

## DEATH IN LIFE: THE BOOK OF JONAH AND BIBLICAL TRAGEDY

BRANSON L. WOODARD

*Literary analysis of the book of Jonah indicates a number of features found in the OT tragedies about Samson and Saul, as well as the tragic narrative of Adam and Eve. Relating Jonah to ancient Hebrew tragedy suggests a broader, more sophisticated expression of the Hebrew tragic vision than current research has shown and strengthens a reading of the book as history. This account of the prophet's experiences, moreover, displays impressive use of dramatic irony, which reveals the calamitous dimension of the downfall of a Hebrew protagonist. The recipient of a divine call to missionary service—and of chastisement for his obstinate disregard of Yahweh's grace—Jonah is a tragic figure whose spiritual estrangement throughout the narrative intensifies his death-in-life.*

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WHILE biblical and literary scholars continue to debate the authorship, purpose, and structure of various OT narratives, commentary on the book of Jonah retains a certain uniformity, keeping intact one assessment from the mid-sixties:

Controversies over The Book of Jonah have apparently all but ceased. One's viewpoint on the historicity of the "great fish" (ch. 1:17 [Heb., ch. 2:1]) no longer determines his orthodoxy or heterodoxy, and reference to Matt. 12:40 does not provide conclusive proof of the matter. That theological battle has been finished. There is even a remarkable unanimity on the interpretation of the book among Old Testament scholars. . . . It is agreed that the story is fictional and that the psalm in ch. 2:2-9 (Heb., ch. 2:3-10) is a later insertion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965; rpt. Sheffield: Almond, 1981) 39.

Scholarly consensus has its own persuasiveness, of course, partly because dissent must respond well to a number of crucial—and still unresolved—issues: the identity of the author and time of writing, his knowledge of other literature, and particularly the diversity of genres associated with the book of Jonah itself. Early in this century, for example, J. Bewer called it a “prose poem not history,” reasoning that the literary aspects of the book disqualify it from consideration as a factual account.<sup>2</sup> More recently, J. Miles has called the book parody,<sup>3</sup> while A. Hauser classifies it as caricature, the work of a skillful narrator who uses the element of surprise to unify his plot. As the narrative unfolds, says Hauser, “the writer has progressively and deliberately destroyed Jonah’s credibility, making him one who strikes out too readily at the world when it does not suit him.”<sup>4</sup> To be sure, his disgruntled attitude throughout makes for powerful drama; but H. W. Wolff’s hypothesis that the book is a five-act drama is inadequate.<sup>5</sup> Equally troublesome are J. Kohlenberger’s phrase “parable-like composition” and J. Ackerman’s term “short story,” especially in light of Ackerman’s subsequent statement in the same article that “the elements in the narrative . . . bring it close to classical satire.”<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere Ackerman and others, including J. Holbert and E. Good, have dealt at length with the pervasive irony in the book, extending our understanding of the narrator’s literary sophistication and rhetorical skill.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Hinckley Mitchell, John Smith, Julius Bewer, *The International Critical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912). Bewer speaks sharply against a reading that unites poetry and history: the book, he says, is “not the record of actual historical events nor was it ever intended as such. It is a sin against the author to treat as literal prose what he intended as poetry” (p. 4), “the work of poetic imagination, pure and simple” (p. 9).

Bewer’s view is shared by C. S. Lewis, who considered the book “a tale with as few even pretended historical attachments as *Job*, grotesque in incident and surely not without a distinct, though of course edifying, vein of typically Jewish humour” (“Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism”; *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967] 155).

<sup>3</sup>John A. Miles, Jr., “Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody,” *JQR* 65 (1975) 168–81.

<sup>4</sup>Alan J. Hauser, “Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove,” *JBL* 104 (1985) 36–37.

<sup>5</sup>H. W. Wolff, *Jonah: Church in Revolt* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1978). Like Bewer, Wolff rejects the Book as history, calling it “poetic fiction . . . comparable to Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son.” Thus, readers should not fight about historicity; the passage about the great fish, “like the whole book,” is “without question, work of the imagination” (p. 40).

<sup>6</sup>John R. Kohlenberger III, *Jonah and Nahum* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984) 19; James S. Ackerman, “Jonah” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987), 234.

