

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203–1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> *and*

<http://purl.org/jhs>



Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, [RAMBI](#), and [BiBIL](#). Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by *Library and Archives Canada* and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by [Library and Archives Canada](#) (for a direct link, click [here](#)).

VOLUME 10, ARTICLE 6

**Yael Shemesh,
“AND MANY BEASTS” (JONAH 4:11): THE
FUNCTION AND STATUS OF ANIMALS IN THE
BOOK OF JONAH**

“AND MANY BEASTS” (JONAH 4:11): THE FUNCTION AND STATUS OF ANIMALS IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

Yael Shemesh
Bar Ilan University

1. INTRODUCTION

The book of Jonah concludes with the Lord’s rhetorical question to Jonah, which embodies his strong rebuke of the errant prophet: “And should not I pity 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?” (Jonah 4:11).¹

¹ Scholars are almost unanimous in reading this as a rhetorical question. A prominent exception is Alan Cooper (“In Praise of Divine Caprice: The Significance of the Book of Jonah,” P.R. Davies and D.J.A. Clines [eds.], *Among the Prophets: Language, Image, and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* [JSOTSup, 144; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993], 144–63 [158]), who takes it for a declarative statement: “As for me, I do not care about Nineveh.” He was followed by P. Guillaume, “The End of Jonah is the Beginning of Wisdom,” *Bib* 87 (2006), 243–50. For rebuttals of Cooper’s reading, see: G.M. Landes, “Textual ‘Information Gaps’ and ‘Dissonances’ in the Interpretation of the Book of Jonah,” R. Chazan, W.W. Hallo and L.H. Schiffman (eds.), *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 273–93 (91, n. 44); E. Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud* (JSOTSup, 367; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 14, n. 1.

Ben Zvi (*Signs of Jonah*, 28; “Jonah 4:11 and the Metaphorical Character,” *JHS* 9 [2009]; available at <http://www.jhsonline.org>) proposes a sophisticated interpretation based on a “double-ending.” In the world of the story and Jonah son of Amittai, who prophesied about the expansion of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:25)—more than a century before the destruction of Nineveh—the Lord took pity on Nineveh, as reflected in various details of the plot (chapters 3–4). In this context, the story concludes, quite naturally, with a rhetorical question. But after the lapse of several centuries, the later Persian-period literati for whom the work was written could read the verse on two levels: in addition to the rhetorical question, they also heard a declaration that ultimately

The very last words—“and many beasts”—indicate that divine mercy transcends human beings and includes animals as well.² Just how indigestible this idea is to an anthropocentric worldview is reflected in the traditional readings that alter its meaning and take “and many beasts” to mean the human inhabitants of Nineveh. As Rashi writes: “*And many beasts*: adults with the intelligence of beasts, in that they do not know who created them.” According to Deuteronomy Rabbah, “many beasts” alludes to the evildoers among the citizens of Nineveh: “*And should not I pity Nineveh in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons*: These are the righteous. *And many beasts*: These are the wicked, whose deeds are like those of beasts.”³

Among modern scholars, too, some do not read compassion for animals into this verse. John A. Miles, who reads the story as a parody, does not strip the expression of its plain meaning, but understands it as a witticism by the Lord:

The last line in particular, with its closing words **ובהמה רבה**, “plus the many animals,” must surely prompt a smile; for if Jonah is foolish in his resentment, the Ninevites, dressing their animals in sackcloth and forcing them to fast, have been foolish in their repentance. God concedes this much to Jonah.⁴

These interpretations fit in with the fact that many of the most influential Western thinkers throughout the centuries left animals beyond the pale of their moral concerns, as the following short survey makes clear.

In the first century, Paul maintained that the Torah’s prohibition on muzzling a threshing ox (Deut 25:4) does not stem from concern for animals but has an anthropocentric motive:

For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is

the Lord would not forgive Nineveh and would consign the city to destruction at the end of the seventh century BCE—a historical datum of which they were well aware. In the present article I relate only to the world of the narrative itself, for which the ultimate fate of the Assyrian Empire is beyond the historical horizon. Nor do I believe that the historical fall of the great city detracts from the message of the story, which is that the Lord pities Nineveh after its citizens repent; but this does not guarantee, of course, that He will not destroy it in the future, in different circumstances, as retribution for its sins.

² **בהמה** ‘beast’ is a collective term for all four-footed creatures (see 1 Kgs 5:13 [4:33]). Although it usually relates to domestic animals, we also find expressions like “beasts of the field” (1 Sam 17:44, Joel 1:20), “beasts of the forest” (Mic 5:7 [8]), and simply “beasts” (Deut 32:24).

³ Deut. Rabbah (ed. Lieberman), *Vešot haberakhab*. See also *Kobelet Rabbah* 3; *Tanhuma* (ed. Buber), *Vešot haberakhab* 5.

⁴ J.A. Miles, “Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody,” *JQR* 65 (1974–75), 168–81 (180).

concerned? Does He not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop.⁵

In the thirteenth century, Aquinas asked “whether irrational creatures ought to be loved out of charity?” and replied in the negative, in part because we have no sense of friendship with them.⁶

The idea that nonrational creatures do not merit moral consideration was widespread during the Enlightenment and was given extreme expression by Descartes (1596–1650). In line with his famous *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am,”⁷ only man is a “thinking being”; animals are not. He viewed animals as automata incapable of conscious states, including a sense of pain. Because they are only “machines,” they are not worthy of (nor do they need) moral consideration.⁸ Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), too, argued that “all animals exist only as means, and not for their own sakes, in that they have no self consciousness, whereas man is the end.” Our obligations towards animals are really “indirect duties to humanity”; for example, to educate men against cruelty.⁹

The anthropocentrism that excludes animals from the ethical domain casts light on the extent to which the final words of the book of Jonah, “and many beasts,” are not self-evident and may even be unexpected. Nevertheless, not only is the idea that the Lord has compassion for animals expressed in the Bible,¹⁰ it is

⁵ 1 Cor 9:9–10.

⁶ T. Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (trans. by fathers of the English Dominican Province; rev. by D.J. Sullivan; Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), II, II, Question 25, article 3 (vol. 20, 502–503).

⁷ R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (third edition; trans. by D.A. Cress; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), Part IV, 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Part V, 31–33; a letter from Descartes to the Marquess of Newcastle, 23 November 1646, in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters* (trans. and ed. by A. Kenny; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 205–208 (esp. 207). For a survey of Descartes’ position and its forlorn influence on the fate of animals in the experimental sciences, see: P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Random House, 1975), 217–20.

⁹ I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (ed. by P. Heath and J.B. Schneewind; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 212–13, on p. 212.

¹⁰ For example, the reason for observing the Shabbat as given in the book of Exodus: “that your ox and your ass may have rest, and the son of your bondmaid and the alien may be refreshed” (Exod 23:12). From this we may infer that animals have needs that must be recognized and respected. This precept protects animals’ right to a day of rest just as it protects the right of the weaker and exploited elements in human society. Similar sentiments are expressed in the book of Psalms: “Man and beast

particularly appropriate for the book of Jonah, in which animals play a prominent role, both as obedient agents of God and as members of a community who are partners in repenting and possibly also in shouting to the Lord. As I hope to show, in Jonah the portrayal of animals as divine agents, as well as the status indicated by the Lord’s attitude towards them, plays both a literary and a theological role.

We begin with the portrayal of animals as divine emissaries throughout the Bible and especially in Jonah. Then we turn to how they are depicted in Jonah as members of a community and as full partners in the efforts to abrogate the divine decree against Nineveh. Finally, we see how they too are the object of divine mercy.

