L. Juliana M. Claassens

Jonah

A Commentary

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"Juliana Claassens reintroduces us to Jonah as a more relatable, flawed, dogged, and frustrating human being. Stripped of the book's mythical edges, this commentary invites readers to engage the numerous issues of contemporary life raised by this ancient text."

—Steed Vernyl Davidson, Executive Director,
Society of Biblical Literature

"Juliana Claassens's bold, creative, and empathetic readings of Jonah are unparalleled. Her commentary is both a beautiful synthesis of contemporary scholarship and a brilliant work in its own right. She lucidly engages trauma theory, feminism, and queer approaches to bring new life to the prophetic text and its interpretations. A wonderful, necessary companion for all readers of Jonah."

—Rhiannon Graybill, Marcus M. and Carole M. Weinstein and
Gilbert M. and Fannie S. Rosenthal Chair of Jewish Studies,
University of Richmond

"In her masterful and compelling engagement of Jonah as a symbolic trauma narrative, Claassens truly has offered us a prophet—and a commentary—for our own time. Both critically sophisticated and grounded in an ethical commitment to the marginalized, this stellar addition to the OTL series is an unflinching yet steady companion for addressing the wounds inflicted by ancient and modern empires."

—Julia M. O'Brien, Professor Emerita, Lancaster Theological
Seminary and Moravian University

"In her commentary on Jonah, Juliana Claassens deploys postcolonial, feminist, and queer interpretive methods as she traces the trauma lived out by the book's first readers who navigated the ongoing effects of the Persian Empire in their daily lives. Marginalized readers who continue to be the subjects of the persisting trauma from past and present empires may find the Jonah narrative a helpful and thus needed resource. Claassens's deliberate reading through the lenses of the marginalized lends greater complexity and depth to a narrative that could just be simplified as a story of a wayward prophet and his God who acts out of free will. A must-read for Hebrew Bible scholars, especially in the field of trauma studies, as well as for clergy and religion scholars committed to the

continued plight of marginalized readers in our postcolonial and anticolonial contexts."

—Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), Professor Emerita,
Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies,
University of South Africa

"Claassens brings trauma hermeneutics together with feminist, postcolonial, and queer insights to unravel interpretations that have held Jonah and its interpreters hostage. I highly recommend this commentary for researchers on Jonah, for theologians who have the guts to read against the grain, and for activists who are inspired by the wounds and vulnerabilities of othered individuals and communities."

—Jione Havea, Adjunct Professor of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Charles Sturt University (Australia)

"Claassens's contextual reading of Jonah as a symbolic trauma narrative provides a provocative and compassionate understanding of the wounded prophet, his traumatized community, and biblical readers who wrestle with divine truth, justice, mercy, and forgiveness. Her application of contemporary hermeneutical approaches reimagines Jonah's story in new ways while asking challenging theological and ethical questions. A timely interpretive tool of trauma hermeneutics applied to Jonah offers an intelligent and gracious interlocutor in the place of our own struggles today."

—Kyong-Jin Lee, Associate Professor of Old Testament Studies,
Fuller Theological Seminary

"L. Juliana Claassens's Jonah commentary is a superb reading that brings together the fantastical and mundane elements of the book as literary and theological engagements with multiple traumas: those of the prophet, the community he represents, and subsequent interpreters of him and his work. Claassens shifts the interpretive focus from attempts to resolve the 'troubles' of the prophet—or his community—to theological reflections about meaning-making in the face of ongoing and anticipated imperialism. Through several interpretive methodologies, Claassens demonstrates how Jonah simultaneously signifies how serial imperialism threatens to trap its subjects—human, nonhuman, and

divine—in a time warp of trouble, and how readings from marginalized places offer opportunities to create and experience grace, forgiveness, mercy, and justice. In the face of persistent imperialism and neo-imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and ecological disaster, Claassens's engagement with Jonah is a welcome and invaluable resource for researchers, clergy, scholars, and activists alike."

—Kenneth N. Ngwa, Donald J. Casper Professor of
Hebrew Bible and African Biblical Hermeneutics,
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

"This engaging and thought-provoking commentary offers intriguing new insights into the meanings of the book of Jonah. In Claassens's hands, Jonah emerges as a representative of a traumatized community who lives in the shadow of imperial invasion. Jonah becomes the 'other' who, given a voice, forces us to confront difficult theological and ethical questions. This commentary belongs on the shelf of every Bible reader."

—Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, Professor of Old Testament Exegesis,
ALT School of Theology, Sweden

"Jonah is one of the deepest, most thought-provoking stories in the Bible. Navigating the text with a trauma-informed hermeneutic, Claassens masterfully plumbs its depths by drawing out the diverse meanings others have argued for and many possibilities for new meanings. Even the reader who owns multiple Jonah commentaries will appreciate what Claassens has to offer here."

—Justin Michael Reed, Associate Professor of
Old Testament / Hebrew Bible, Louisville Seminary

"Claassens's troubled Jonah admirably offers readers a safe confrontation with past traumas and challenges God with questions that modern readers share. Her commentary is a work of art woven with philology, exegetical skill, and a keen sense of the reader."

—Christl M. Maier, Professor of Old Testament,
Philipps-Universität Marburg

“Juliana Claassens has been reading the Hebrew Bible against the grain and with the marginalized her entire professional career. In this commentary, she brings her considerable knowledge of trauma hermeneutics, along with feminist, queer, and postcolonial biblical interpretation, to bear on the book of Jonah, and the result is marvelous. In Claassens’s hands, the inherent queerness of Jonah shines forth in theologically exciting and liberating ways. This is not your grandfather’s commentary!”

—Amy Erickson, Professor of Hebrew Bible,
Iliff School of Theology

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PREFACE

I am an accidental Jonah scholar. Much like the reluctant prophet on whom I have been writing, I was hurled into a vocation that I did not know I wanted. But traveling with Jonah through the centuries and the sprawling body of work, seeing how his story has been taken up and taken root in various communities and by poets, artists, and activists, would be quite the adventure.

Commentary writing is a process involving several people from beginning to end. First, I want to acknowledge Bill Brown, who first approached me regarding this commentary. Thank you for your faith in me and for being able to read Jonah through different eyes. Also, to Carly Crouch, my editor, for the helpful comments along the way, always encouraging me to do more, go deeper, and think more profoundly about this enigmatic text with its layers and layers of interpretive possibilities.

I would like to acknowledge the authors of the wonderful Jonah commentaries that have appeared since 2020, including Jione Havea's *Jonah* (Earth Bible Commentary), Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer's *Jonah through the Centuries*, Amy Erickson's *Jonah* (Eerdmans Bible Commentary), and Susan Niditch's *Jonah* (Hermeneia Commentary). A particular word of thanks to Rhiannon Graybill, Steven McKenzie, and John Kaltner, who graciously shared the page proofs of their Jonah commentary (Anchor Yale Bible) that was published just as I was wrapping up my own so that I could engage with their work. I learned much from all of you. From the other side of the world, it was a joy to be in conversation with you and see Jonah through your eyes.

Also, Alastair Hunter, Stuart Lasine, my former colleague Tom Bolin, and Yvonne Sherwood, I have found your monographs on Jonah very helpful. And, of course, Steed Davidson, your postcolonial readings of Jonah were central to my approach to Jonah. The field of Jonah is alive and well, and we look forward to further work in this area, knowing also that Irmtraud Fisher's commentary for the International Exegetical Commentary Series (Kohlhammer) is still to come.

I want to thank Christl Maier for hosting me in Marburg during a crucial time in writing this commentary and for all the conversations and reading Hebrew together. You were a fantastic guide and cheerleader all along the way! Also, a word of thanks to Jacqueline Lapsley and Dennis Olson for the time in

Princeton, which bookended my sabbatical and provided me with the space to complete a first draft of this commentary. And, of course, I would not have the time and space to read and write were it not for sabbatical leave made possible by the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, and the Alexander Von Humboldt Stiftung that supports its alums through programs that provide them with further opportunities for research and rejuvenation in Germany, which remain so important for us scholars to stay the course.

Thank you to Westminster John Knox, particularly Julie Mullins, Daniel Braden, Michele Blum, and Dave Garber, for shepherding this project to publication. And Hermiene Ferreira for carefully compiling the bibliography.

To family and friends who now know more about Jonah than they ever thought they wanted to learn, thank you for your support over the years. I would like to single out Alphonso Groenwald, Estelle Muller, Cas Wepener, Charlene van der Walt, Dion Forster, Ian Nell, Funlola Olojede, Nadine Bowers-Du Toit, Shantelle Weber, Lisel Joubert, our Dean Reggie Nel, and also the indomitable F4s, Amanda Gouws, Stella Viljoen, and Louise du Toit.

