work of Elijah and Elisha.

Once we have decided against parody or satire as a label for the book of Jonah, then we are confronted with a character that is much more difficult to laugh at or to blame. “The whole tenor of the story is much too earnest for a satire; Jonah is not painted with the brush of mockery or disdain, but drawn with the pencil of deep and sympathetic insight into human weakness” (Goitein, 1934, 74; qtd. by Alexander, 1985, 47). And when the power structures of Jonah’s world are considered, it is easy to understand how his actions could be in earnest. Perhaps Jonah should be seen less like a ridiculous Don Quixote<sup>26</sup> and more like a ques-

24 Band’s solution that the canonizers misinterpreted the book is unconvincing (1990, 177-95).

25 A multitude of genre options have been defended, including midrash, allegory, parable, legend, novella, short story, didactic fiction, didactic history, satire, parody, etc. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century there was movement away from midrash, allegory or parable (because of the growing recognition that Jonah is too complex to be put in one of these categories) at the same time as consensus over Jonah’s fictional status grew. Nevertheless, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jonah was read as history. T. Desmond Alexander makes a compelling argument for why “didactic history” is the best genre designation for the book, whether or not one believes the events could actually have taken place (1985, 35-59). This label is not an oxymoron, as all Hebrew narratives are artfully crafted with a didactic purpose, even “historical” ones.

26 Some *Don Quixote* scholars would disagree with this label, but I use it here because Jonah scholars arguing that Jonah is satire or parody often mention it (e.g., Band, 1990, 185).

tioning prophet Habakkuk.

While all this will make us much more empathetic with Jonah, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he is a negative example. Three of the four liberation and post-colonial perspectives view Jonah this way—Ryu is the exception. He reads the book as a challenge to God's justice through the voice of Jonah, concluding that Jonah is right and God is wrong.<sup>27</sup> The huge problem with this reading is that the book would have been so blasphemous that it never would have been canonized. Furthermore, his argument rests heavily on seeing Jonah's final silence as "resistance." This ignores that fact that elsewhere in the OT, when God has the last word, it is because God has won the argument (Gen 3, 32; Ex 4; 1 Kgs 19:1-18; Jer 12, 15:10-21). Therefore, we will read with sensitivity to power structures that will make us more empathetic with the prophet Jonah, while ultimately concluding that his example is a bad one.

### **Jonah's Setting and Background**

The book of Jonah begins like many prophetic books: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai." This sets the book during the life of Jonah, son of Amittai, a professional prophet who served during the reign of Jeroboam II, King of Israel (786-746 B.C.). The international political situation during Jeroboam II's reign was relatively good for Israel. Israel's long-time enemy to the north, Damascus, had been gravely weakened by the Assyrian ruler Adad Nirari III (ca. 802 B.C.; Bright, 2000, 256). And while Adad Nirari III also exacted tribute from Joash/Jehoash (Jeroboam II's father), by 784 B.C. he was dead and Assyria entered a time of weakness (Bright, 2000, 256). The Assyrian threat was temporarily dormant. All this gave Israel one last shot at peace and strength.

King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel began to reign in Samaria; he reigned forty-one years. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD . . . he caused Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to 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 14:23-25)

We see that Jonah, son of Amittai, had prophesied and worked toward the restoration of Israel (2 Kgs 14:25). And although he served under an evil (*ra'ah*) king, there is no indication that he was evil. The setting of the book of Jonah suggests that our protagonist would have been a popular prophet known for advancing Israelite interests.

27 Ryu, 2007, 195-218. Other recent attempts to completely vindicate Jonah have been equally unconvincing (Frolov, 1999, 85-105; Perry, 2006).

While the setting is clear, the date of composition is unclear, with possibilities ranging from 750-250 B.C. The year of composition is less important than the sequence of events. Was the book composed before or after Assyria conquered Israel (722 B.C.)? The answer is most likely after. And the book would certainly have been added to the canon after Israel's fall.<sup>28</sup> We will read the book of Jonah as though Israel had already fallen victim to Assyria's war machine. The implication is that the original audience would have known that within a generation of the prophet Jonah's oracle to Nineveh, the Assyrians had turned around and exacted crushing tribute from Israel (2 Kgs 15:19-20), then attacked Israel and deported the tribe of Naphtali (2 Kgs 15:29-30), and finally conquered Israel and scattered its people (2 Kgs 17). Thus, when we read the book of Jonah two backgrounds must be kept in mind—that of the prophet and the earliest audience.<sup>29</sup>