2. ANIMALS AS AGENTS OF THE LORD

2.1 Animals as agents of the Lord in the Bible

The book of Jonah is not the first to describe animals as emissaries of the Lord. The ram caught in the thicket, in the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22:13), is a helpless agent, a passive sacrifice, but also an essential part of the divine plan. Balaam’s ass, whose mouth is opened by the Lord so that it can speak words of sense to its abusive master (Num 22:28–30), is an agent of a different type—a self-conscious being, unlike the ram. Whether the action performed by animals that fulfill the Lord’s will is consistent with their nature, or at odds with it, they are always His deputies.

The functions of animals as divine agents can be divided into several categories, although a particular animal may belong in more than one category:¹¹

1. Animals as a miraculous sign or portent: The most impressive biblical miracles worked through animals are probably Balaam’s talking ass (Num 22:28–30), Moses’ staff that is transformed into a snake, as a sign to help him win the people’s confidence (Exod 4:3), and Aaron’s staff that is transformed into a serpent to impress Pharaoh (Exod 7:8–12). All three cases are breaches of natural law.

Thou savest, O Lord” (Ps 36:7 [6]); “for every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is Mine” (Ps 50:10–11); and especially “The Lord is good to all, and His compassion is over all that He has made” (Ps 145:9). See also B. Janowski, “Auch die Tiere gehören zum Gottesbund: Gott, Mensch und Tier im alten Israel,” B. Janowski und P. Riede (Hrsg.), *Die Zukunft der Tiere: Theologische, ethische und naturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven* (Stuttgart: Clower Verl. 1999), 31–60 (esp. 38–40).

¹¹ For a different classification of the roles of animals in the Bible (not necessarily as agents of the Lord) see J.M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB, 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 144–46.

But there is a difference between Balaam's ass, an animal that existed before the miracle and continued to exist afterwards, and the miraculous metamorphosis of the staffs into reptiles. The quail sent by the Lord to feed the Israelites are another miracle involving animals, though this time there is no gross deviation from natural law. In addition to their function of feeding the discontented people they also serve as a sign: "then you shall know that I am the Lord your God" (Exod 16:12).¹² We could perhaps say that the dogs, who are merely following their nature when they lap up the water that contains Ahab's blood, are a sign that the Lord's pledge that the king will be punished measure for measure has been fulfilled (1 Kgs 21:19 and 22:38). Sometimes animals serve as a portent by acting contrary to their nature: the dogs that refrain from howling on the night before the Israelites' departure from Egypt (Exod 11:7), the lion that does not mangle the body of the man of God or kill his donkey (1 Kgs 13:28), and the lions that do not touch Daniel (Dan 6:23 [22]). Usually it is the Lord who takes the initiative to employ animals as a portent; but we find that the Philistines, too, employed animals to determine whether it was the God of Israel who had sent their troubles on them. They placed the Ark of the Covenant on a cart drawn by milch cows, who, contrary to their nature, took the road up to Beth-Shemesh, lowing as they went but turning neither to the left or right, even though they had been separated from their calves (1 Sam 6:12).

2. Animals that serve a didactic purpose: the instruction "Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine" (Exod 13:2) has an educational purpose: reminding the Israelites of the Plague of the Firstborn, which struck only the Egyptians and from which the Israelites and their animals were spared: "And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage'" (ibid. v 14; cf. Num 8:17). Balaam's ass, who, unlike its master, sees the angel of the Lord and reproves the prophet for his abusive treatment (Num 22:25–30), also serves a didactic purpose: through the contrasting analogy between animal and master, which makes a laughingstock of the master, the story teaches that it is God Who gives all creatures their ability to see and that it was

¹² The plant world, too, is represented in this category when Aaron's staff blossoms (Num 17:23 [8]).

not through his own powers that Balaam achieved his miraculous visions.

3. Animals as a means of punishment: Often animals are the means by which the Lord or his prophet exacts punishment. Several of the plagues in Egypt involve animals: the frogs (Exod 8:1–2 [5–6]), the lice (vv 12–14 [16–17]), the swarming insects or wild beasts (vv 17–20 [21–24]), and the locust (10:4–6 and 12–15).¹³ The Lord dispatches fiery serpents to slay some of the people in the wilderness (Num 21:6).¹⁴ A lion kills the man of God who violated the divine ban on dining in Bethel (1 Kgs 13:24). Another lion mauls one of the sons of the prophets who refuses to comply with his comrade’s request to strike him (1 Kgs 20:36). The Lord dispatches lions against the settlers of Samaria because they do not fear Him (2 Kgs 17:25). Elisha’s curse, uttered in the name of the Lord, causes two she-bears to mangle 42 children who mocked him (2 Kgs 2:24). The horses that trample Jezebel’s corpse are unknowingly executing the divine sentence on her (2 Kgs 9:33, and see v 37). In a number of passages dogs and birds serve as means of divine punishment by eating the corpses of dead transgressors.¹⁵ A similar formula relates to the birds of heaven and the animals of the earth.¹⁶ Birds as a means of retribution are also found in a didactic parable: “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (Prov 30:17).¹⁷
4. Animals as a means of salvation and deliverance: The Lord employs a plague of hornets to subdue the Canaanite nations before the Israelites (Exod 23:28; Deut 7:20; Josh 24:12). Ravens provide Elijah with his twice-daily ration of bread and meat when he takes refuge in Wadi

¹³ See also Deut 28:38–39, 42, where locusts, worms, and crickets will punish the Israelites if they sin. For a description of locusts as a divine mode of punishment see Joel 1.

¹⁴ See Jer 8:17: “For behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders which cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you,” says the Lord”; Amos 9:3: “Though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them.”

¹⁵ 1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; Jer 15:3.

¹⁶ Deut 28:26; Jer 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Ezek 29:5; 32:4. Ezekiel includes “evil beasts” among the string of punishments that the Lord will dispatch against the people (Ezek 5:17 and 14:21).

¹⁷ This, incidentally, illustrates one of the principles of commensurate retribution—punishment of the sinning organ. See Y. Shemesh, “Punishment of the Offending Organ in Biblical Literature,” *V/T* 55 (2005), 343–65 (363).

Cherith (1 Kgs 17:6).¹⁸ Heavenly animals, too, are enlisted, like the horses (and chariot) of fire that protect Elisha against the Aramean troop (2 Kgs 6:17).¹⁹

Despite the many functions played by animals as divine agents in the Bible, there is no story in which such animals evince any degree of independence, such as that enjoyed by the fox in the Sumerian legend of Enki and Ninhursag. A fox is there the gods' envoy to bring Ninhursag before them, having volunteered for the mission in return for a suitable reward.²⁰ In the Bible, including the book of Jonah, animals that serve as agents of the Lord are totally subordinate to Him and do not ask to be compensated for their services.

2.2 Animals as agents of the Lord in the book of Jonah

The book of Jonah portrays the actions of the great fish as implementations of divine decrees: the Lord "appoints it" to swallow up Jonah (2:1 [1:17]), just as He later "appoints" the gourd, the worm, and the east wind (4:6–8). More important, the fish obeys when the Lord tells it to vomit Jonah out: "And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (2:11 [10]). Jonah and the fish are the only creatures addressed by the Lord in this story.²¹ But unlike Jonah, who must be spoken to a second time before he

¹⁸ In the apocryphal book of 2 Baruch (77:19–26 and 87:1), Baruch employs an eagle (or vulture) to carry missives to the tribes; he enjoins it not to tarry and reminds it of the dove sent out by Noah after the flood, of the ravens that fed Elijah at the Lords' behest, and of the bird that served Solomon and flew wherever he commanded. The story of ravens who feed a holy man is also found in Christian legends (no doubt influenced by the story of Elijah) about St. Paul in the wilderness, to whom a raven brings bread every day. See H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (trans. from the Latin with an Introduction; London: Constable, 1977 [1936]), 48.

