

## Wrestling the Word: Submission and Resistance as Holy Hermeneutical Acts

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*Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us?" . . . Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us?" . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (Deuteronomy 30:11–14)*

These verses from Deuteronomy 30 invite believers into the infinite possibilities of *halakhic* obedience, the joy of obeying the stipulations of Torah and thus honoring the purposes of God through the practice of holiness. But they do more than that. On the level of meta-narrative, these Scripture verses testify to the accessibility of God's holy Word for new generations of believers in every age. These stirring words come near the conclusion of Moses' great speech to Israel as their wilderness wandering comes to an end. God's covenant people stand poised at the boundary of the Promised Land. Moses' speech has reflected on what has happened in the plot of Exodus through Deuteronomy: Israel's servitude in Egypt, God's gracious provision of all their needs through the wilderness sojourn, the defeat of forces that had opposed Israel on its journey. But Moses has also adumbrated a dark future in which some in Israel will turn to foreign gods, abandoning the covenant, and will suffer terrible afflictions and exile. Future generations will wonder—this is in Deuteronomy 29—why "the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger, fury, and great

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wrath, and cast them into another land” (29:28). Their unfaithfulness will have led—thus is the awkward future perfect of Moses’ speech—to their (future) punishment. So the moment of promise in which Moses assures his people that the Word of God is very near to them is a moment in which the shadow of the Babylonian diaspora already falls over God’s people. This is a prophetic way of telling *history* that signals the vital relevance of God’s Word in all the seasons of a community’s life.

Yet for many today, believers as well as seekers and nonbelievers, God’s Word can seem distant, strange, disconnected from the lives we live. This is especially true of the Hebrew Scriptures as God’s Word for Christian communities of faith. (The New Testament texts are no less strange. The parables of Jesus are paradigm-shattering and odd; the sophisticated ironies of the Gospel of John are missed by many readers; the apocalypticism of Mark 13 and the entire book of Revelation are all but unintelligible to most of us, even when we understand the ancient political context well. New Testament texts are all too easily domesticated, but on that I have no scholarly credentials to speak; I have only strong opinions. My arena is the Hebrew Scriptures.) True, the powerful narratives, poetry, and wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures are compelling to many of us here. I happily concede the point. We delight in the artistic use of metaphor and ellipsis in the Psalms, we are moved by the visceral energy of the rhetoric of Jeremiah and the disturbing visions of Ezekiel, we marvel at the artisanal subtlety of characterization in the Joseph material and in the book of Ruth. Surely all of us in this chapel cherish the Hebrew Scriptures! But it is not so for everyone. It is not so for all who have grown up in the Bible Belt, nor for all who have enjoyed the demanding luxury of education in theological schools. While the attendance numbers in churches in the global South—Africa and South America—may be growing, mainline denominations in North America and Europe continue their well-documented decline. Ignorance of the Bible is epidemic. For our context here in the United States, and for my theological discipline of Hebrew Scripture studies, it must be acknowledged: legion are the numbers of nonbelievers, lay people, theological students, and even pastors who steer clear of substantive engagement with the Hebrew Scriptures.

Yet it remains my conviction—as it is Christian orthodoxy—that our hearts and minds are nourished in unique and vitally important

ways by our engagement with the living Word of God. Thus the sustained engagement of all of Scripture is essential to the life of discipleship and to the flourishing of the church. Without Scripture, there is no theological vision but only boardroom tactics for congregational development. Without Scripture, there is no witness to the power of God across difference but only the planning of strategies for increased average Sunday attendance of folks who are like ourselves. Without Scripture, there is no prophetic claim on the hearts and minds of a community that seeks relationship with “the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy” (Isa. 57:15). The spiritual formation of believers and the renewal of entire communities of faith depends—as it has always depended—on transformative engagements with Scripture.

In these Jackson Lectures, I have the privilege of reflecting with you on the tremendous possibilities that lie before us for renewed engagement specifically with the Hebrew Scriptures. It is my hope that our explorations together—along with formative biblical study back home in your congregations and mine—can invigorate our pastoral and educational ministries and promote deep and courageous spiritual growth in our congregations. Today I will consider history and hermeneutics, specifically thinking about the challenge of historical relevance given how we may construct “history” itself, as a concept and as an intellectual endeavor, in our postmodern age. Tomorrow I will address the challenge of “difficult” Scripture texts, focusing on two dimensions of the book of Joshua that are challenging for many modern readers: its narration of miracles and the violence of its rhetoric and plot.