### **A Selective Literary Re-Reading of Jonah**

The “word of the Lord” commands Jonah to “cry out against” Nineveh because of their wickedness (*ra'ah*, 1:2). And then we reach the first surprise of the book. Rather than obeying or objecting—the two options with a precedent for a prophet—Jonah flees “from the presence of the Lord” (1:3). This results in a series of ominous descents. He goes *down* to Joppa, finds a ship, and goes *down* into the hold (1:3, 5). God responds by sending a great storm against the ship. The captain is incredulous that Jonah could be asleep, “Get up, call on your god!” (1:6). Jonah never follows the advice of the captain, which is a shame, because one gets the distinct impression that if he had, God would have called off the “calamity” (*ra'ah*). And this impression is strengthened when God relents from “calamity” (*ra'ah*) after the Ninevites repent in chapter 3. But Jonah is still fleeing the presence of the Lord. If the ship was not far enough, perhaps death will be. “From Jonah's perspective drowning would be his salvation” (Trible, 1998, 201).

28 The Book of the Twelve includes the post-exilic writings of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

29 Even if one maintains a date of composition before Israel's fall, my conclusions can still stand. If eighth century Israel was strong, and if it had been a century since the Assyrians had oppressed Israel (Walton, 2009, 100), then why would Jonah desire the annihilation of the Assyrians? It is a good question. Indeed, scholars often argue against an 8<sup>th</sup> century date because the political situation does not seem to them to justify Jonah's response! But here we can learn from genocide studies. Historic memory is lengthy, strong, and creates powerful emotional responses in people. As Leo Kuper points out “I have always been impressed by the depth of historic memory, and the way in which ancient events, seemingly long consigned to oblivion, suddenly become part of the contemporary conflict” (2009, 26). It may have been some time since Assyria had been a threat to Israel, but when it was, it was a big enough threat to cause King Ahab to ally with his worst enemy—the Aramaen King Ben Hadad (Bright, 2000, 243). Additionally, Assyria had recently forced Israel to pay tribute—something that crippled economies and caused great suffering. Such things are not soon forgotten.

He chooses to go *down* once more (2:6).

The prophet's second attempt to escape is as short-lived as the first: God sends a fish to swallow him. Jonah's brush with death<sup>30</sup> drives him to thankfulness and a desperate promise of sacrifices at the temple (2:9). But God desires obedience, not sacrifice, and when Jonah returns to the land of the living, God issues his command for a second time, ushering us into the second half of the book which structurally parallels the first.

In chapter 1, God told Jonah to "get up," "go," and "proclaim," and Jonah only obeyed the first, *getting up* to flee (1:2-3). In chapter 3, God repeats the three commands and Jonah immediately obeys the first two: he *gets up* and *goes* "according to the word of the Lord" (3:3). But then there is an aside, "Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it" (3:3). And "Jonah *began* to go into the city"—*one* days walk—and *proclaimed*, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4).<sup>31</sup> So Jonah technically obeys the third command, but the brevity of his effort and speech are telling. Additionally, the usual phrases accompanying the oracle of an obedient prophet are missing. Jonah does not say, "Thus says the Lord," nor is his speech described as being "according to the word of the Lord" (Lubeck, 1988, 43).<sup>32</sup> We are starting to get the feeling that Jonah is "a prophet whose preaching does not have the purpose it should have, and whose effectiveness is the last thing he wanted" (Moberly, 2003, 167). Surprisingly, he is effective nonetheless. The Ninevites repent. God relents.

### ***Jonah's Genocidal Attitude***

So far we have mostly refrained from judging Jonah's character. The reason for this is that so far the narrator has withheld an all important piece of information: Jonah's motivation. Why did he flee? We cannot know for sure what motivation the original audience would have suspected before they reached chapter four. People are diverse, so likely there would have been multiple answers going through peoples' minds, just as there are today. Regardless, the process of revealing and withholding information creates an impression (Craig, 1990, 107). By

30 "A person is considered truly dead after three days in the grave or netherworld. . . the three days and nights in the belly of the fish in the realm of death indicates that Jonah is at the threshold of death" (Walton, 2009, 109).

31 Many have pointed out the slippery and flexible nature of the Hebrew word *haphak*, which can mean overthrow as in destroy or as in transform. Whatever the result, Jonah will be right. The use of this word also creates an allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah, which were overthrown by fire and brimstone (Gen 19:25, 29).