¹⁹ A fiery chariot and fiery horses are involved in Elijah's ascent to heaven in the whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:11), too. The horses of Zechariah 1:8, too, are undoubtedly celestial horses ridden by the angels sent to scout the land. Especially close to the role of the fiery horses in the siege of Dothan (2 Kgs 6:17) is the account in 2 Maccabees (3:25; 10:29; 11:8) of celestial horsemen mounted on celestial horses who ride to deliver Israel from its Greek foes.

²⁰ "Enki and Ninhursag: A Paradise Myth," J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [=ANET] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 40.

²¹ 1:1: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying"; 3:1 "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying." In 4:9 and 10 we find the same formula used for the fish: "God/the Lord said [to Jonah]."

performs his mission (“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying” [3:1]), the fish complies the first time.²²

Perhaps the text is picking up on Jonah’s act of prayer—“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish. He said (וַיֹּאמֶר)” (2:2–3 [1–2])—when it employs the same root אָמַר in the context of the Lord’s deliverance of Jonah: “The Lord spoke (וַיֹּאמֶר) to the fish . . .” (2:11 [10]). This reinforces the link between the prayer and the divine response, measure for measure.

The great fish that swallows Jonah seems to fit into all of the categories listed above. The miracle of Jonah’s being swallowed, spending three days inside the fish, and then being vomited up on the shore, safe and sound, turns the episode (for both Jonah and readers) into a sign of divine involvement in everything that happens. The fish serves both as a means to punish the prophet, who, trying to evade his mission, finds himself trapped helplessly in its bowels for three days, and as a “life raft” that saves him from drowning.²³ Most of all, Jonah’s adventure with the fish promotes the moral lesson of the story, as I shall try to show below. The worm, which is also an agent of God, serves only a didactic function, teaching both the prophet and readers that the Lord governs all His creatures and that having compassion for every living being is a virtue.

The *Tales of the Prophets* by al-Kisā’i, a medieval Arabic collection of popular interpretations of the narratives of the Old and New Testaments,²⁴ retells the story of Jonah with significant changes and extensive homiletic additions.²⁵ In this version the role of animals as divine agents is developed at length and several of them actually speak. Among other new details we learn that when Jonah ran away he took his property and family with him, only to lose his belongings and be separated from his wife and two sons during his flight. The account of the loss of the older son, kid-

²² In the Bible, the only other animal to whom God speaks is the serpent in Eden, whom God addresses to curse (Gen 3:14).

²³ On the fish as a means of rescue see D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 438.

²⁴ The author’s name is in fact unknown and his date in dispute. See T. Nagel, “Ḳiṣāṣ al-Anbiyā’,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed; ed. by P. Bearman et al., Brill, 2010). Brill Online. Last accessed 19 April 2010 http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-4401; idem, “al-Kisā’ī, Sāhib Ḳiṣāṣ al-Anbiyā’,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*; ibid, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/uid=1433/entry?entry=islam_SIM-4398. I would like to thank my friend Dr. Livnat Holtzman from the department of Arabic in Bar-Ilan University for her help with these references.

²⁵ Al-Kisā’i, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh, *Tales of the Prophets (Ḳiṣāṣ al-anabiyyā’)*, (trans. from the Arabic by W.M. Thackston Jr.; Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997), 321–26 (tale 85: “Jonah son of Matthew”).

napped by a wolf, is relevant for us. When Jonah sets out in pursuit the wolf turns to him and says, intelligibly: “Jonah, turn back from me, for I am commanded to do so.”²⁶ The fish, too, addresses Jonah before swallowing him, “Jonah, I have come from India in search of you.”²⁷ After the fish vomits up Jonah, who is utterly exhausted and reduced to skin and bones, the Lord sends a gazelle to nurse him, as a mother does a child.²⁸ After Jonah completes his mission he is reunited with his family. He discovers his older son in the care of a shepherd, who tells him that a wolf had brought him the boy and informed him, “in an eloquent tongue,” that he was receiving the child in trust from God.²⁹

But the biblical account is marvelous enough without al-Kisa’i’s homiletic expansions. It is easy to understand how the extraordinary incident of Jonah’s being swallowed by a huge fish, remaining in its bowels for three days, and returning to dry land hale and hearty has captured readers’ imagination and made Jonah one of the best-known biblical tales for the general public. Scholars who want to focus on the book’s theological message complain about what they consider to be the excessive attention directed to this one episode. As G. Campbell Morgan put it wittily, “Never mind the fish. Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.”³⁰ Leslie C. Allen, who quotes Morgan and agrees, adds, “but obviously a subject that takes up only three verses out of a total forty-eight can hardly be regarded as the narrator’s main concern.”³¹

As I will try to show below, however, the huge fish and tiny worm are devices employed by the narrator and by the Lord (as a literary character) to convey a better understanding of the Lord’s essence and ways, and of His governance of the entire earth. Hence (pace Morgan) interest in them does not conflict with interest in the Lord Himself.

Jonah’s encounter with the great fish and survival in its gut have long been a topic of debate between those who accept the historicity of the story and those who reject the possibility of such a miracle and frequently mock the naiveté of the believers in this “fish story.” One method employed by those who hold the story to

²⁶ Ibid., 322.

²⁷ Ibid., 323–24.

²⁸ Ibid., 324.

²⁹ Ibid., 326.

³⁰ G.C. Morgan, *The Minor Prophets: The Men and their Message* ([Westwood, N.J.]: Revell, [1960]), 69.

³¹ L.C. Allen, *The Book of Joel, Obadiab, Jonah and Micha* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 192. See also the complaint by T.E. Fretheim, (*The message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1977], 13) that the excessive scholarly attention to the scene of Jonah’s being swallowed by the fish impedes genuine understanding of the book’s theological message.

be true has been to fish up other incidents in which a human being is supposed to have been swallowed by a marine creature but survived.³² Another method is to rationalize what is represented as a miracle: Jonah was picked up by a ship named the Big Fish or spent three nights at an inn called At the Sign of the Whale or in a bathing establishment known as The Whale. A less absurd rationalization is that Jonah dreamed he was being tossed about in the bowels of a big fish while he was actually asleep in the bowels of the storm-tossed ship.³³ As Jacques Ellul rightly observes, however, these rationalizing explanations “neglect the text.”³⁴

In light of the widespread occurrence of the motif of a person who survives being swallowed by a fish or sea monster,³⁵ Julius Beyer argues that the author “uses the fish episode merely in order to bring Jonah back to the land. If he had not known any of those stories, he might perhaps have thought of a different means of delivering Jonah. But this feature lay ready at hand and was most impressive, and there was no reason why he should not use it.”³⁶

³² For a conspicuous example of this see A.J. Wilson, “The Sign of the Prophet Jonah and its Modern Confirmations,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 25 (1927), 630–42. After he tries to prove that it is physiologically possible for a person to survive inside a sperm whale (pp. 631–35) he passes to the historical documentation, chiefly the case of James Bartley, who is supposed to have been swallowed by a sperm whale in 1891 (pp. 635–37). For additional bibliography see D. Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 97, n. 21. See Sasson (*Jonah*, 151, n. 14) for a more recent example, from 1987, of a shark that swallowed the Japanese fisherman Mikado Nakamura and later spat him back on shore unharmed. Sasson does not conclude from this, however, that the story of Jonah’s being swallowed by the fish is historical. For the refutation of the most famous of these stories, that of James Bartley, see E.B. Davies, “A Whale of a Tale: Fundamentalist Fish Stories,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 43 (1991), 224–37.