A special word of thanks goes to my dear husband and colleague Robert Vosloo, who, over numerous cups of coffee and wine in the evening, was the first to hear my thoughts on the journeys and the travails of the prophet and his people. I love exploring new worlds with you, in real life and virtually!

We know time passes as we look at our children growing before our eyes. As I was writing these acknowledgments while preparing to finally submit the manuscript, my daughter, Suzanne, is a vibrant eleven-year-old, now almost as tall as I am and wearing the same shoe size! My stepdaughter, Jana, is busy with her PhD in Feminist Philosophy, exploring the work of the artist Senzeni Marasela. And my stepson, Roux, is finding his passion for teaching after completing his Master's in English Studies on Environmental Ethics in film and literature. Your passion and creativity and love of life, music, art, stories, and deliberation encourage me to keep exploring new creative expressions and ideas.

Stellenbosch, August 22, 2023

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The following essays and articles have fed into this commentary and offered the space for a preliminary discussion of some of the themes and approaches that would be important for my reading of Jonah. This material, significantly reworked, is reused with permission of the respective publishers:

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ActT	*Acta Theologica*
alt.	altered
AYB	Anchor Yale Bible
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BCT	*The Bible and Critical Theory*
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
b. Taʿan.	Babylonian Talmud Taʿanit
BZAW	*Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
CC	Continental Commentaries
CEB	Common English Bible
Comm. Jon.	*Commentary on Jonah,* by Jerome
CTJ	*Catholic Theological Journal*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
GNB	Good News Bible
GTJ	*Grace Theological Journal*
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
Hen	*Henoch*
HIV-AIDS	acronym: human immunodeficiency virus / acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
IECOT	International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament
IRM	*International Review of Mission*
JANER	*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*

JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JHS	*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JSem	*Journal for Semitics*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOT Press	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press
KJV	King James Version
KTU	*Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*. Edited by Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín. 3rd enl. ed. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013.
LGBTIQ+	Acronym: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, plus
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
Mek. R. Y.	Mekilta Rabbi Yishmael
Midr. Jonah	Midrash Jonah
MSG	*The Message, trans. by Eugene H. Peterson*
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text*
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSVue	New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition
OTE	*Old Testament Essays*
OTL	Old Testament Library
Pirqe R. El.	Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer
Proof	*Prooftexts*
RevExp	*Review and Expositor*
SBL Press	Society of Biblical Literature Press
Taʿan.	Taʿanit
TBCSJ	*Taiwan Baptist Christian Seminary Journal*
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBBC	Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries

WTL	*Wesleyan Theological Journal*
WW	*Word and World*
y. Taʿan.	Jerusalem Talmud Taʿanit
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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INTRODUCTION

In my trouble I called to the LORD.
—Jonah 2:3 NJPS

"Trouble" is a fitting description of the situation of distress in which Jonah finds himself. Hurled into a prophetic ministry he did not want, subjected to a raging storm on board a boat threatening to break down, and victim of a near drowning after being thrown overboard to appease an angry storm god, Jonah utters words from the belly of a big fish that encapsulate the trouble he has seen. In the concluding chapter, this trouble is further connected to the anger of a prophet who remains trapped outside the imperial center, which signifies empires to come. The community that Jonah represents is also plagued by trouble, reeling from the great evil (*rāʿâ*) inflicted by the Assyrian and then the Babylonian Empires (cf. the reference to the evil rising up before God's seeing eyes and hearing ears in 1:2).

Adding to the prophet's troubles is his reception by subsequent interpreters, many of whom have derided Jonah for his inability to comprehend God's greatness and grace. The catchy refrain from the Christian children's cartoon *VeggieTales* suggests using "a megaphone to get it through [poor old Jonah's] head"—the latest in a long line of depictions of Jonah as a foolish and prejudiced prophet who simply does not understand that God is a loving deity whose mercy extends to all.

Jonah's interpreters have often found themselves in trouble as well. In 1990s South Africa, Jonah was a litmus test regarding the historicity of the Bible, with endless correspondence flying back and forth in the newspapers arguing over whether Jonah really was in the big fish. And in the run-up to writing this commentary, the "Queering the Prophet" conference, hosted at the University where I teach, was the target of some dissenting letters in the newspapers, comments on social media, and even a couple of protestors outside our faculty building, reflecting people being troubled by the use of queer language in association with Jonah.