32 Lubeck stretches the evidence too far, however, when he concludes that "Jonah sabotaged the message so that it became an unconditional prediction implying the inescapable annihilation the prophet selfishly wished on them" (1988, 41).

gapping Jonah's motivation for flight, our motivation becomes his, so that by this point in the story we are identifying with Jonah (West, 1984, 233-41).

Finally, at the beginning of chapter 4, Jonah's motivations are revealed. What is more, we learn that Jonah did, in fact, argue with God when he first received the divine command.

O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. (4:2-3)

Whether or not the reader suspected this was coming, Jonah's motivation is clear now. Jonah wanted the Ninevites to be destroyed. He did not want to help them avert "calamity" (*ra'ah*).

Jonah is wishing destruction—something today we would call genocide—on the Ninevites, but before we rush to condemn Jonah, we again need to understand the historical context. The Assyrians were brutal and dangerous colonizers, exacting tribute and imposing policies. And when they waged war, they were known for inflicting unnecessary pain on their enemies who had surrendered—impaling and skinning them alive (Timmer, 2009, 6). One king boasted about burning alive a whole city of rebellious vassals (Tukulti Ninurta I; Niehaus, 1994, 304). The dead fared no better. In a culture where burial practices were important, the Assyrians mutilated enemy corpses, piling hands and heads before the city gates (Ashurnasirpal II and Tiglath Pileser III; Niehaus, 1994, 304). "Is it any wonder that the Hebrews despised the people of the empire? Assyria was not some nation with which Israelites had religious disagreement; rather, it was an evil empire, the mortal enemy of Israel, whose fundamental purpose was to destroy Jonah's people, the Israelite nation, and its way of life" (De la Torre, 2007, 11).

The last time Israel had met an evil enemy known for brutality, the enemy was the Canaanites, and the result was the conquest of the land and the genocide of the people. If ever someone was justified in using violent biblical texts to justify violence—it was Jonah. His situation lined up perfectly.

Furthermore, by the time the book of Jonah's earliest audience heard its message, Israel had become the victims of Assyria's brutality. Israel was wiped off the map, its inhabitants dead or forcibly scattered so that the northern kingdom was gone forever. The prophet Jonah's mission resulted in mercy for the Ninevites and the end of the Israelites.<sup>33</sup>

33 It should be pointed out that this was not inevitable. The effectiveness of Nineveh's repentance shows that the repentance of the Israelites would have been equally effective.

### ***Jonah's Suicidal Attitude***

So perhaps now we can understand a bit better why Jonah responded to mercy for the Ninevites with a request for suicide. Suicide was rare in the OT, and certainly not socially acceptable.<sup>34</sup> Most OT examples are cases where a person facing certain death kills himself in order to avoid a more shameful death.<sup>35</sup> There is one OT suicide that can be seen as a political protest. When Absalom rejected his counselor's military advice, Ahithophel "set his house in order and hanged himself" (2 Sam 17:23). The message of impending destruction that this should have sent to Absalom was also ignored, and Absalom rode out in battle to his death (2 Sam 18:15). It seems that Ahithophel was saying, "If I kill myself, perhaps you will reconsider. If I follow you, I will die anyhow." Similarly, Jonah's suicide attempt (1:12) and requests to die (4:3, 8, 9) should be seen as his protest against God's mercy to the Ninevites.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the actual suicides in the OT, there are a handful of suicidal individuals. Jonah echoes the death wish of one of them—Elijah.<sup>37</sup> Only these two ask God to take their lives in the Bible, and the phrasing is almost identical, "Now, O LORD, take away my life" (1 Kgs 19:4b; Jonah 4:3).<sup>38</sup> Both are frustrated prophets, but whereas the object of Jonah's wrath had just escaped destruction, the object of Elijah's wrath had just met destruction (1 Kgs 18:40). Elijah had just defeated the prophets of Baal and Asherah, but the Israelites are not repenting, and now Jezebel wants revenge. Elijah flees deep into the wilderness and asks to die. Briefly paraphrased, God's response is this, "You are almost done. Just train your replacement first. And be assured that your ministry is not in vain—there are faithful Israelites" (1 Kgs 19:15-18). God's response to Elijah is reassuring and affirming. Jonah, in using Elijah's words, may have been hinting, "See! He wanted to die and his enemies had been destroyed! How much more do I have a right to

34 This is still true today in the Middle East, and those countries have relatively low suicide rates (Diekstra, 1990, 72, 93). A type of suicide known there (and not in the West) is suicide as political protest. For example, on December 10, 2010, street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring.