³³ These rationalizations were surveyed by P. Haupt (“Jonah’s Whale,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 46 [1907], 151–64 [154]) and by E. Bickerman (*Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Kabeleth, Esther* [New York: Schocken, 1967], 4); and, at greater length, in the latter’s article in French on Jonah (E. Bickerman, “Les Deux Erreurs du Prophète Jonas,” *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* [ed. by E. Bickerman; Part one; Leiden: Brill, 1976], 33–71 [34–35]).

³⁴ J. Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1971]), 43.

³⁵ See: L. Frobenius, *The Childhood of Man* (trans. by A.H. Keane; New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 273 ff.; T.H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament: A Comparative Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 653–54; I.A. Ben-Yosef, “Jonah and the Fish as a Folk Motif,” *Semiotics* 7 (1980), 102–117. The last-named, however, notes that the story of Jonah is unique, because here being swallowed by a fish leads to the victim’s survival. See also Motif F 9114.4. “Jonah. Fish (or water monster) swallows a man,” in S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), vol. 3, 233.

³⁶ J.A. Beyer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on [Haggai, Zechariah,*

Paul Haupt believes that the fish was inserted into the story as a device to transport the recalcitrant prophet as swiftly as possible from Joppa to Alexandretta, the start of the shortest road to Nineveh.³⁷ He seems to forget that the text never tells us where the fish swallowed Jonah, where it spewed him back on to the shore, and how long it then took him to get to Nineveh.³⁸

None of these arguments attribute any literary or theological importance to the fish. There are several reasons, however, why the story might employ a fish as the agent of God.

First of all, a fish may be associated with the name of the city of Nineveh. Several scholars have noted that in cuneiform, “Nineveh” is written as a fish (*ha*) inside an enclosure; that is, we are dealing with a popular Assyrian etymology that associates Nineveh with a fish (Akkadian *nīnu*, Hebrew *nīn*).³⁹ According to C.T. Fritsch, the name Nineveh is “an obvious allusion to the river-goddess Nina, whose emblem was the fish.”⁴⁰

If the thesis of a link between the name of the city and the fish is correct, the story incorporates an ironic play on words that enhances readers’ enjoyment: Jonah tries to flee in the opposite direction, to get as far as possible from “Fish City” and avoid performing his mission. But the Lord intervenes and sees to it that he winds up in a fish all the same—first a marine creature and then the metropolis.

Second, the use of a fish as the divine agent sharpens one of the story’s messages: the Lord’s absolute control of His world. From the dawn of history the sea has fascinated and terrified the human race, because it is unpredictable, ungovernable, and normally outside the domain of human beings. It is easy to understand the emergence of the ancient myths (which left their traces in the Bible as well) that portray the sea and the monsters to which it is home as a primordial force that wages war against the celestial god(s).⁴¹

Malachi and] Jonah (ICC, 21; Edinburgh: Clark, 1912), 6–7; see also *ibid.*, 41.

³⁷ Haupt, “Jonah’s Whale,” 160, 162–63.

³⁸ See Bewer’s criticism of Haupt (Bewer, *Jonah*, 41).

³⁹ See, for example, E.A. Speiser, “Nineveh,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 551–53 (552); C.T. Fritsch, “Nineveh,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 538–41 (538); H.C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 83; Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 42.

⁴⁰ Fritsch, *ibid.*

⁴¹ This idea can be found in the Akkadian creation epic, *Enūma Elish*, in which the dracoform Tiamat employs sea monsters in its battle against the creator god Marduk (Tablets I and II; see Pritchard, *ANET*, 61–63), as well as in the Ugaritic myth of Baal and Anat, where Zevul Yam enlists sea monsters for his war against Baal (*ibid.*, 137). There are glimmers of

As a counterweight to these myths, various biblical passages emphasize God’s control of the sea and all its inhabitants, for He created them all.⁴² The same message is encapsulated in Jonah’s confession to the sailors: “I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9). But the prophet belies this profession of faith when he tries to run away from the God who created that same sea by taking passage on a ship.⁴³ The fish, which obeys the Lord’s decree, reminds us that God’s dominion extends to the sea as well.

Third, the portrayal of the fish as an agent of God fits in with the broader depiction of animals in general and of all creation as divine agents. This conception sharpens the criticism of Jonah’s attempted flight and illustrates its hopelessness. The story develops a contrasting analogy between the animals (and all creation) and Jonah. It describes how fauna (the big fish and the worm, a tiny creature), flora (the gourd), and the forces of nature (the sea, the storm, the sun, and the wind) are all obedient to the word of God. They are all His creatures⁴⁴ and consequently His servants and agents. Only the prophet Jonah, who is God’s official messenger, tries to evade his mission.⁴⁵ The book begins with the Lord’s in-

this myth in several passages of biblical poetry: “In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa 27:1); “Thou didst divide the sea by Thy might; Thou didst break the heads of the dragons on the waters. Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, Thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness” (Ps 74:13–14); “Thou didst crush Rahab like a carcass, Thou didst scatter Thy enemies with Thy mighty arm” (Ps 89:11 [10]). See also Job 7:12: “Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that Thou settest a guard over me?” as well as Job 9:13 and 26:12–13.

⁴² God’s control of the sea is expressed in many biblical passages, especially in Psalms. For example, “Thou dost rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, Thou stillest them” (Ps 89:10 [9]). See also Ps 24:1–2; 29:3,10; 33:7; 48:8 [7]; 77:17 [16], 20 [19]; 78:13; 95:5; 98:7; 104:24–31; 107:23–29; 148:7; Job 38:8–11; 40:25–32 [41:1–8].

⁴³ On the incongruity between Jonah’s confession and his action, see Good’s pointed comment: “Jonah’s theology is unexceptionable, but, like so much theology, it seems to make no difference to his action” (E.M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965], 45).

⁴⁴ Jonah’s definition of the Lord as “the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9) emphasizes that they are all His creatures. On the book’s doctrine of creation, see E. Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I* (NIBCOT; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996), 256.

⁴⁵ Cf. S.D.F. Goitein, “Some Observations on Jonah,” *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 17 (1937), 63–77 (68–69); Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 88; R.F. Person Jr., “The Role of Nonhuman Characters in Jonah,” N.C. Habel and P. Trudinger (eds.), *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 85–90 (esp. 87, 89). What is more,

junction to Jonah—“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2)—and continues with what seems to be the prophet’s full compliance: “And Jonah arose” (v 3). But at once we are astonished to learn that he is in fact trying to run away and avoid his mission: Jonah does arise, but “to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (ibid.). Readers, with their natural expectation of total obedience to the divine decree, are shocked and astonished by Jonah’s response.⁴⁶ Tarshish lies in the opposite direction from Nineveh;⁴⁷ in the last chapter of Isaiah it is cited as a remote place whose inhabitants do not know the name of the Lord (Isa 66:19).⁴⁸ Although Jonah is not the first emissary who attempts to shirk his obligation,⁴⁹ he is undoubtedly the only one who, instead of trying to persuade the Lord not to entrust him with the mission, tries to sever his connection with God and His command by means of physical flight.⁵⁰ Jonah’s rejection of his mission is reflected in the multiple occurrences of the root **נָרַח** in the account of his flight from the Lord (1:3 [twice] and 5); as Uriel Simon notes, this represents both Jonah’s “vertical flight” from the Lord and his “horizontal flight” from his assigned destination.⁵¹ Another expression of Jonah’s abdication of his duty is the fact that he lies down and goes to sleep while the tempest is raging and all the sailors are crying out to their gods (1:5). Jack M. Sasson links Jonah’s slumber with a prophetic trance (see Dan 10:9); he holds that at this point of the story the prophet bows to the Lord’s will and understands that there is no point in trying to run away.⁵² But the story does not

Person (ibid, 86) sees inanimate objects—the vessel that “thought it was going to founder” (the literal rendering of the Hebrew **חשבה להשבר**) (1:4) and the lots (v 7)—as “active agents” of the Lord. Others, too, have noted the personification of the ship; e.g., J.C. Holbert, “‘Deliverance Belongs to YAHWEH!’: Satire in the Book of Jonah,” *JOT* 21 (1981), 59–81 (65), who puns on the “thinking ship.”