### *1. Problems with “History”*

First, then, I want to consider briefly what has become of the discipline of “history” as late-modern and postmodern theories of representation have developed from the second half of the twentieth century to today. History, of course, matters greatly for Christian readers. We worship an Incarnate Lord whose presence was, and is, and is to come as the fulfillment of Isaiah 61 (see Luke 4), a crucified One who speaks his death and resurrection in the words of the Psalms. We must seek to understand how the ancient and odd texts of the Hebrew Scriptures can be said to address us. The lines of

continuity that connect practicing Jewish believers with these ancient texts—especially as regards *halakhic* observance and ongoing immersion in rabbinic modes of interpretation—are not fully available to Christians, for two reasons. First, we understand ourselves not to be bound by the legal prescriptions of the Torah. Second, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we read our sacred texts toward different hermeneutical ends than do those readers who do not proclaim Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ.

Thus for many Christians, and for folks who observe Christian communities with a mixture of interest and skepticism, historical lines of continuity are difficult to perceive between contemporary Christian contexts and the diverse ancient contexts in which the Hebrew Scriptures were written. The mighty kingdoms that once terrorized cities and villages across the ancient Near East have crumbled to dust, a truth told in the biting irony of the poem “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
 Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown  
 And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
 And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 ‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
 Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!’  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

This astonishing poem points up the dramatic transience of the kingdoms of this world. A cruel despot—one who had been known by his “sneer of cold command”—had once taunted enemy kings with the magnificence of his statue, a monumental claim to power: “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” Yet now, all that remains is the “colossal wreck” of this ancient arrogance. So, too, the Davidic dynasty—whether great or minor on the ancient Near Eastern stage, it had once loomed large in the imagination of ancient Israel; but now it is dust, absence, all but incomprehensible to readers in a post-industrial

world. The liturgical dynamism that animated ancient Israelite worship in the first and second Jerusalem Temples is no more. The struggles of semi-nomadic life and subsistence agriculture, the economic suffering regularly caused by the Israelite monarchical system with its attendant oppressions via tributary economics, corvée labor, and debt slavery, the terrors of exile so devastating for those who experienced them: all these urgent dimensions of Israel's history have been lost. Israel's testimony has been rendered indistinct and seemingly irrelevant by the vast sweep of time, by the innovations of industrialization, and most recently by the technological revolution and globalization. How can we think of history now?

The positivist construal of the conceptual category of "history" was sharply contested in the twentieth century and continues to be re-configured even now. As the comparative literature specialist Hayden White observed back in 1984, the fixing of a narrative of events in writing "makes the written text a special kind of *symbolic structure*—however much its author might have intended it to be a merely literal report or description."<sup>1</sup> White notes, "There is no such thing as narration-in-general . . . there are only different kinds of stories or story-types, and . . . the explanation effect of historical story-telling derives from the . . . coherence with which it endows events by its imposition upon them of a specific plot-structure."<sup>2</sup> Coherence is constructed. The Enlightenment framing of the historical endeavor as an objective scientific analysis of neutral "facts on the ground" is no longer tenable.

Our understanding of ideological tendencies in both texts and interpretations has become more sophisticated. Vitally important gains have been made in this regard through feminist and postcolonial modes of inquiry. Those who have written history and those who interpret texts all have vested interests, biases, things they do not know, things of which they cannot yet conceive. Writers and interpreters alike can pose only the questions that they already know how to formulate, governed by the assumptions and norms of their own social

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, "The Interpretation of Texts," *Berkshire Review* 7 (1984): 7–23; reprinted in Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 208–222, at 217.