35 Abimelech in Judg 9:54; Saul and his armor bearer in 1 Sam 31:4-5; and Zimri in 1 Kgs 16:18. Samson could arguably be included here as well, since he was blinded and enslaved, waiting to die at the hands of the Philistines (Judg 16:30).

36 A few scholars analyze Jonah from a psychological perspective as though he desired death because of individual psychological reasons like depression. These studies impose Western psychological categories on an ANE culture. For examples, see Kaplan and Schwartz, 2008, 65-79, 107-09 and Wohlgeleuter, 1981, 131-40.

37 Others who express a desire to die or who despair of life include Rebekah (Gen 25:22), Rachel (Gen 30:1), Job (Job 3), and Jeremiah (Jer 20:14-18).

38 Jonah adds "please" and the Hebrew particle that marks the direct object.

be angry enough to die when my enemies still live!”

So we see that Jonah had biblical precedent to defend both his genocidal and suicidal attitudes. If anyone had a right to use Scripture to justify violence, it was Jonah. Now that we have a better ability to empathize with Jonah, let us turn to God's response.

### ***God's Rebuke***

God responds in a way that further strengthens our parallel to Elijah. Just as God responds to Elijah with a *question* (1 Kgs 19:9), an *object lesson* (1 Kgs 19:11-12), the *question repeated* (1 Kgs 19:13), and a *speech* (1 Kgs 19:15-18), so God responds to Jonah. Only, whereas for Elijah these things are cumulatively reassuring, for Jonah they are cumulatively rebuking.

The *question* God asks Jonah is, “Is it right for you to be angry?” (4:4). Jonah's answer is to go set up camp outside the city to “see what would become of” Nineveh (4:5).<sup>39</sup> Jonah seems to hope that God will change his mind and destroy the Ninevites.

For an *object lesson*, God appoints a bush to “save him from his discomfort (*ra'ah*),” which makes Jonah “very happy” (4:6). And while it is impossible to be dogmatic on this point, it seems likely that this comforting act by God gives Jonah hope that God's next move will be a comforting speech (like Elijah received). And for Jonah, a comforting speech would include reassurance that the Ninevites will, in fact, be judged. But the speech does not come, because the object lesson is not over. God appoints a worm and an east wind, which destroys the plant, leaving Jonah exposed with an apparently ineffective shelter (4:8; Walton, 1992, 52-53). He was happy that he was saved from his *ra'ah*, but still wished it on the Ninevites. God gives him his wish. In the object lesson, Jonah is Nineveh.<sup>40</sup> Jonah's comfort is dashed. He again desires death (4:8).

God *repeats his question*. “Is it right for you to be angry—about the bush?” This time Jonah replies, “Yes, angry enough to die” (4:9). The prophet, who has now twice been saved from calamity (*ra'ah*) by God, and has now experienced—albeit in a very minor way—God bringing calamity (*ra'ah*) back again. Yet this

39 I am aware of the suggestion by many scholars to move 4:5 to after 3:4. See Phyllis Trible's argument for reading it as a gap filler, thus recognizing that chronologically it fits after Jonah's brief oracle, but textually it can stay where it is (1994, 118-19).

40 I am following Walton in this (1992, 47-49), though I do not share his exact conclusion. He concludes that Jonah resented God's mercy because the Ninevite's repentance was “shallow and naive” (53). I think that Jonah had deeper historical reasons to wish for Nineveh's destruction. However, even if Walton is correct, Jonah still wishes destruction on Nineveh. It is still a wish of genocide—just for a lesser reason. And unfortunately, history has shown that reasons for genocide do not need to be large.

is still what he desires for the Ninevites—and if he cannot have it, he wants to protest through death.

God's *final speech* is not full of comfort, it is full of rebuke:

You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned 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 also many animals? (4:10-11)

Two phrases in this speech suggest that God is specifically correcting Jonah's *genocidal* attitude: "be concerned about" and "also many animals." The first, from the verb *hus*, is better translated "pity" or "spare." The verb is not common, and is most often used when "no pity" will be shown to a person or group being punished. It is used this way repeatedly in Deuteronomy, and then often in the prophets.<sup>41</sup> It seems likely that Jonah, and the other prophets as well, were building on Deuteronomy. And the text in Deuteronomy addressing a situation most similar to Jonah's is Deut 7, which commands *herem* warfare against the Canaanites. "You shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God is giving over to you, showing them *no pity*" (7:16).