⁴⁶ J. Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1976), 19; P. Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1994), 127–28.

⁴⁷ On the location of Tarshish see Sasson, *Jonah*, 79.

⁴⁸ As noted by Sasson, ibid.

⁴⁹ Prophets who do not want to serve include Moses (Exod 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:6). Gideon (Judg. 6:15) and Saul (1 Sam 9:21; 10:22) are heroes who would refuse their nomination.

⁵⁰ Cf. A. Lacocque and P.-E. Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 24–25; H.C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar*, 68; K.M. Craig, Jr., *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* (Columbia: university of South Carolina Press, 1993), 78–79; Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 57, 78.

⁵¹ U. Simon, *Jonah* (The JPS Bible Commentary; trans. from the Hebrew by L.J. Schramm; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 6.

⁵² Sasson, *Jonah*, 102, 103.

report that the Lord speaks to the prophet at this stage; He does so only after Jonah’s captivity in the bowels of the fish. What is more, had Jonah accepted his assignment at this point, there would have been no need for him to be tossed into the raging sea, an action that Jonah must have expected would lead to his death. It is not a prophetic trance but a profound depression with an accompanying death wish that is expressed by Jonah’s deep sleep, like that of Elijah, who asked to die (1 Kgs 19:4–6).⁵³ Jonah’s suggestion that the sailors throw him overboard shows that at this point in the story he would rather die than complete his mission.⁵⁴ This argument is compatible with his explicit request to die in the last chapter (Jonah 4:3, 8–9).

Except for Jonah, all of the other human characters—the sailors and the Ninevites—seem to recognize the Lord’s total control of the world; witness the sailors’ fear of the Lord (1:10–16) and the Ninevites’ reaction to the Lord’s warning as delivered by Jonah (3:5–9). Perhaps we can draw a parallel between the great fish and the (tiny) worm, both of which serve the divine will, and the emphasis that all the residents of Nineveh, “from the greatest of them to the least of them” (3:5), participated in the collective penance, which demonstrated their belief in the Lord, fasting, and putting on sackcloth. The animals in the story perform God’s behest, the human characters try to do His will, and only Jonah flees from his mission. We might also suggest that the prophet’s very name—Jonah ‘dove’—is symbolic,⁵⁵ chosen to emphasize the contrast between the prophet who would elude his vocation and the animals who fulfill their duties: it was a dove that did as Noah bade and returned to him with an olive leaf in its mouth (Gen 8:8–12).⁵⁶ This

⁵³ Thus Simon, *Jonah*, 9. Sasson (*Jonah*, 102) writes that it is “only superficially” similar to 1 Kgs 19:5, but without explaining why. In practice, though, this is one of the many parallels between Jonah and Elijah, on which many have commented. See, for example, Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah*, 131–33. On Jonah’s death wish, see also J.S. Ackerman, “Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah,” B. Halpern and J.D. Levenson (eds.), *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 213–45 (esp. 235).

⁵⁴ I. Abravanel (*Commentary on the Prophets and Writings* [Tel Aviv: Abravanel Publishing House, 1960], 123 [Hebrew]) on Jonah 1:12; Goitein, “Jonah”, 68; Good, *Irony*, 45; Simon, *Jonah*, 13; P. Tribble, “A Tempest in a Text: Ecological Soundings in the Book of Jonah,” S.L. Cook and S.C. Winter (eds.), *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 187–200 (189). I do not accept the reverse contention by Achtemeier (*Minor Prophets I*, 264) that Jonah’s slumber indicates that he is at peace with his decision to flee to Tarshish and consequently has no trouble falling asleep.

⁵⁵ Pace Stuart (*Hosea-Jonah*, 431, 447) that most Biblical names, including Jonah’s, are not symbolic.

⁵⁶ A.J. Hauser (“Jonah: in Pursuit of the Dove,” *JBL* 104 [1985], 21–37), too, believes that Jonah’s name, “dove,” is symbolic, but proposes a

conjecture is strengthened by several links between the episode of the flood and the story of Jonah:⁵⁷

1. In the story of the flood the Lord destroys the world because of the sins of the human race; in Jonah the Lord threatens to destroy the great city of Nineveh because of its people's transgressions.
2. Noah journeys on a current in an ark (a mission of deliverance, at the Lord's behest); Jonah journeys on the sea, in a ship (an unsuccessful attempt to run away from the Lord).
3. The duration: "Rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights" (Gen 7:12); "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4).
4. The rising of the deluge and of the water (Genesis 7:18–19); the rising of the storm at sea (Jonah 1:13).
5. "All the fountains of the great deep burst forth" (Gen 7:11); "The deep was round about me" (Jonah 2:6 [5]).⁵⁸
6. The reappearance of the tops of the mountains when the flood abates (Gen 8:5); Jonah's descent to the base of the mountains (Jonah 2:7 [6]).
7. Noah's threefold release of the dove (Heb. *יונה*; Gen 8:8, 10, 12); the Lord's double dispatch of Jonah son of Amitai (Jonah 1:1–2; 3:1–2). The similarity here is juxtaposed with a significant difference, since *yonah* the bird does not try to evade its mission, unlike Jonah the prophet, whose attempted escape requires that he be given his orders a second time.
8. Finally, animals have a similar status in the two narratives. Their fate, for better or worse, depends on that of the

different explanation. He would associate the dove with passivity and escaping danger—qualities that initially seem to be associated with Jonah, though later it becomes clear that the ostensibly passive prophet is in fact an angry one, while the ostensibly wrathful God is in fact a dovelike God. But it is difficult to correlate God's behavior with the qualities that Hauser attributes to the dove. Mercy and forgiveness have nothing to do with passivity.

⁵⁷ Cf. E.W. Esse and I.M. Kikawada, "Jonah and Genesis 11–1 (sic)," *AJBI* 10 (1984), 3–19 (5). They too note the link between Jonah's name and Noah's dove but do not try to explain its significance.

⁵⁸ Even if we do not accept the argument, advanced by some scholars, that the psalm in chapter 2 is original to the book (Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 46–47; Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 39–54; Fretheim, *The message of Jonah*, 58–60; Ackerman, "Satire," 215; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 438–40; Brich-to, *Toward a Grammar*, 73–74; Landes, "Gaps," 282–83), it has such strong links with the rest of the story that its incorporation into the book seems to be an act of conscious artistry. For this reason I will include it in the analogy between Jonah and the story of the flood in Genesis.

human race. In the story of the flood they are part of the world that is destroyed, on the one hand, and part of the tiny remnant that is saved, on the other. After the flood the Lord makes a covenant with human beings and all animals (Gen 9:9–11, 17). In the book of Jonah the destruction of Nineveh would have entailed the death of the animals as well; the reprieve granted to the city also means the survival of the animals (Jonah 4:11). The Lord, whose compassion applies both to the human beings of Nineveh and the animals, takes this into account (*ibid.*).