Actually, the book of Jonah always has been shrouded in controversy: not merely the big fish was the cause of heated debate. Jerome and Augustine,

for example, exchanged angry letters arguing over the type of plant Jonah sat beneath: a type of gourd, a cucumber plant, or perhaps an astoundingly fast-growing ivy! (Erickson 2021, 192; Bolin 1997, 25–26). For instance, Augustine challenged Jerome's decision to change the translation of *qîqāyôn* in Old Latin from *cucurbita* (gourd) to *hedera* (ivy), citing the tumult caused in the church by Jerome's choice of words. In response, Jerome retaliated, stating that the reason why one of his particularly fierce critics, Cantherius, was upset by Jerome's choice for "ivy" was because he then no longer could drink secretly in the dark from goblets fashioned from gourds imagined to be the plant in 4:6! (*Comm. Jon*. 4:6, cited in Erickson 2021, 420).

This commentary is not an attempt to save poor old Jonah—or his interpreters—from all this trouble. Instead, it seeks to trouble interpretations and constructions that have held Jonah and his interpreters hostage. Reading Jonah through the lens of trauma hermeneutics and in conversation with feminist, postcolonial, and queer interpreters, this commentary seeks to open up new layers of theological meaning. Specifically, these interpretive strategies take seriously the woundedness of the prophet and the woundedness of the community that Jonah represents as interpreters reflect on the book's theological purposes and their consequences.

As a theological commentary, this exposition on Jonah reflects on how a community under duress chose to speak about their God and the trouble in which they found themselves. Therefore, an important theme of the commentary is attending to the hardships faced by Jonah's interpreters as they sought to make sense of their own lives through this confounding book. It explores the ongoing process of meaning-making, which continues as the themes and metaphors found in the book of Jonah generate new meanings in the hands of its later interpreters. The history of reception (or, better, of *consequences*) attests to the many ways that interpreters from various religious and socio-cultural locations have been intrigued, even confounded, by this tale—by its fantastical and mundane elements.

Perhaps one reason interpreters keep returning to this enigmatic book is the unfinished business of a traumatic past. Jonah emerges as an every-person figure in his quest to understand—and perhaps not to understand—the trouble he has been hurled into as he flees from and is drawn into an encounter with God. Joining Jonah on his journey away from and ultimately to Nineveh, the reader is transported into a narrative world in which time and space are subverted. Readers are afforded the opportunity to join the biblical authors—and scores of interpreters after them—in working out what we think about God and about those others with whom we share this world in terms of truth, justice, mercy, and forgiveness.

This commentary proposes that Jonah may be viewed as a symbolic trauma narrative that includes the undoing of temporal and spatial categories to facilitate

an encounter with the empire that remains. Jonah's original audience would have known all too well that Nineveh had long since been destroyed. However, the fact that Nineveh, in the story world envisaged in the book of Jonah, looms large suggests that this particular place has taken on symbolic significance (Claassens 2023b, 43–44). The fact that, by the end of this book, the prophet is left in limbo, compelled to remain in close proximity to an imperial center that is not going anywhere, can be taken as a sign that Nineveh serves as a specific symbolic place that allows Jonah and his community to work through the painful memories associated with the suffering inflicted by a long history of colonization and dislocation by empires past and present (Balaev 2008, 160; Ben Zvi 2009, 95).

Reading Jonah as a symbolic trauma narrative in which Nineveh is destroyed (and not destroyed at the same time), moreover, has the potential of evoking traumatic memories for future generations of interpreters who interpret the book in terms of their own experience under imperial subjugation. As will be evident in the rich contributions by postcolonial biblical interpreters, it is not only the prophet Jonah who is stuck in narrative time outside Nineveh, but also many subsequent readers who are compelled to face historical and current forms of colonization that are far from over (Claassens 2023b, 52).

The introduction to this commentary will address issues of *criticism*, *context*, *text*, and *reception*, highlighting elements that explain and illuminate the reading of Jonah that comes in the commentary proper. The central argument of this commentary is that Jonah may be fruitfully read as a narrative in which the theological consequences of the trauma inflicted by successive ancient empires are expressed in narrative terms. By employing symbols and metaphors that create a "safe confrontation" with the wounds of the past, the book invites its readers to join a traumatized prophet in a space just outside Nineveh to begin to work through the painful memories associated with the collective trauma arising from their past encounters with empire.

1. Criticism

While most commentaries start with issues of authorship, dating, sociohistorical context, and genre, this commentary will commence with criticism. The reason for this interpretive choice is that whatever approach or lens applied to Jonah informs what one sees in the text, how one imagines the world behind the text, and which interpretations from the vast reception history of this book draw one in.