Commentators often stumble over the concluding phrase of the book, "and also many animals,"<sup>42</sup> but if God is correcting Jonah's genocidal attitude, it fits perfectly. Animals were sometimes devoted for destruction along with people in *herem* war and were often condemned alongside people in prophetic oracles of destruction.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Saul loses the crown for sparing (*hml*, a synonym of *hus*) animals after God

41 *Hus* is found only 24 times, 17 with the negative particle *lō*. Five are in Deuteronomy (7:16; 13:8; 19:13, 21; 25:12). Twelve are in the prophets (Isa 13:18; Jer 13:14; 21:7; Ezek 5:11; 7:4, 9; 8:18; 9:5, 10; 16:5; 24:12; Jonah 4:11). Of the other six positive usages, one is significant because it is in Joel 2:17, only a few verses after Joel quotes Ex 34:6 similarly to Jonah (see next section for discussion). For this reason, Leslie C. Allen thinks that Jonah borrowed the verb from Joel (1976, 234). We cannot know for sure whether Jonah knew Joel or vice versa, but even if Jonah was aware of Joel's usage, that does not mean that he could not also have been drawing on Deuteronomy.

42 Many commentators simply gloss over the phrase without note. And explanations that are offered tend to fall flat: it bridges the gap between the plant and humans (Sasson, 1990, 319); it emphasizes God's sovereignty over all creation (Achte-meier, 1996, 284); it is a final attempt to arouse Jonah's sympathies (Alexander, 1988, 130); it is a joke and should be translated "people as dumb as their cows" (Slavitt, 2000, 68).

43 Jer 7:20; 12:14; 21:6; Ezek 14:13, 17, 19, 21; 25:13; 29:8, 11; 32:13; Zeph 1:3; Zech 14:15. Also, Jonah 3:4 alludes to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:25, 29; see f.n. 54). Animals would not have been spared in that judgment. The ANE was marked by corporate responsibility. In the ANE, community meant everything and morality was maintained through holding all members of a family or community responsible for the sins of individuals—even the children and sometimes the animals.



commanded *herem* (1 Sam 15). So the question, “Should I *not pity* the people and the animals?” evokes a tradition of judgment and *herem* war, and turns it on its head.

Just because God commanded *herem* in the past does not mean he will again. God’s rebuke is final; Jonah is not given a chance to respond. God alone is judge. It is not necessary to believe in a non-violent God in order to believe that his followers must be (Suderman, 2011, 156).<sup>44</sup> No example of violence in the Bible can be used to legitimize human hatred and violence towards others.

This leaves us with a truth about humanity and a truth about God. About humanity, the book demonstrates “that even the best people can have a powerful sense of self-deception. . . . Jonah teaches that each person must take an active role in his or her life, trying to uncover the truth regarding one’s motivation and promoting justice even where doing so is destructive to oneself or one’s nation” (Angel, 1995, 66). About God, the book demonstrates that his mercy can extend even to the oppressors (De La Torre, 2007, ix). God is on no one’s “side,” because he desires a relationship with all humanity.<sup>45</sup> This can form an important starting point for the hard work of healing and reconciliation in all areas with a history of genocide, or racism, or oppression—that is to say, most of the world (Riley, 2012, 125).

### ***Jonah’s Conversation within the Book of the Twelve***

The dense intertextuality in Jonah shows that not only *can* the book be read this way, it *should* be read this way. By intertextuality I mean the quotations and allusions which show that the Bible is “intentionally self-referencing, self-focused, and self-contained” (Timmer, 2009, 8 f.n. 25). As additional books were written they joined the theological conversation. We have already seen how Jonah responds to earlier violent texts, but now we will look at Jonah’s contribution to the conversation within the Book of the Twelve.

Jonah was added to the canon as part of the Book of the Twelve: a group of books meant to be read together. Within that group, Jonah’s dominant conversation partners are Nahum and Joel. Nahum is an important conversation partner because it is a book of vengeful judgment oracles celebrating Nineveh’s destruction. Jonah stands in stark contrast to Nahum as a narrative describing Nineveh’s remarkable

44 Suderman points out that Anabaptists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century “had little difficulty reconciling a God of judgment with their own commitment to nonviolence and following Jesus in life” (2011, 157).