To summarize this section, the portrayal of animals in general and of the great fish in particular as divine agents serves the story’s ideological line and sharpens its lessons: God’s absolute control of His world, including the sea that terrifies human beings; and the criticism of Jonah, God’s emissary, who, unlike the animals, attempts to evade his mission.

3. ANIMALS AS PART OF THE COMMUNITY THAT ENTREATS HEAVEN FOR MERCY

When the king of Nineveh hears the divine verdict, as spoken by Jonah, he issues a royal decree that applies to both his human subjects and domestic animals: “Let *man and beast*, herd and flock, not taste anything; let them not feed, or drink water, but let *man and beast* be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God; yea, let every man turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we perish not?” (Jonah 3:7–9).

According to Arnold B. Ehrlich (comm. on Jonah 3:7), “this is the act of childish gentiles and was not born on the knees of the Hebrews. For if you review all of Scripture you will not find such a fast, in which animals fast along with human beings. It is possible that this was the custom of fasts in Assyria and that the prophet, aware of their custom, includes it in his parable.”⁵⁹ There is no doubt that this description is extraordinary for the Bible; it is certainly possible that it was written under the influence of Assyrian customs of which the author was aware.⁶⁰ It seems to me, nevertheless, that in the context of our book the royal decree is not so astonishing, given the special status of animals in this narrative, from the big fish that acts in the service of God, through the tiny worm which also acts on His behalf, and concluding with the divine compassion that extends to “many beasts” as well.

⁵⁹ A.B. Ehrlich, *Mikrâ ki-Pbeschutô*, vol. 3 (New York: Ktav, 1969 [1901]), 427 (Hebrew).

⁶⁰ See below, in §3, Schaumberger’s report that in Assyria animals took part in religion rites, including prayer.

The phrase “man and beast” appears twice in the king’s directive. The animals are clearly included in the first two parts of the proclamation: fasting and wearing sackcloth. Some critics, limiting its scope, maintain that the repetition of “man and beast” in v 8b, with regard to sackcloth, is a corruption influenced by the wording of v 7. But there is no textual evidence for this proposal and no good reason to accept it. Dressing animals in sackcloth in response to a serious threat to the community can also be found in Judith 4:10 (perhaps under the influence of our story). What is more, expressions of mourning that include animals can be found in various ancient texts. Herodotus (9, 24) describes how the Persian army mourned Masistios, “cutting off their own hair and that of their horses, and baggage animals.”⁶¹ Plutarch relates Alexander’s deep grief for Hephæstion, which included an order to his troops “that the manes and tails of all horses should be shorn.”⁶² Leslie C. Allen draws attention to a contemporary custom in state funerals, where the horses and the catafalque they draw are draped in the same color as the mourners.⁶³

It is an open question whether the third clause of the king’s decree—“let them cry mightily to God” (v 8b)—refers both to human beings and animals, like the two previous clauses, or only to the citizens, like the next clause, which calls on human beings to repent: “let every man turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands” (v 8c).⁶⁴ Although no definite answer can be offered to this question, I tend to the opinion that the animals, too, are meant to call out to the Lord. They are being denied food; in their hunger they would certainly low and bleat in distress, which could be interpreted as “crying mightily to God.” In fact, a number of biblical passages refer to animals who call on God to provide

⁶¹ Herodotus, *The Histories* (trans. by G.C. Macaulay; ed. by D. Lateiner; New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 470.

⁶² Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander*, §72, in: *The Age of Alexander: Nine Greek Lives by Plutarch* (trans. and annotated by I. Scott-Kilvert; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 329. For an extensive survey of Greek, Roman, and Persian texts that relate to various ways of involving animals in mourning, see M. Mulzer, “Die Buße der Tiere in Jona 3,7f. und Jdt 4,10,” *BN* 111 (2002), 76–89 (78–83). But, as he notes (84–85), these sources, which refer chiefly to cutting off the manes of the horses and denying food to cattle, do not involve repentance by animals, unlike the situation in Jonah. His assertion that the author is interested in the fate of the human beings and not in that of their domesticated animals does not seem to be compatible with the end of the book, however.

⁶³ Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micha*, 224, n. 23.

⁶⁴ According to Abraham Ibn Ezra on this verse, the injunction to pray applies only to human beings. By contrast, H.W. Wolff (*Obadiah and Jonah* [CON]; trans. by M. Kohl [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986], 153) argues that animals are included in the summons to pray to the Lord.

their wants:⁶⁵ “The very beasts of the field cry out to You; for the watercourses are dried up, and fire has consumed the pastures in the wilderness” (Joel 1:20); “The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God” (Ps. 104:21); “These all look to Thee, to give them their food in due season” (Ps. 104:27); “He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens which cry” (Ps. 147:9); “Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?” (Job 38:41).⁶⁶

The inclusion of domestic animals in religious ceremonies, including prayer, is documented in an Assyrian text, as Schaumberger showed. The text in question deals with the bad luck (including animal diseases) that may strike a household at the start of *Lisi-gim* (when the sun enters the sign of Scorpio). To avoid it, humans, cattle, sheep, and donkeys must refrain from sleeping for three days and pray to *Lisi-gim* that the entire household may prosper.⁶⁷ Because the text has survived in two versions—the Berlin tablet, dated to the time of Sennacherib (687 B.C.E.), and the Paris tablet, which is four centuries younger, Schaumberger concludes that this was practiced in different periods in different regions and that domestic animals took part in nocturnal rites whose purpose was to shield the entire household from bad luck. By extension, he argues, the inclusion of animals in a religious ceremony might apply to an entire city and not just a private household.⁶⁸

Various scholars have read the king’s decree as satirical or humoristic and as evidence that the penance of the sinful city of Nineveh was on the surface only.⁶⁹ I agree, however, with those who see nothing ironic here.⁷⁰ The book of Jonah describes the

⁶⁵ Cf. P. Riede, “‘Doch frage die Tiere, sie werden dich lehren’: Tiere als Vorbilder und ‘Lehrer’ des Menschen im Alten Testament,” B. Janowski und P. Riede (Hrsg.), *Die Zukunft der Tiere: Theologische, ethische und naturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven* (Stuttgart: Clavier, 1999), 61–91 (86–87).

⁶⁶ In the apocryphal *Testament of Job* (40:11) we read of animals crying, not out of a need to satisfy their individual needs, but in mourning over the death of a human being who was dear to them: the animals stand around the corpse of Sitis, Job’s wife, and cry.

⁶⁷ J.B. Schaumberger, “Das Bussedikt des Königs von Ninive bei Jonas 3, 7. 8 in keilschriftlicher Beleuchtung,” *Miscellanea Biblica* 2 (1934), 123–34 (133).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Miles, “Laughing at the Bible,” 176–77, 180; Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 146, 152–53; Brichto, *Toward a Grammar*, 76; Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah*, 121–22. Holbert (“‘Deliverance Belongs to YAHWEH!’”), on the other hand, who writes about satire in Jonah, finds none in the description of the Ninevites and their cattle who repent their sins. For him, the prophet himself is the butt of the send-up (see esp. p. 77).

⁷⁰ Bewer, *Jonah*, 54; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 485; and especially Tribble (“‘Ecological Soundings,’” 193), who writes of herself: “This reader hears

common destiny of human beings and animals.⁷¹ This idea is found elsewhere in the Bible, including the story of the flood, mentioned above, and in the book of Joel, where both human beings and animals are victimized by the locusts that have descended on the land and cry out to the Lord for deliverance (1:18–20). This common destiny, and perhaps even solidarity between man and beast in the book of Jonah, brings us to the third and last section of this paper—the Lord’s compassion for animals as well.