<sup>7</sup>Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 39–55; John C. Holbert, “‘Deliverance Belongs to Yahweh’: Satire in the Book of Jonah,” *JSOT* 21 (1981) 59–81; and James Ackerman, “Satire and Symbolism in the

All in all, commentary seems to move in one of at least two directions: toward a pluralistic response to the issue of historicity, primarily because several supposedly preposterous—therefore purely imaginary—events in the plot make the book a satire; or toward a one-dimensional view of the text as history, due in part to other biblical references to Jonah as an actual person, not as a fictional character (see 2 Kgs 14:25; Matt 12:40; Luke 11:29–32).<sup>8</sup> With the former reading, critics assume that certain events could not happen and seek a way to explain the text accordingly. With the latter, the veracity of the narrative in Kings and Chronicles, the words of Jesus, as well as the OT prophets' fundamental concern with the historical nature of narrative, exclude any possibility that Jonah is a fiction.

This article does not attempt to resolve all issues regarding the genre and background of the book; it does, however, suggest an altogether different context for criticism of the book, based upon literary matters that have not been raised before—details that not only accommodate the flashes of irony, the compact structure, and various other poetic elements in the narrative but also point to sources that may have aided the author. In short, the book of Jonah has various features that appear in biblical tragedy. In the following discussion, I wish to show how these features follow the text, providing a firm literary base for the ironic statements in the plot; associate the author of Jonah with the Hebrew tragic vision; and show that a reading of the book as history is quite defensible.

Explication of a text is always more than mere plot summary. Nevertheless, to uncover the tragic qualities in the book of Jonah, especially in light of the various genres attached to it, an explication close to plot summary is necessary. In fact, such an approach, drawing upon the primary features of biblical tragedy—dilemma, choice, catastrophe, suffering, perception, and death<sup>9</sup>—will reveal a highly unified narrative about the dramatic descent of a proud prophet.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF TRAGEDY IN THE TEXT

Jonah's dilemma is easy enough to identify. He must preach to the Ninevites as God has commanded or disobey the very One who has called Jonah and his countrymen the Chosen People. The former

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Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (ed. B. Halpern and J. Levenson; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981) 213–46.

<sup>8</sup>The most recent discussion is by J. H. Stek, "The Message of the Book of Jonah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 4 (1969) 23–50, defending the importance of historical perspective in prophetic narrative; but the article says far too little about the literary features of Jonah to refute the current view that the book is satiric fiction.

<sup>9</sup>Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 145.

the safety of the prophets' own territory, Jonah is being sent *to* the Gentile people.<sup>10</sup> His other alternative, however, is the infinitely more dangerous, unholy, and unloving option of refusing Yahweh's call altogether. That call, moreover, is based upon an awesome fact that intensifies Jonah's dilemma: the Ninevites' wickedness has "come up" to Yahweh, affronting His holiness. Thus, for Jonah to ignore his mission is to ignore his God—a crisis indeed, though the prophet has no excuse for disobeying Yahweh's command, regardless of the consequences.

No wonder, then, he flees to Tarshish (1:3). Twice in the verse, perhaps to achieve emphasis, the narrator states that Jonah fled from the Lord. Whether this emphasis is ironic is debatable. To be sure, no one can absent himself from the omnipresent One; therefore, Jonah's self-deluded attempt to run may be read as dramatic irony, the implicit contradiction between what a character says or does and what the reader knows to be true. Moreover, such discrepancy may embellish (rather than contradict) a presumed historical fact that one of Yahweh's prophets rebels against Him, seeking to avoid His will and presence, and thus reacts rashly (and irrationally) in a vain attempt to escape.

Jonah's choice is particularly noteworthy because it links his character with other OT tragic figures. Whereas Samson's tragic flaw was his lack of self-control (Judges 14–16) and Saul's, a rashness or proneness to extremes that eroded his ability to lead (1 Samuel), Jonah's was contempt fed by pride. He wanted the Ninevites to perish because, as Gentiles, they stood outside the camp of God's covenant blessing. Such insensitivity must have been intense to motivate a believer to turn away from Yahweh's call.

The prophet's choice soon leads to catastrophe, the divinely-sent storm (1:4–16), circumstances made all the more desperate by the tense dialogue between Jonah and the ship's crew. The narrator introduces this dialogue with a brief statement about the effects of the storm. Its ferocity could have split apart the ship, as could Yahweh's hand; but whatever damage would be sustained, the sailors were fearful enough to pray to their false gods and to part with various cargo so as to keep the ship afloat. All the while Jonah lay in a deathlike sleep, a detail that may suggest in a different way the extent of his insensitivity. Whatever the case, he is confronted by a series of questions (1:6, 8, 10), each of which reveals the speaker's desperation.