45 This does not mean that Jonah teaches universalism (contra Angel, 2006, 9). God’s reason for mercy on the Ninevites is stated in 3:10, “When God saw what *they did*, *how they turned from their evil ways*, God changed his mind.” For a great argument against taking universalism from Jonah, see Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” *ZAW* 90 no 2 (1978): 230-33.

repentance and God's mercy.<sup>46</sup> Joel is important because like Jonah he quotes an almost identically shortened version of the confession in Exod 34:6-7.<sup>47</sup>

Exodus 34:6-7a, "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love <i>and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty.</i> "	Jonah 4:2, "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, <i>and ready to relent from punishing.</i> "	Joel 2:13, "he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, <i>and relents from punishing.</i> "
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The huge difference is context. For Joel, the change brings hope for Judah. Joel follows the quote with, "Who knows whether he will not turn and relent?" (2:14). For Jonah, the change brings hope for Nineveh, and it was the Ninevite King who said, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind" (3:9). In Joel, the people of Judah ask for God's pity (*hus*, 2:17). In Jonah, God gives pity to the Ninevites (4:11).

We cannot be certain whether Joel knew Jonah or Jonah knew Joel, but the inclusion of both in the Book of the Twelve (and Nahum as well) creates productive theological tensions. The tension between Joel and Jonah makes us ask, are God's compassionate actions just, even when they extend to Israel's enemies? The answer is clearly yes. God is not on the side of any one group. And the tension that Nahum adds is, but does that mean that God is simply "clearing the guilty" (Ex 34:7)? Nahum's answer is no. In fact he says so explicitly, quoting the part of Ex 34:7 that both Jonah and Joel omit: "the Lord will by no means clear the guilty" (Nah 1:3). The tension must remain—God is both merciful and just, in his relations with Israel and the nations. Nevertheless Jonah makes it clear that *followers* of God are called away from hatred of the "other" and toward compassion and mercy.

46 Suderman is the only scholar I found who uses Jonah to address the problem of a violent God, and he does so by analyzing the conversation between Jonah, Nahum, and Joel. I am indebted to him for pointing out the interconnectedness of these books (2011, 152-54).

47 Other texts have the same confession, probably all stemming from Ex 34. Ps 103:8-10 includes an element of forgiveness. The others only quote verse six (Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 145:8).

## Conclusion

Genocide in the Bible is not going to become an easy topic anytime soon, and this paper has not turned it into one. Nevertheless, it has attempted to show how there are canonical voices that balance the violence and which clearly teach that violent texts can never be taken as examples to follow or as justifications for violence today. Jonah functions canonically to direct God's people away from hatred and toward compassion. The book is a beacon of hope. "If the ancient writers can imagine a world where empires are repentant and the common denominator of the story is that both colonizer and colonized have a new-found and shared identity, then one might ask if, in our own context, one could read Jonah and not just imagine such a world but also begin the hard work of seeing such a vision come to realization" (Riley, 2012, 119). Let us hope so. But if we are to get there, then texts like Jonah need to be taught and re-taught by the Church in order to subvert violence scripted by violent biblical texts.

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Alyssa Walker

## **Jonin genocidni i suicidalni stav – i Božji prijekor**

### Sažetak

Biblija opisuje Boga kao suca i ratnika, koji se ponekad služi ljudima kako bi izvršio svoj sud. Ovi nam nasilni tekstovi teško padaju, posebno kada ih stavimo u kontekst suvremenog pojma “genocid”. Nažalost, tijekom određenih povijesnih razdoblja neki su samoprozvani kršćani iskrivljavali takve tekstove kako bi opravdali genocidne kampanje. Na sreću, čitajući Sveto pismo kao kanon, ono se opire takvoj zloporabi. Mnogi tekstovi upućuju Božji narod kako se treba odnositi prema “onima drugima”, i to nikad nije nasilje. Jedan takav tekst jest i Knjiga o Joni. Čitanjem knjige kao literalnog djela, opažajući intertekstualnost te priznavši doprinos teologije oslobođenja i post-kolonijalizma, nailazimo na proroka čija je genocidna želja za uništenjem Ninivljana bila toliko snažna da je on poželio umrijeti ako oni prežive. Bog ga je ukorio zbog takva stava.