4. THE LORD’S COMPASSION FOR ANIMALS

4.1 Divine mercy as a key theme of the book of Jonah

Before we turn our attention to the Lord’s compassion for animals, we should highlight the centrality of the notion of divine mercy in the book of Jonah. As is known, commentators and scholars do not agree as to why Jonah ran away. The answer, of course, is intimately related to the meaning of the book as a whole. Here I will summarize the major answers that have been proposed and express my reservations about the first five.

1. A nationalist and political motive: Because Jonah, a nationalistic Israelite prophet (see 2 Kgs 14:25), knows that Assyria will eventually attack and defeat Israel, he has a vested interest in its destruction.⁷² But as Elias Bickerman cogently argues, the book never mentions or deals with the Israelite nation.⁷³ Furthermore, as Ben Zvi maintains, the casting of Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher, as its protagonist sets the story in an age when Assyria posed no threat whatsoever to Israel; nor does anything in the narrative hint that Jonah has prophetic foreknowledge of that empire’s eventual role in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom or that he harbors some particular animosity toward the Assyrian nation.⁷⁴
2. A nationalist and theological motive: Jonah is afraid that the residents of Nineveh will do penance, after which Israel will be condemned for ignoring its prophets and

the words as respect, not ridicule, and as pathos, not parody.”

⁷¹ See also Mulzer (“Die Buße der Tiere,” 77). But Mulzer also holds that the narrator is interested in the fate of the human beings and not of their domesticated animals, who “repent” only because they belong to the people (77–78). His assertion ignores the Lord’s declaration in the last verse of the book (4:11), which clearly indicates His concern for both humans and animals.

⁷² For example, Abravanel (*Prophets*, 121, 128) in his commentary on Jonah 1:3 and 4:1. See also A.D. Cohen, “The Tragedy of Jonah,” *Judaism* 21 (1972), 164–75; Lacocque and Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex*, 30.

⁷³ Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 28.

⁷⁴ Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 51–52, 57.

not repenting its evil ways.⁷⁵ There is no support for this line, either, in the text, and Bickerman’s point is equally valid here.

3. The prophet’s own safety: Jonah fears that the people of Nineveh, enraged by his prophecy, may attack and harm him.⁷⁶ This reading, which makes Jonah a shallow figure motivated by cowardice and deprives his action of real significance, is incompatible with his conscious preference for death, rather than performing his mission, when he tells the sailors to throw him overboard (1:12).
4. The prophet’s image: Jonah is apprehensive that when the verdict he proclaims is overturned he will be viewed as a false prophet.⁷⁷ Abraham Ibn Ezra deflated this idea in his comment on Jonah 1:2: “How could the prophet defy the Lord out of fear that the people of Nineveh might call him a false prophet? How would that hurt him, given that he did not live among them? Furthermore, the Ninevites were no fools. The Lord sent a prophecy to them so that they would return to Him and if they did not repent the decree would be carried out. If they knew it was true that if they returned to God, He would repent of the evil, how could they call him a false prophet?”
5. A theological motive associated with the image of God: Were the divine verdict not carried out, the people of Nineveh might conclude that God is powerless.⁷⁸ But Ibn Ezra’s second argument applies here as well. This explanation ignores the fact that the Ninevites do believe that the Lord may voluntarily annul His verdict if they repent their evil and appeal to Him. Why should Jonah, after witnessing their belief and repentance, be angry that the divine decree was modified?
6. A theological motive associated with the theory of reward and punishment: Jonah believes that sinners must be punished and expects the Lord to govern the world with strict impartiality, following the principle of justice and

⁷⁵ J Sanhedrin 11:5 (30b); *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Bo, Masekhta de-Pisba* 1; Rashi and Joseph Kara on Jonah 1:3; David Kimhi on Jonah 1:3 and 4:2.

⁷⁶ E.g., Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 26–27; Sasson, *Jonah*, 87; but Ellul offers other reasons as well.

⁷⁷ E.g., Rashi on Jonah 4:1; Joseph Kara on Jonah 4:3; Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 76; J.W. Roffey, “God’s Truth, Jonah’s Fish: Structure and Existence in the Book of Jonah,” *ABR* 36 (1988), 1–18 (16). Sasson (*Jonah*, 297) believes that Jonah himself fears for his status as a prophet should his proclamation not be realized, so that it is his self-image rather than his public image that concerns him.

⁷⁸ See Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 76.

not the principle of mercy.⁷⁹ Unlike Moses, who urged God, “Turn from Thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Thy people” (Exod 32:12); and unlike Joel, with his message of encouragement and promise, “for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil” (Joel 2:13); Jonah assails the Lord with the reason for his flight from his mission in the past and his disgust with the life in the present: “for I knew that Thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repenting of evil” (Jonah 4:2).⁸⁰

As I understand it, the conclusion of our book, which places compassion at its center, supports the last option. The “surprise gap”⁸¹ at the beginning of the story, with regard to Jonah’s motive for running away, is filled in at the conclusion, when Jonah impeaches the Lord’s grace and compassion as the reason for his flight (4:2), and even more so in the last verse of the book, in which the Lord justifies His decision to show mercy for Nineveh. As Sternberg argues, the impression conveyed by the start of the story is that God is wrathful and punitive. As for Jonah and his flight, we mistakenly believe that the recalcitrant prophet “is too tenderhearted to carry a message of doom to a great city. He obviously protests against a wrathful God not with words, like Abraham or Moses or Samuel, but with his feet.”⁸²

But the last verses of the book show that we had it backwards: Jonah does not flee because God is a wrathful God, but because He is a merciful God. The Lord’s reaction to the Ninevites’ penance—“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which He had said he would do to them; and He did not do it” (3:10)—clearly echoes “the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Exod 32:14). Thus the book of Jonah teaches us that the Lord’s mercy is not reserved exclusively for “His people” but extends to all of His creation. Many biblical passages teach us about the power of repen-

⁷⁹ Y. Kaufman (*The Religion of Israel from its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* [trans. and abridged by M. Greenberg; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961], 285), refers to Jonah as “a champion of divine justice . . . the voice of the ancient idea that sin must be punished.” See also Fretheim, *The message of Jonah*, 23–24; Ackerman, “Satire,” 245; Brichto, *Toward a Grammar*, 76–77, 79, 80; Simon, *Jonah*, xii–xii, 34–35, with a slight variation in emphasis.

⁸⁰ On the ironic effect of Jonah’s complaint in comparison to biblical passages that laud the Lord’s mercy and seek it, see Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah*, 126–28.