First the captain, rousing Jonah, asks, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish" (1:6).<sup>11</sup> This exclamatory question, heavily ironic because Jonah's God *sent* the storm, addresses not the obvious issue, how to

<sup>10</sup>Kohlenberger, *Jonah and Nahum*, 29.

<sup>11</sup>This and all subsequent references follow the NIV (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

survive the wind and waves, but how anyone could be so oblivious to the imminent disaster. It is a question of shock and fear. Particularly striking is the narrator's silence; no mention of Jonah's reply follows, perhaps an indication that Jonah is disturbingly passive, especially in chapter 1.<sup>12</sup> What does follow is a brief description of the crew's casting lots in order to identify the culprit (v 7). After the lot falls on Jonah, the other men pose a series of questions to him, not rhetorical but genuinely expository ones: "Who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" (v 8).<sup>13</sup> Again, as with the captain, the crew focus their attention not upon the gale but upon the prophet, linking him with the storm. Some commentators argue that the narrator is using this situation, a crisis in which pagans are more discerning than a prophet, to satirize Jonah.<sup>14</sup> But more likely, the men

<sup>12</sup>Hauser, "Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove," 23: "Passivity . . . plays an important role in ch 1. Although Jonah's decision to flee (1:3) is certainly active, virtually everything else said about Jonah in ch 1 is passive." Thus, all are unwitting tools in Yahweh's hand.

This emphasis, however useful in analyzing the plot design, fails to consider Jonah as defensive, not just passive—perhaps not passive at all. First, Hauser downplays the significance of Jonah's decision to flee, the response that leads to the subsequent trials for himself and for the sailors. His blatant rebellion puts him on the defensive; he must protect himself. And he does so without fear of God or man. Such is not necessarily a passive stance. Second, certain remarks from Jonah are as much facts that he must acknowledge as they are tacit expressions of passivity. When he identifies himself as a Hebrew and a worshiper of Yahweh (1:9), he is simply explaining an earlier admission (1:10). Later, his reply to the sailors' question (1:11–12) is but the logical result of the preceding interrogation (1:6–10). He simply cannot now deny that his presence caused the storm and accompanying danger. Besides, as Hauser later admits twice (p. 26), Jonah's suggestion that the sailors throw him overboard is an "offer" of his own life for theirs, a display of Jonah's irrational thinking; in fact, these words anticipate his response after the sailors repent.

The question is whether a passive character makes such offers. Probably not, if indeed Jonah is motivated in part by his defensiveness—a sign not of weakness but of resolution, albeit ill-conceived.

<sup>13</sup>Good seems to be overreaching here, thereby obscuring the point of the sailors' questions. He calls the situation "wildly incongruous" that "in the midst of the howling storm, [the crewmen] request of Jonah a thumbnail autobiography" (p. 44). The questions, I would argue, are motivated by the drama of the moment; as Holbert notes, "The lots have already revealed the truth; Jonah is the guilty party. The questions of the sailors in v. 8 become highly significant in the light of their certain knowledge of Jonah's guilt" (p. 67). Moreover, the gravity of the circumstances would prompt the men to blurt out questions, not to await a systematic reply but to react to the perceived mysteries of Jonah's presence among them.

<sup>14</sup>See Holbert 66–67: "in a satiric piece it is the unexpected one who offers the expected solution [to crises involving divine judgment]. It is the pagan captain who suggests, 'perhaps that God will stir himself on our behalf in order that we do not perish.' Crying for help to the source of help may lead to help; that is good religion. The 'faithful' prophet of God never thought of it; or if he did, he surely did not act upon it . . . another famous pagan in the book, the Ninevite king, has nearly an identical suggestion in

are expressing the ancient tendency to assume that crises were divine judgments upon sinful deeds; therefore, their wisdom is syncretistic, not orthodox.<sup>15</sup> At any rate, he identifies himself as a Hebrew and a worshiper of Yahweh, Creator of the sea as well as the land (v 9). How do these statements affect the crew? They are horrified and to show their terror raise the second of two rhetorical questions: "What have you done?" They knew already, from Jonah's own lips, that he was attempting to avoid Yahweh's presence (v 10), so the question is uttered in sheer panic.

The catastrophe worsens as the sailors turn their attention from Jonah's background to his threatening presence on the ship. Accordingly, they ask him what to do with him to still the waves (v 11), to which he replies, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea . . . and it will become calm." Then, perhaps to show his strength of mind, if not forcefulness of will, he accepts blame for the storm: "I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you" (v 12).