<sup>2</sup> Hayden White, "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological," in *Centuries' Ends: Narrative Means*, ed. Robert D. Newman (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 58–78; reprinted in *The Fiction of Narrative*, 273–292, at 280.

locations. As evangelical scholar Iain Provan rightly observes, “The myth of ‘the neutral, uninvolved observer’ has functioned and continues to function as an ideological tool in the hands of those whose political and economic interests it has served.”<sup>3</sup>

Walter Brueggemann insists that “the imaginative force of Old Testament rhetoric refuses to live with the restraints of either hegemonic power or Enlightenment epistemology.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures constitute a powerfully important resource with which to engage, critique, and move beyond the “meta-narratives” of this and every age. I stand with those who argue that it is essential to allow “the marginal, the secondary, the repressed, and the borderline” to reconfigure the interpretive framework and the cultural assumptions with which we work regarding how authority and truth are understood.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is vital to continue to think about historical dimensions of these texts, not only because we are “marked as Christ’s own for ever”<sup>6</sup> through baptism into his death, but because Scripture constitutes the precious witness of the Other. In every moment of reading, we risk allowing our own perspectives fatally to distort the testimony left behind by others very different from us. Yet we are ethically bound to read on, seeking to honor the perspectives of ancient witnesses as best we can, no less than we are bound to speak the truth as we know it in our own selves. Look at the breathtaking poem of Yehuda Amichai, “At an Archaeological Site,” which offers these lines: “. . . This dust / is people like us . . . / We are this heap of dust, our / bodies, our souls, all the words / in our mouths, all hopes.” As we gather our own communities around Scripture, we need to take account of history as precious testimony. This is an ethical mandate as much as a theological one.

I would like to lead us into the question of historical relevance and hermeneutics via three biblical figures in the Hebrew Scriptures. My governing thesis is that faithful approaches to reading Scripture in our postmodern age can be renewed by a dialogical movement between

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<sup>3</sup> Iain W. Provan, “Knowing and Believing: Faith in the Past,” in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephan Evans, Mary Healy, and Murray Rae, *Scripture and Hermeneutics* 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 229–266, at 237.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1997), 68.

<sup>5</sup> The quoted phrase is from The Bible & Culture Collective’s *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 121.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase is taken from the service of Holy Baptism in the Episcopal Church’s 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 308.

submission and resistance to the claims and underlying assumptions of these texts. My hermeneutical conviction is that the Word of God is living and powerful not because we treat the content of the Bible as a simplistic set of rules or as a reified, unchanging exhibit to be visited every Sunday in our faith-museum, but because we wrestle with it faithfully, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we seek to know God in Christ more deeply. Submission to Scripture and resistance to Scripture are both holy hermeneutical acts. Both please the God who continually calls to us through our sacred texts.

## 2. *Ancestors in Faith*

For this postmodern journey into a hermeneutics of submission and resistance, we will take as our guides Jacob, Jeremiah, and Jonah, ancestors in faith for every historical age. As the burgeoning scholarly work in reception history shows, readers in every age make of these biblical figures the icon needed in their own historical moment. These three are particularly fitting as models of postmodern faith because each is fractured by competing claims on his identity in a specific historical moment: Jacob as eponymous ancestor of “Israel” in the patriarchal period, Jeremiah as the paradigmatic prophet of exile, and Jonah as the conflicted hero of post-exilic Judaism. Further burnishing their credentials as proto-postmodern protagonists, each must work out his response to God in a liminal and unstable space that holds both extraordinary promise and dire threat. No one “master narrative” sustains Jacob or Jeremiah or Jonah. Each must move into uncharted territory, reconfiguring received tradition, forging a new path in a landscape for which the religious and cultural maps they inherited are not fully adequate. And marvelously, the struggles of each of them are inscribed in Scripture as meaningful—or more: as potentially transformative for Israel. Thus Jacob, Jeremiah, and Jonah live their leadership in moments of contestation and struggle, through submission and resistance. In our preaching and teaching, we would do well to reflect on their examples as we seek to revitalize our ministerial practice and our proclamation of the gospel.

First, then, in our lineup of postmodern heroes: Jacob.

### *a) Jacob*

Trickster *par excellence*, Jacob is the patron saint of those who struggle and wrangle their way through life. He is brash, a risk-taker,

always negotiating and seeking a new angle as a way to make a place for himself. Jacob and his twin brother Esau had grappled even in the womb. Conflict catapults him out into the wider world after he tricks his aging father Isaac into giving him Esau's birthright. Seeing Rachel, he desires his beautiful cousin for a wife; Jacob works hard for his uncle Laban for seven years and then has to work another seven years when a reverse-trickster move is pulled on him with Rachel's older sister, Leah. Jacob does not take the easy road. Whether due to his own machinations, through the consequences of the kinds of relationships he has with others, or because of the greed and envy that he inspires in others, Jacob has to wrestle for everything he wants in his life.