A productive avenue of inquiry in recent years is the so-called contextual approaches, which have yielded fresh insights into Jonah and other biblical books. Contextual approaches such as postcolonial, gender-critical, and queer biblical interpretation have in common a way of reading that is *against* the grain of the text, *from* below, and *for* the most vulnerable. These approaches

are especially well suited for interrogating the ideological and power structures associated with the production and reception of Jonah. Coming from a place of pain and attentive to individuals and communities negated and disrespected by those in power, these approaches help us question and critique interpretations of Jonah that have presumed hegemonic definitions of "normal" and normative; central and marginalized. To adopt Jione Havea's metaphor, Jonah is "hurled" into a swirling sea of interpretive methods, "rolling over different barriers, toward alternative shores" (Havea 2016b, 1). Postcolonial,[1] feminist,[2] and queer[3] interpreters have given us new eyes for reading the book of Jonah: new ways of interpreting the prophet and the God whom the book presents, as well as the rest of its characters. From the great city of Nineveh and the big fish to the bit characters, such as the militarized worm and the defenseless plant, these interpretive lenses help us to see an old text anew. Since not all readers may be familiar with these approaches, a brief introduction to each of the main interpretive approaches used in the commentary follows, starting with trauma hermeneutics, which offers a natural conversation partner for the contextual approaches utilized in this commentary.

Trauma Hermeneutics

Most biblical literature emerged in the shadow of empire: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, or Roman. Reflecting this historical reality, the specter of violent military invasion and forced migration looms large in the prophetic books. Trauma hermeneutics has become a popular approach for interpreting biblical literature because it recognizes the influence of such experiences on the content and concerns of these texts. In particular, trauma hermeneutics acknowledges the impact of traumatic experiences on language and on the ability of traumatized persons to describe and relate what has happened to them. Informed by the fields of psychology and sociology, trauma hermeneutics recognizes that traumatic experiences are, by definition, impossible to put into words. As Elizabeth Boase and Sarah Agnew (2016, 19) write regarding Jonah's silence, with which the book starts and ends: "Words fail when the world no longer makes sense. Words fail when meaning has collapsed." At both the individual and the community level, traumatized persons often struggle to find words to express what they have experienced.

1. The word "postcolonial" is used here as an umbrella term, including postcolonial and decolonizing approaches.

2. "Feminist" is an umbrella term, recognizing that the principles informing feminism have been embodied differently in different contexts, including Womanist, Mujerista, Latinx, African Women Theologians, Latin American, and Asian American feminist interpreters.

3. "Queer" is here used as an umbrella term, acknowledging the full range of experiences represented by the LGBTIQ+ community.

Trauma hermeneutics thus seeks to understand how traumatized bodies make sense of experiences that are impossible to put into words. Despite the impossibility of articulating the traumatic experiences that have befallen them, traumatized individuals and communities are typically compelled to return to their memories of the traumatic past, trying to find ways to tell others what happened to them as part of their efforts to come to terms with those terrifying events.

The foremost trauma to affect the authors and editors of biblical literature certainly was the violent destruction of Jerusalem and the deportations to Babylon. Even decades later, traumatic memories of the Babylonian invasion and exile continued to inflict harm; these traumatic events compounded the violence inflicted by the Assyrian Empire and were amplified by the ongoing experience of life under Persian imperial rule (Boase and Agnew 2016, 8–9). The long-lasting effects of trauma over decades or even centuries, beyond the generation that initially experienced it, are referred to as secondhand, or intergenerational, trauma and are rightly described by Barbara Green (2005, 41) as "a trauma not wholly overcome."

Trauma hermeneutics is interested in how literature encodes these wounds left by trauma. The narrative and poetry of the book of Jonah mirror the effects of trauma on the psyche in various ways, including their depiction of Jonah's compulsive movements, which echo a traumatized community's efforts to escape the memories of imperial subjugation, even as they continue to return to the site of trauma. The symbols and imagery used in Jonah, particularly in Jonah's lament, are also characteristic of trauma narratives' propensity to express individual and collective suffering indirectly. We will see, for example, how the book represents a multiplicity of bodies in pain in the singular traumatized body of the prophet, reflecting the close link between individual and collective trauma.