The most sensible response to these words is to throw Jonah overboard. But the narrator suspends that possibility and thereby heightens the catastrophe. The sailors know that Jonah's suggestion involves certain death for him and whatever his wrongdoing may be, death hardly seems appropriate; therefore, the crew try to row against the currents, unaware that God is increasing the winds. Facing an impossible task, the men finally abandon their efforts and throw Jonah into the sea, after which the storm subsides. But the catastrophe does not even end here. The crewmen think that they may have caused the death of an innocent man (v 14)—casting lots is hardly a foolproof

3:9. . . . Must the pagans teach the prophets proper religion? Apparently, *this* prophet needs teaching."

To begin with, one simply cannot assert that Jonah did not call upon God and that he may have. Trying to have it both ways is as unpersuasive as ever. Also, Jonah's need of teaching, or lack of it, is quite a different matter from the captain's wise counsel, an expression of his pagan religiosity. Certainly that counsel should be uttered by a Hebrew prophet such as Jonah, but Gentile religious invocations during a crisis hardly lead to only one conclusion, that the narrator is satirizing Jonah. On the contrary, why could not the narrator be reporting actual statements, the sum of which obviously underscores Jonah's spiritual faults? Indeed, this effect can be drawn from the mere unfolding of tragic narrative, without the literary apparatus of satire.

<sup>15</sup>Based upon a study of fourteen Hittite prayers, Walter Beyerlin found a noteworthy characteristic that occurs also in the OT (*Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 1966): the prayers, which are primarily argumentative, "are made from the basic conviction that a transgression against the deity will be punished by a visitation; conversely, a blow which falls on a community or an individual indicates a wicked action which has been committed recently or even longer before." Beyerlin then illustrates these concepts by citing Jonah 1, as well as 2 Sam 21:1ff., Ps 38:1ff., and individual speeches by Job's interlocutors. Whether the sailors were Hittite or not, recalling their mindset points clearly to the possibility that the narrator may not be ridiculing Jonah at all.

technique of determining a man's guilt or innocence—and fearfully offer sacrifices and make vows to God (v 16). Surviving the storm should be cause for revelry, but these sailors see nothing to celebrate. So ends chapter 1 in the Hebrew Bible, though English translations include the next verse: "But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights" (1:17).

The prayer that follows, which George Landes has argued most compellingly as integral with the original text,<sup>16</sup> dramatizes Jonah's suffering (2:1–8) and, later, his perception—the realization of a key insight, though that insight may not resolve all of his troubles (2:9–3:10).

Who can read Jonah's prayer without being moved by his suffering? His first words ("In my distress I called to the Lord") set the mood while subsequent phrases point to his physical torment and spiritual anguish. Images of death and burial pervade the pleas: Jonah calls to God "From the depths of the grave" (v 2), from "the deep" (v 3); this "deep" engulfs him, he says (v 5); even so, as he sinks down, he acknowledges that the Lord delivered him from the "pit" (v 6). Here the mood swings from suffering to hope, an important structural detail because chapter 3 focuses upon life, not death; and that life is an outworking of Jonah's perception during the three days in the belly of the fish.

The perception itself is the most pleasant part of the narrative. Jonah sings with thanksgiving to praise God from whom comes salvation (2:9).<sup>17</sup> This strong claim attests to his courage and faith and

<sup>16</sup>"The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah," *Interpretation* 28 (1967) 3–30. Landes argues persuasively that 2:2–9 fits contextually into the prose narrative and therefore is a viable part of the original composition, not inevitably an interpolation from a later editor. First, he notes, we have no textual evidence that the book "ever circulated without the psalm" (p. 10), though he concedes that the earliest known text (from the late third century B.C.) still allows ample time for interpolation to occur. Then he cites the unifying function of the psalm: that it includes two prayers, rather than one, allows it not only to "describe Jonah's anguish after having been cast into the sea" and his "plea for deliverance" but also his "grateful praise for a past deliverance" (p. 15). Finally, Jonah's personality in the narrative has "nothing significantly disharmonious" with his personality in 2:2–9.

T. Warsaw, interpreting the book as satire, supports Landes on the integrity of the psalm as a part of the book, at least if viewed from a literary perspective: "Jonah's prayer presents difficulties, but from the point of view of the literary critic it contains many echoes of motifs in the story that surrounds it, making it an artistic part of the whole" ("The Book of Jonah," *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative*; ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis with James Ackerman and Thayer Warsaw [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974] 192). Critics familiar with the Hebrew note additional literary artistry through vocabulary and various instances of word play.