⁸¹ On this term, and the use of this literary device throughout the book of Jonah, see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 318–20.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 318.

tance to alter a divine decree; particularly close, for our present purpose, is God’s proclamation to all nations in the book of Jeremiah: “If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it” (Jer 18:7–8).⁸³ Unlike Abraham, who debated God in an attempt to save the sinful city of Sodom (Gen 18:17–33), Jonah quarrels with God out of irritation with the divine decision not to punish the sinful city of Nineveh after its residents have repented.⁸⁴

4.2 The Lord’s compassion for animals

The conclusion of the book of Jonah teaches us that the Lord’s compassion extends to both man and beast. The talmudic sages and the traditional commentators debate whether the Torah precepts that protect animals are motivated by divine compassion for them. Most offer anthropocentric reasons for these precepts: education (to wean human beings from cruelty), hygiene, religion, human-centered ecological concerns, and so on.⁸⁵ But some midrashim and traditional commentators emphasize that the Lord shows mercy to animals as well as human beings.⁸⁶ Several midrashim even suggest that sometimes the Lord saves human beings only because of animals that are blameless. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the Lord pardoned Nineveh because its residents blackmailed Him! Exploiting the Lord’s concern for animals, they abused their livestock and threatened God that if He did not have mercy on them they would not show mercy to their animals:

Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish said: “The penance of the people of Nineveh was fraudulent.” What did they do? Rabbi Hunah in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Halfuta: “They placed the calves indoors and their mothers outdoors, the foals indoors and their mothers outdoors, so that these were howling from the one place and those from the other place. They said, ‘if you do not have mercy on us we will not have mercy on them.’” This is what is meant by the verse, “How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed” (Joel 1:18) Rabbi Aha said, “they do this in Arabia.” “Let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them cry mightily to God” (Jonah 3:8). What

⁸³ See also 1 Kgs 21:29; Ezek 18:27–28; 33:19; 2 Chr 33:12–19.

⁸⁴ On the contrasting analogy between Jonah and Abraham see, for example, Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 80; Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 110; Ben Zvi, *Signs of Jonah*, 16–17, n. 10; 42, n. 5: 121–22.

⁸⁵ See Y. Shemesh, “Compassions for Animals in Midrashic Literature and Traditional Biblical Exegesis,” *Studies in Bible and Exegesis (Presented to Elazar Touitou)* 8, (ed. by S. Vargon, A. Frisch and M. Rachimi; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press), 677–99 (686–93) (Hebrew).

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*, 694–99.

does “mightily” mean? Rabbi Simeon ben Halfuta said: “The arrogant defeated the virtuous” (J Ta’anit 2:1 [65b]).⁸⁷

The Lord’s peroration is compatible with the argument that He shows mercy to animals. In fact, His compassion for animals is emphasized by the structure of His rebuke of the prophet, which draws special attention to the words “and many beasts” by leaving them without a parallel clause:⁸⁸

4:10

And the Lord said,

“You pity⁸⁹ the plant,

for which you did not
labor, nor did you
make it grow,

which came into being
in a night, and
perished in a night.

4:11

And should not I pity
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?”

The Lord’s compassion for the animals is of a piece with the universal dimension of the book of Jonah and sharpens one of its main messages: God is not a national deity, the God of Israel alone; rather, His dominion extends to the entire Earth and His subjects

⁸⁷ So too *Pesiqta de-Rav Kabana* 24, s.v. “The repentance of the men” (ed. Mandelbaum, vol. 2, 361–62). This midrash is an attempt to defend the honor of Israel by forestalling the idea that the Ninevites, in their repentance, are better than the people of Israel, who are in no hurry to mend their ways. This comparison bothered the talmudic sages and traditional commentators; see above, the second reason for Jonah’s flight.

⁸⁸ Sasson, *Jonah*, 319.

⁸⁹ Tribble (*Rhetorical Criticism*, 219–22; “Ecological Soundings,” 196–97, 198) argues that we learn from the Lord’s statement, unexpectedly, that Jonah was upset about the gourd not only because it had provided him with shade, but also as a matter of disinterested compassion. But her idea is not persuasive. Still, the Lord’s a fortiori argument is indeed problematic, because Jonah did not feel sorry for the gourd but for himself, who had benefited from it. Perhaps we can say that the Lord, too, derives benefit from the great city of Nineveh, as asserted by Abravanel (*Prophets*, 129) on Jonah 4:11; perhaps this is the Lord’s subtle way of rebuking Jonah for being capable of self-pity but not of pity for others. Cf. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar*, 78–79.

are all human beings as well as animals.⁹⁰ The Lord’s concern for the well-being of animals, too, means that they do not exist solely to be exploited by human beings;⁹¹ their lives have an independent rationale. This view is maintained with great force in the book of Job, where the Lord, speaking from the whirlwind, enumerates various species of animals for which He provides, and what is common to them all is that human beings derive no benefit from them, because they cannot dominate them and subdue them to their own needs (Job 39:5–12; 40:15–32 [40:15–41:8]). That is, they have their own *raison d’être*, wholly independent of human beings.⁹²

Still, the Bible does not recognize animals as a legal entity distinct from human beings and manifestly links their fate to that of human beings.⁹³ Consequently when God sent the flood to destroy the world the animals perished with the human beings (Gen 7:21–23). Had the Lord carried through with his decree and wiped out Nineveh, the animals (as well as the innocent children and infants) would have been destroyed too. This linkage imposes special responsibility on human beings, because their behavior affects the entire world. But it also imposes special responsibility on God, who governs the world, since punishing certain human beings for their transgressions will inevitably harm the innocent as well, both human beings (such as children)⁹⁴ and animals. This is how we should understand the Lord’s rhetorical question at the end of the book: “And should not I pity 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?” (Jonah 4:11).

⁹⁰ Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 95.

⁹¹ The dominant outlook in the Bible is that animals exist principally to benefit human beings (in the form of meat, leather, etc.) or to be used in divine worship (as sacrifices). This view is not totally absent from the book of Jonah, either: the sailors offer sacrifices to the Lord (1:16). All the same, my argument is that in the view of the book of Jonah animals are not just instrumental.

⁹² Cf. S. Schroer, “Im Schatten Deiner Flügel,” O. Keel and T. Staubli (eds.), *“Im Schatten deiner Flügel”: Tiere in der Bibel und im Alten Orient*, Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 2001, 8–12 (9).

⁹³ Cf. Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah*, 94; Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, 277. This idea that the destiny of animals is linked to that of human beings and that human transgressions can harm animals, too, is found elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Jer 12:4; Hos 4:1–3).

⁹⁴ The phrase “who do not know their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:11) may refer to the children of Nineveh, as many understand it in the light of passages like Deut 1:39 and Isa 7:16. See, for example, Rashi and David Kimhi *ad loc.*; Bewer, *Jonah*, 64; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 129; Simon, *Jonah*, 47.

5. CONCLUSION

Animals play an especially prominent role in the book of Jonah: they serve as the Lord's deputies and agents (the fish and the worm); they are part of the community that beseeches the Lord in time of distress (Chapter 3); and they are an object of divine mercy, since the Lord's decision to reprieve Nineveh stems also from the presence in the city of "many beasts."

Animals play both a literary and theological role in the book. The fish and the worm, which serve as divine agents, form a contrasting analogy with Jonah, the official divine emissary, who shirks his mission, and as such sharpen the criticism of the prophet as well as our realization that he cannot escape. They, along with the other animals in the story, teach us that the Lord reigns over all of His world and has compassion for all of His creatures.

It may be argued, of course, that the unrealistic descriptions of animals (integrated into the unrealistic account of the Ninevites' repentance) are intended, in part, to alert readers that the story reports fictive events to be understood as such. Even if this is true, it does not cancel out the messages of this morality play, as presented above, concerning the Lord's role as the God of all creatures, human beings (both Israel and the nations) and animals alike, and the status of animals in His eyes, which goes beyond what some anthropocentric conceptions are willing to grant them.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ I do not mean to assert that the book's overt purpose is to combat anthropocentrism. Its use of animals can be seen as sharpening the message that the Lord is a universal deity and not just the God of Israel. It suffices that we recognize that its author did not share the radical anthropocentrism of Western thinkers, reviewed at the start of the present article, which reduces animals to the status of objects unworthy of moral consideration.

I would like to thank Prof. Ehud Ben Zvi, Dr. Ronit Shoshany and Lenn Schramm for their helpful comments. I would also like to thank *Keren Beit Shalom* of Japan for its generous support of this research.