Today we will pause on the story of Jacob crossing the Jabbok ford—a narrative that could be important for your congregations, if any individuals in your churches, or perhaps your congregation as a whole, might at some point be facing the risk of change. (Life being nothing but change all the time, this is my way of emphasizing that Genesis 32 could potentially be crucially important as a sacred text for the faith life of every congregation.)

Our postmodern hero Jacob writes the patriarchal history of Israel in a new way. You'll remember that he is on his way back home after many years away. No longer a callow, manipulative youth, Jacob is a powerful chieftain with two wives (Rachel and Leah) and two concubines (Bilhah and Zilpah), thirteen children, and phenomenal resources. He is "exceedingly rich," we are told in Genesis 30:43. Jacob has large flocks and many servants in his household. Yet he is terrified of his brother Esau, whose inheritance and blessing Jacob had stolen so many years ago, leaving Esau to sob piteously, "Bless me, me also, father!" (I consider this one of the most wrenching moments in Scripture.) Everyone would understand if Esau were to kill Jacob on sight, and Jacob knows it. As he approaches home, the anxious patriarch bargains with God. "Remember, LORD, that *you said* you would do me good" is the manipulative gist of 32:9. For good measure, he throws in a dramatic concern that Esau might murder all of the mothers and children in Jacob's family, a concern for which there is no narratological evidence and which is likely meant by the narrator to signal that Jacob is overstating his case out of self-interest. Jacob knows the traditional pieties: he holds God to God's long-standing covenant promise to make the patriarchs' offspring "as the sand of the



sea, which cannot be counted because of their number” (Gen. 32:12). But citing venerable tradition cannot change the fact that Jacob is entering a moment of extreme risk. There is no way out—there is only through.

The confusion of Pentateuchal sources being brilliantly what it is, we cannot resolve whether Jacob has crossed the Jabbok or not. Verses 22–24 have it both ways, him accompanying his family across the Jabbok and him sending the others on ahead while he stays behind. As French literary critic Roland Barthes has put it, either Jacob wrestles before crossing as a “trial by combat” that proves his worthiness as folk hero, or he wrestles after he has crossed, in a moment of solitary testing of his chosenness,<sup>7</sup> what we might term a “vocational crisis.” In any event, Jacob is left alone at the Jabbok. Suspended by the text’s ambiguities, he wrestles on the far side, or perhaps on the near side—even potentially (if you see here a refraction of ancient folklore about river-demons) wrestling in the actual water. Jacob is saturated by fear, yet he knows it is impossible to go back, impossible not to try to return home. He may be at risk of drowning, but he is at even greater risk of being taken apart by the adversarial forces that animate his past and threaten his future. Jacob is an archetypal liminal figure, poised between threat and promise.

As you know, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” There is thunderous silence at the crucial moment: no expression of fear from Jacob, no attempt to flee or bargain. Jacob wrestles, and his adversary cannot prevail against him. Jacob is strong. Even with the agony of a dislocated hip, he refuses to let his adversary go: “Not until you bless me.” There is holy resistance and holy submission in this wrestling: the muscular tension of heroic resilience meets the inevitability of vocational submission to God. Named “Israel” in that moment precisely, Jacob writes Israel’s past as an ongoing dialectic between power and fear. In that very wrestling is the blessing that Jacob—Israel—wings from God. And of course, Jacob the patriarch writes not only the ancient past but Israel’s post-exilic future as well. (I offer this to those

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, “Wrestling with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:23–33,” originally published in *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1972); reprinted in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988), 246–260.

who believe, as I do, that the patriarchal stories were given their final literary shape in the post-exilic period.)

This is formative history for those grafted into Israel through Jesus Christ (Romans 11). Conflict compels us to grow in strength, to find our way in adversity, to be formed into our full and true identity as people of God. There are always new threats: they are markers of times of transformation. You know you must tell your congregations that. They may not be used to thinking of dread and threat and risk as liminal opportunities in which they can find astonishing missional purpose as they move into what God has planned for them. They might just be scared, and they might be tempted to overcompensate in all the ways that congregations do: with bluster and passive aggression, with triangulation and squabbling at church meetings. Help them see the holiness of wrestling, the joy of it! If you haven't found a way to say that to them recently, to give them courage in their wrestlings as individuals or as a community, then use this story of Jacob at the Jabbok. Pore over it with them. Ask them to explore the risks they fear in their communal life together. Invite them to pray through their anxiety about the future.