<sup>17</sup>Landes, referring to the entire psalm, includes two other details as part of Jonah's perception (pp. 24–25), though not in the context of biblical tragedy, as I am arguing. First, Jonah realizes that this life-threatening incident at sea results not solely from his

presents him as anything but a passive man. At this point, Yahweh commands the fish to vomit the prophet on dry land; and it is so.

"Salvation comes from the Lord" indeed, and the recipients of that salvation include some of the most wicked people on earth, the Ninevites, as Jonah well knows (see 4:2). He admits such knowledge even before he fled to Tarshish. Thus when Yahweh extends a second call to preach to Nineveh (3:1–2), Jonah knows exactly what he must do; and his sensitivity has been raised considerably after three days in solitude, smelling gastric juices, seeing nothing. With short, direct statements, the narrator reports Jonah's obedient response, along with a description of his trip and the results (vv 3–10). Jonah's message too is short and direct ("Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" [v 4]) and is the negative aspect of his positive statement inside the fish, "Salvation comes from the Lord." As Jonah issues God's warning, he witnesses the mighty deliverance of a brutal people whose king fasts, dons sackcloth, places himself at the mercy of God, and exhorts his subjects—including the animals—to do likewise, as a testimony of their contrition (vv 5–9). Sincere doubts about the inclusion of the animals have prompted some commentators to interpret this scene as grotesque and, literally, fantastic.<sup>18</sup> But the narrator may have a different (nonsatiric) intention, to dramatize the depth of God's concern for the Ninevites and even for their animals, a compassion expressed also in the conclusion of the book:

the whimsical picture of the beasts of Nineveh wearing sackcloth and crying mightily to God, if it stood alone, might be dismissed as only a humorous embellishment of the narrative; but the closing words of the book, "and also much cattle," can be understood only as emphasizing the compassion of God for animals as well as men.<sup>19</sup>

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rebellion or from the sailors' decision to throw him overboard but also from his chastisement by Yahweh. Second, he learns "a fundamental truth in the Israelite conception of death: death means radical separation from God, a sense of being bereft of the divine presence. . . ." Both details, I would suggest, contribute to the reading of Jonah as a tragic figure, shown divine truths but later (chaps. 3–4) rejecting them for the sake of his own interests.

<sup>18</sup>Good, 49–50 and Warsaw, 197.

<sup>19</sup>Millar Burrows, "The Literary Category of the Book of Jonah," in *Translating & Understanding the Old Testament* (ed. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970) 102.

That animals are described as sharing human experiences is not limited to Jonah 3:7–8 anyway. The prophecy of Joel refers to beasts engaged in moaning and suffering (1:18), "panting for" God (1:20), and being instructed not to fear past devastation of crops (2:20). Although the uncertain dating of Joel's prophecy (from the ninth century to a post-exilic period) makes any further connection between the two books mere conjecture, the similarity of the two descriptions of animals warrants further study.



Chapter 3, then, is not only a continuing part of the narrative but, for Jonah anyway, a striking commentary on the insight he has gained.

Of course, the literary artistry enhances this commentary, as it has strengthened the preceding accounts. One particularly powerful device is contrast: earlier, Jonah rebelled against Yahweh and went to an obscure western city; now he obeys and visits an "important" eastern one (3:3). Before, he was the cause of a ship's being destroyed; now he preaches to prevent a city from a similar end. Whereas on the ship he remained defensive, now he proclaims Yahweh's message. Then comes the climax of Jonah's realization (or perception); as he observes the Ninevites plead for mercy, then beholds Yahweh respond with compassion and grace, he becomes part of a full and rich expression of divine love and divine life.

What could gratify a believer any more than that? Not Jonah, though; he grows angry at Yahweh's grace. Moreover, he asks to die (4:3), as Elijah had requested for himself (1 Kgs 19:4). These two details, in addition to other images of death in chapter 4 (and throughout the book), present Jonah less as a satirized prophet and more a tragic figure. Some humor may arise from the narrative, but the laughter turns to mourning as the intended Hebrew audience considers the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:3). How utterly disgraceful for the melancholic evangelist to seek death for himself and destruction for the Ninevites, rather than further Yahweh's plan to make of Abraham a great nation and through his progeny to evangelize the Gentiles. That blessing, in Jonah anyway, has turned into a curse, though never apart from divine superintendence.

God's sovereignty is further elevated, and dramatically so, in the narrative following Jonah's death wish. Once again he leaves his assigned place of ministry, goes somewhere east of Nineveh, and pouts. (Again one recalls the dramatic irony in Elijah's self-willed flight from Jezebel, as if she controlled all, and God's providential care of Elijah during his "retreat.") But even now, the metaphor of death remains; as the fuming prophet shelters himself from the sun, the narrator says, he "waited to see what would happen to the city" (v 5). This remark implies that Jonah still hoped for the destruction of Nineveh, and adds another dimension to his death-in-life. He is alive, but his thoughts are ruled by death, either his own or the Ninevites'—or both.

This metaphor of death guides the remainder of the narrative as well. First comes the death of the vine that brought a welcomed shade to Jonah (v 7). Then the narrator, perhaps intensifying Jonah's earlier death wish, refers to it again; and the reference occurs on two rhetorical levels, through the narrator's commentary and through Jonah's direct statement: "He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live'" (v 8). This claim, incidentally, is a literary

convention that enhances Jonah's call as a prophet. Finally, after Yahweh again asks Jonah if he has "a right to be angry about the vine," the prophet once more shows his preoccupation with death: "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die" (v 9). Thankfully, Yahweh has the final word, explaining to Jonah the symbolism of the vine and the value of the Ninevites in carrying out His plan (v 10); and He concludes with a rhetorical question, which is a characteristic way of showing divine sovereignty: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" The very focus of this question is upon death, the would-be destruction of an ancient metropolis, had the people not repented. The question, posed to an impenitent prophet, heightens the death imagery in the story and points to more dramatic irony: the contrite people of Nineveh are more alive than the Hebrew prophet, whose existence is truly a death-in-life. That the book does not refer to his physical death hardly seems significant in the context of his recurrent spiritual insensitivity, especially after the miraculous display of Yahweh's love.

Throughout the book, then, Jonah demonstrates the downward movement typical of tragedy, in which a privileged protagonist falls from a position of honor and respect, here the ministry of a prophet, to one of rebuke and death. The narrator, in fact, makes this movement clear through repetition: His special standing is established by the phrase "son of Amittai," i.e., truth, and by the call to ministry itself (1:1). Without further delay, however, the narrator explains Jonah's fall, particularly through repetition. He "went down" to Joppa (1:3); aboard the ship in a storm, he had "gone below" (v 5). Later he descended "into the deep" (2:3) and "sank down" (2:6). This entire scene is filled with images of death. And the narrative concludes with Jonah's two death wishes (4:3, 8) and the death of the plant (4:7). His shame is complete, and the irony most strong, as the book ends; the "son of truth" who well knows Yahweh's grace must hear a plea from Yahweh to believe it. This low point is probably the most degrading one in the book.

#### THE TRAGIC VISION OF THE HEBREWS

This brief narrative is quite similar to OT tragedy, which is found in several texts. Genesis 1-3, probably written 1400 B.C., is tragedy, following the model of dilemma-choice-catastrophe-suffering-perception-death that fits Jonah. Adam and Eve face the dilemma of obeying God's command or eating the fruit (3:1-4). They make a deliberate choice (vv 5-6), then face a twofold catastrophe: their shameful self-consciousness of being naked (v 7), an awareness that must have been horrible because their nakedness once involved no self-consciousness at all; and their alienation from Yahweh, implicit in His rhetorical question "Where are you?" (v 10). Next, the couple endures suffering,

not just the punitive pronouncements from God but expulsion from the garden and, ultimately, physical death. Of course, neither Adam nor Eve (nor Jonah) physically dies immediately following the suffering. Adam and Eve come to realize that disobedience brings disaster; thus, as fallen beings, they now must depend upon Yahweh for help—precisely Eve's statement in 4:1–2.

Within the Jonah text are indications that the author has drawn upon the phraseology of the tragedy in Genesis. As J. Holbert argues (in another context), the use of "sleep" refers back to Gen 2:21; the rhetorical question in 1:8 is an "exact analogy of God's question to Adam in the garden" (see Gen 3:11), and the rhetorical question "What is this you have done?" is the "identical phrase" in Gen 3:13.<sup>20</sup> Surely, then, the author of Jonah knew this account and used its literary features in his own narrative.