### *b) Jeremiah*

Our second proto-postmodern protagonist is the prophet Jeremiah. A study in contrasts, Jeremiah has been renowned throughout the centuries both for his polemical tirades—whence the term “jeremiad”—and for his wrenching laments. Commissioned by God before he was born, Jeremiah contests God's view of his prophetic capabilities: “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jer. 1:6). His demurral is poignant indeed for the re-reader of Scripture who knows how much this prophet will suffer: this young “boy” will be scorned, beaten, left to die in a well. He will also become the towering spiritual authority who speaks God's definitive word to a traumatized exilic generation.

The persona of Jeremiah has itself been fractured through contestations. The prose of the book of Jeremiah is turbulent with competing claims, torn and made incoherent by the attempts of differing Judean political groups to lay hold of the prophet and make him speak to their interests.<sup>8</sup> There is the sobbing Jeremiah whose heart breaks

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<sup>8</sup> This is the thesis of my *Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah: Struggles for Authority in the Deutero-Jeremianic Prose*, *Old Testament Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

at the fate of his people: “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. . . . Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? . . . O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!” (Jer. 8:21–9:1; Heb. 8:23). But there is also the Jeremiah who spews bitter invective in the name of the LORD at his fellow Judeans who were not deported to Babylon: “I will make them a horror, an evil thing, to all the kingdoms of the earth—a disgrace, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they are utterly destroyed” (Jer. 24:9–10). The complex compositional history of the book shows the legacy of Jeremiah splintered into many shards. Here is the Jeremiah who promises that archenemy Babylon must line up with the other nations to drink the deadly cup of the LORD’s wrath (Jer. 25:26, and see the oracles against Babylon in Jeremiah 50–51), but there is the Jeremiah who whispers that exiled Judeans must pray for the *shalom* of Babylon and seek the welfare of the city that keeps them in chains (Jer. 29:7). Here, the Jeremiah who can promise—apparently without irony—at the end of his oracle against Egypt that “afterward Egypt shall be inhabited as in the days of old” (Jer. 46:26b), but there, the Jeremiah who bellows divine judgment against his compatriots who fled for their lives to Egypt: “They shall perish; from the least to the greatest, they shall die by the sword and by famine; and they shall become an object of execration and horror, of cursing and ridicule” (Jer. 44:12). This is exilic history: a history of trauma and savage internecine disputes, a history of endlessly competing claims to authority, a history in which political disagreements had life-or-death consequences for entire generations of Judeans and no one was safe.

And so Jeremiah laments. Crying out the anguish of one who knows the loss and adversity of submitting to God, Jeremiah embodies conflict in his heart, his kidneys, his very bones. Jeremiah 20 shows us a prophet humiliated by the religious establishment—struck and thrown into the stocks by the priest Pashhur—and made a mockery by the LORD who had forced him into prophetic service. God has overpowered this faithful man and has prevailed (as is well known, the Hebrew of verse 7 has strong nuances of assault). He seeks to resist, but cannot: “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jer. 20:9). His adversaries may think they can prevail against him; but Jeremiah is robustly confident, in the depth of his bitterness, that they will fail,

for it is only God who is able so to violate him. The irony is searing when Jeremiah cries out this lament: “The LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble. . . . Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers. Cursed be the day on which I was born!” (Jer. 20:11, 13–14). The supposedly “joyful” moment of verse 13 is best understood as a bitterly ironic nod to God’s “deliverance” in that no one other than God can overpower the prophet. Those who see this as a fragment of earnest thanksgiving are missing the ironic tone, which is flagged by the double use of the verb “to prevail” (*yachol*) in 20:7, where God has prevailed over Jeremiah, and 20:10, where his human adversaries delude themselves that they might prevail over him. The exilic life of faith embodied by Jeremiah is a life of relentless struggle between submission and resistance; it is the living of that struggle that is holy. There is no single authoritative meta-narrative of history. The fractures of Jeremiah’s voice and vision in the book of Jeremiah illustrate that at the heart of the history of real communities lies contestation—lies wrestling.