Even if he did not use Genesis, he had two other biblical tragedies to consult. The account of Samson (Judges 13–16) was written probably in the eleventh century. Here a Nazirite strongman must either adhere to his vow or forsake his spiritual privilege for temporal pleasures. He chooses the latter (see esp. 14:8–9 and 16:1, 4–17, esp. 17) and soon thereafter experiences, unknowingly, the greatest catastrophe conceivable, the departure of God's Spirit (v 20). Then Samson endures the degradation of Philistine imprisonment and slavery (v 21), living in physical blindness (as Jonah does inside the belly of the fish). Shortly before his death, Samson utters a death wish (16:30), as does Jonah, and realizes that his strength comes only from God. Yet another tragedy, that of Saul (1 Samuel), was written ca. 900 B.C., at least a full century before Jonah. This narrative, explicated most impressively by W. L. Humphreys and L. Ryken,<sup>21</sup> joins two other similar narratives, all of which presented the writer of Jonah with a literary form highly useful to the story of an angry, recalcitrant prophet who would rather

<sup>20</sup>See "Deliverance," 65, 67, 68. The Hebrew for "deep sleep" (Jonah 1:5–6) is discussed also by J. Magonet, who argues that in both Genesis and Jonah, the words refer to a dormancy "beyond rousing which is close to death" (*Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*, 2nd ed. [Sheffield: Almond, 1983], 67). The phrase "deep sleep" in 1:5–6, based upon a root word that, says Magonet, occurs only eleven times in the Bible, is the "first hint of Jonah's 'death wish,' a theme which is more and more explicitly demonstrated as the story progresses, the request to be thrown overboard, the requests for death in Chapter 4" (68). If Magonet's connection between the root in 1:5–6 and Jonah's declaration to die is forced, certainly the prophet's preoccupation with death intensifies as the narrative develops. The more important point, however, is that neither Holbert nor Magonet suggests any relation between this language and the Hebrew tragic vision that I believe appears in Genesis 2–3 and in Jonah.

<sup>21</sup>W. Lee Humphreys, "The Tragedy of King Saul: A Study of the Structure of 1 Samuel 9–31," *JSOT* 6 (1978) 18–27; and *Words of Delight* 151–55.

die than obey God. No further connection between Jonah and the earlier tragedies can be claimed, of course, because we have not dated the composition of the book of Jonah precisely, identified its author conclusively, or documented his knowledge of contemporary literature. Nevertheless, the earlier OT tragedies were written and the author of Jonah used phraseology in at least one of them to shape his story.

This context for analyzing Jonah derives further support from the tragic spirit in OT literature as distinguished from Greek plays that are called tragedies. The Hebrew tragic vision, defined by W. L. Humphreys as the struggle in a hero between forces beyond his control and flaws within his own character, is "larger than the pure forms of Greek tragedy, and it informs a wide range of literature," appearing perhaps for the first time in *The Gilgamesh Epic*.<sup>22</sup> Humphreys' discussion draws in part upon the work of L. Michel, who claims that a tragic view of literature has two prerequisites, the "inscrutability of God" and "actual or moral evil." Both are found, he says, in the OT:

In the Old Testament the materials are often . . . those of competition between men: Cain slew Abel, Jacob defrauded Esau, David coveted Uriah's wife: but the important aspect of these actions is that they are not only evil or dangerous, but sinful. What counts is how a man acts in the eyes of the Lord. . . . No sin is a little thing, because of *God's* greatness. And it is here that the Hebrews, unlike their contemporaries, took the step that allows their history to be seen tragically: Having abandoned God they caused their own penalty and woe.<sup>23</sup>

This observation is further detailed by R. Sewall, who notes that the Israelites looked upon the elements of tragedy with "striking clarity," an insight not apparent in other nearby cultures:

Of all ancient peoples, the Hebrews were most surely possessed of the tragic sense of life. It pervades their ancient writings to an extent not true of the Greeks. . . . The Hebraic answer to the question of existence was never unambiguous or utopian; the double vision of tragedy—the

<sup>22</sup>W. L. Humphreys, *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 1–9, 18. Humphreys is here distinguishing tragedy, which he says describes the story of Saul, from the tragic vision—a literary dynamic that appears in such passages as Genesis 2–3 and Judges 13–16 (see pp. 69–70 and 77). Whether these passages conform to a genre that may be termed Hebrew tragedy, as I am suggesting, or display the Hebrew tragic vision, the important point is that they present a hero regressing through various phases toward degradation and shame—not as a victim of circumstances, as in formal Greek tragedy, but as a free moral agent who rebels against Yahweh.

<sup>23</sup>"The Possibility of a Christian Tragedy," in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 220–21. Later in the same article, Michel denies that tragedy and Christianity are compatible, due to the fact of redemption (pp. 223–33).

snake in the garden, the paradox of man born in the image of God and yet recalcitrant, tending to go wrong—permeates the Scriptures. . . . The Old Testament stories are heavy with irony, often of the most sardonic kind. And yet their hard, acrid realism appears against a background of belief that is the substance of the most exalted and affirmative religion, compared to which the religions of their sister civilizations, Egyptian, Babylonian, and even Greek, presented a conception of the universe and man both terrible and mean.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the terror of tragedy lies in what Sewall describes as the chaotic nature of reality, its disjointed, multi-dimensional, irreconcilable events and ideas—in which truth is anything but harmonious. To be sure, Truth is neither chaotic nor ultimately irreconcilable, but its paradoxical dimensions aid our reading of those times when

Moses, Jonah, and many of the Old Testament heroes and prophets argued with Jehovah, questioned his judgment, criticized his harshness or (as with Jonah) his leniency, in actual dialogue. . . . Ideas, or truth, were not regarded apart, as abstractions or final causes. They were ideas-in-action, lived out and tested by men of flesh and blood.<sup>25</sup>

In such a *weltanschauung*, Jonah's flight to Tarshish—not just in fear but in challenge to Yahweh—and his childish pouting are not as exaggerated as they may appear. Likewise, his reference to Yahweh as the Creator of the sea (1:9), whether a platitude or a sincere statement, emphasizes “the most exalted and affirmative religion.” In fact, Jonah's acknowledgment of God, revealing his Hebrew heritage, is not necessarily satiric at all, whether spoken with heartless orthodoxy or genuine concern.

#### JONAH VS. THE PROTAGONISTS IN CLASSICAL TRAGEDY

Later, the Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides would develop a quite different vision and form of tragedy. In their plays noble characters suffer degradation not always through *hamartia* but at the hand of fate, the gods, whose own follies and obsessions wreak havoc in the human realm. Ryken has listed three characteristics that distinguish OT from Classical tragedy,<sup>26</sup> characteristics that support a correlation of Jonah with the Hebrew tragic vision. First, the spiritual dimension of the narrative is obvious; in fact, I would suggest, the ultimate “tragedy” is that the Jonah narrative closes without clear indication that the prophet repented of his sin and found fellowship with Yahweh. Indeed, as chapter 4 ends, Jonah's anger is nothing less

<sup>24</sup>Richard Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale, 1959) 9–10.

<sup>25</sup>Sewall, 13–14.

<sup>26</sup>*Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 105–6.

than a "Great Evil" that has left him "in need of much greater repentance" than he had shown earlier.<sup>27</sup> Surely this is the ultimate disgrace in any believer's life. It is certainly apparent in Samson (see Judg 16:28, 30) and Saul (see 1 Samuel 31). Second, the blame for the catastrophe lies squarely with Jonah and throughout the book God has punished him for his disobedience. Never does he appear as a sympathetic victim of circumstances beyond his control, as happens, for example, with Sophocles' *Antigone*, whose resolution to her own convictions leads to her death; or with Euripides' *Medea*, whose uncontrollable anger prompts her to poison her own children as well as Creon.<sup>28</sup> Quite the contrary, Jonah's suffering is his own doing. Thus the Hebrew protagonists should not be judged strictly by the Greeks, whose paganistic determinism creates and sustains a sympathetic response from the audience. Third, Jonah has clearly-defined alternatives, preach to Nineveh or reject God's command and suffer chastisement. Though he finally opts for the former, he has also endured the latter, his obstinacy always frustrating the intimate relationship sought by a loving God. That stubborn pride is what Yahweh hates most—and what makes Jonah a tragic figure.

#### CONCLUSION

Abundant irony, highly-crafted structure, artful narrative, clever word play, captivating use of dialogue—these make the book of Jonah both memorable and literary. The poignant story of a privileged believer who sacrifices his ministry and his intimacy with God for self-gratification is the spirit of OT tragic narratives in Genesis, Judges, and Samuel. That these passages are historical does not make Jonah the same; but if the narrative about Jonah is a part of their literary identity, as I have argued, why should not the text be read as history, as a powerful (though temporary) frustration of the Abrahamic Covenant that only divine grace could overcome? Whether subsequent research extends or refutes this argument, at least the inquiry will have at its disposal a new basis for commentary and a new perspective on the greatest fish story ever told.

<sup>27</sup>Duane Christensen, "The Song of Jonah: A Metrical Analysis," *JBL* 104 (1985) 231.

<sup>28</sup>Both plays, in translation, are available in the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, 4th ed. (ed. Maynard Mack et al.; New York: Norton, 1979). The passage from Sophocles (p. 405) is lines 1152ff.; that from Euripides (p. 442) is lines 1100ff.