### c) *Jonah*

Finally, and only fleetingly, we may glance at postmodernity’s anti-hero: Jonah. He declines the traditional vocation of prophet, swiftly and without comment. Bidden to go to Nineveh, he promptly takes off in the opposite direction. Catastrophe threatens the ship that is giving Jonah passage. Far from saving the day, Jonah slumbers in the hold of the pitching vessel as the divinely ordained mighty storm threatens to break it asunder. Trapped in the belly of a giant fish, Jonah sighs and mouths some traditional pious phrases. That this anti-prophet would be earnest when he laments, “How shall I look again upon your holy temple?” is beyond what I can swallow, all due respect to those readings that propose that Jonah underwent a profound spiritual transformation during his time in the briny deep. “Deliverance belongs to the LORD!,” he manages, mimicking the psalmist<sup>9</sup>—and the fish gags and spews him out. He grudgingly goes to Nineveh, it having become clear that there was no way out of this mission. The prophet produces a miserly brief warning about Nineveh’s impending

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<sup>9</sup> I argue this at more length in “Irony as Emetic: Parody in the Book of Jonah,” in my *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2009), 176–186.

doom (five words in the Hebrew: *'od 'arba'im yom ve-nineveh nehpa-chet*; compare this grudging oracle to Jeremiah's elaborate and artistic 110 verses against Babylon in Jeremiah 50–51). Nineveh repents immediately and hyperbolically, and Jonah wants to die, he's so angry.

Readers have pondered the meaning of the book of Jonah for centuries. Is it about God's sovereignty, that God may do as God wills? Is it about universal grace extending even as far as Israel's notoriously cruel enemy, Assyria? Maybe, and maybe. But in my view, Jonah is distraught that God has been merciful to Nineveh while not having been merciful to Israel throughout its history. The book of Jonah is a brilliant ironizing of any traditional piety that would praise God for God's goodness when Israel herself has suffered so much at God's hands. Nineveh falls to the Medes and the Babylonians in 612. The book of Jonah was written well after that time, so it was always obvious to the implied audience of the book that Nineveh would not flourish for long. The book of Jonah ends with a famous rhetorical question, unmarked as such in the Hebrew: the LORD said, "Should I not be concerned [*lo 'ahus*] 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). *Lo 'ahus* can be better read as, "Should I not pity?" Back in the eighth century, the prophet Hosea had named Israel *Lo Ruhamah*, "Not Pitied." Here in Jonah, the unmarked interrogative ostensibly about Nineveh is also an assertion about Israel: God has not pitied.

Jonah knows that God is ruthless. Early and late, "no pity" has been the truth of Israelite history, per Jonah. Post-exilic history is still the history of submission and resistance, but in another register entirely. Submission is to the reality of what a ruthless God has allowed: countless Judean lives destroyed, the ruin of the once-glorious Temple, the obliteration of political and cultural sovereignty for the people of God. More important, we have resistance: holy irony skewering old theological platitudes that no longer suffice. Jonah too is lament: sophisticated ironic lament.<sup>10</sup>




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<sup>10</sup> As Walter Brueggemann noted long ago, with lament "Israel kept the justice question visible and legitimate. The cry [of lament] *initiates history*." See Brueggemann's "The Costly Loss of Lament" in his *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1995), 98–111, at 106; emphasis added.

All this is history. Your students may want to argue about whether the patriarchs were real and how the sedentarization process unfolded in early Israel. Fine, but invite them also into a conversation about Jacob as the originary author of Israel's ambivalence about power and its deep cultural anxiety about change. Your scholarly peers may want to debate whether the confessions of Jeremiah constituted *ipsissima verba* of the historical prophet or instead were generic psalmody added later by a redactor. Fine, but invite them also into a discussion of the fractured polyphony of Jeremiah as emblematic of Israel's exilic identity. Your congregations may want to push for divine sovereignty or grace as the solution to the enigma of the book of Jonah. Fine, but invite them also to see that holy submission and holy resistance cannot be the same after trauma as they might have been before: Jonah speaks the post-exilic truth of Israel's history in a way that can never again be naïve.

Israel's history is a history of submission to the One who calls. It is also a history of resistance to the One who overpowers. Israel wrestles. And it is our profound privilege, our terror, and our joy to continue the struggle.