Trauma hermeneutics is also concerned with the narratives that traumatized communities tell about themselves. Specifically, trauma shapes collective identity through narratives of shared suffering. In the biblical traditions, these expressions of collective trauma are especially evident in connection with the events associated with the Babylonian invasion and exile. The leaders and the opinion makers in Jonah's world engaged, through Jonah, in acts of meaning-making. Through the story of the unconventional prophet Jonah, the book tells the story of a community's trauma and through that story voices the community's search for meaning in a world come undone (Boase and Agnew 2016, 9).

Finally, trauma hermeneutics draws our attention to how traumatized readers of Jonah have produced interpretations informed by their own traumatic experiences. In this way, the book of Jonah creates space for readers to process some traumatic memories of their own as they connect with the narrative portrayal of suffering in Jonah.

As we will see in the section below, contextual approaches such as postcolonial, gender, and queer biblical interpretation, with their keen awareness of the woundedness of individuals and communities from which they come and to whom they speak, further illuminate our understanding of how Jonah continues to speak across time and space.

Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation

Postcolonial biblical interpretation has proven well suited to addressing the deep wounds left by the empire. Much of the trauma reflected in the book of Jonah is the result of imperial invasion, forced migration, and the harsh enforcement of imperial policies and practices by one powerful empire after another (Davidson 2016; Ryu 2009; Havea 2013; De La Torre 2007). The imperial setting of Jonah also has the potential to trigger traumatic memories for interpreters who speak from their own painful experiences of imperial subjugation. For instance, Havea (2013, 50) links Jonah to the enduring colonial presence in his own context by describing how "'Ninevehs' . . . still roam in Oceania." Chesung Ryu's anger at the prospect of Nineveh's repentance (3:7–9), in turn, reflects the unresolved trauma of his South Korean community after its colonization by Japan. Ryu (2009, 207) laments the fact that "to the oppressed and the colonized whose lands had been plundered and who were still suffering because of what the colonizer had done to them, this repentance without restitution to the victimized could not be accepted."

The specific geographic location of Nineveh serves as a focal point of suffering for many of the book's postcolonial readers. As noted below under "Context" and "Text," commentators' understandings of Nineveh have not been static: diverse interpretations of this imperial center have invoked painful memories wrought by colonization in contexts past and present. Such interpretations draw on the experience of more recent colonial powers to uncover the veiled allusions to Nineveh's ancient practices of imperial exploitation, recognizing, for instance, that references to the grandiosity of the great city of Nineveh point to the empire's abusive use of material resources and human labor (Davidson 2016).

From a postcolonial perspective, Jonah is an "every person" who represents the anger and frustration of the ordinary Judeans who suffered under the yoke of imperial subjugation. Although the book is set in the Assyrian period, the effects of the empire were ongoing in the daily lives of the book's first readers, living under the rule of the Persian Empire (see "Context"). Recognizing the deep wounds caused by colonial powers' actions and a desire to hold empires past and present accountable for those actions leads postcolonial interpreters to sympathize with Jonah. For Havea (2013, 49) and Ryu (2009, 198), Jonah represents their contemporary constituents, who join the prophet in being angry at God for God's perceived lack of justice.

As the preceding has already implied, postcolonial interpreters are also committed to reading texts from the perspectives of the marginalized—also described as reading "from below" or "other-wise." In such an approach, readers' attention is deliberately drawn to the bit characters, those whom Gina Hens-Piazza (2020, 2) describes as the "supporting cast"—characters often considered to be "props," "part of the background," "exist[ing] solely for enhancing the characterization of the protagonist." As she argues: "Though present in the narrative, the story of the supporting cast is never told. Instead, they appear only to shoulder the burden of a story that is never their own."

In the book of Jonah, the "supporting cast" would include the boat with feelings, the big fish, the raging ocean, the vulnerable plant, the militarized worm, the mariners with their captain, the Ninevites with their king, and also the many animals in Nineveh. At first glance, these characters seem unimportant. Given contextual biblical interpreters' commitment to read from below and against the grain, these seemingly minor characters receive new significance. Havea, for example, reminds us that these "are characters with mind, will, and ability and . . . do not have to serve the interests of YHWH or the narrator" (Havea 2020, 28). From a theological perspective, approaching these characters as subjects in their own right, with interests and agendas of their own, lends greater complexity and depth to a story that might otherwise be perceived as merely a simple tale of a wayward prophet and his God, who is free to forgive and condemn whom God so pleases.

Reading from a different place and in a different direction often yields fresh perspectives. This is no more evident than in Jione Havea's *Jonah* (2020, 2, 4), in the Earth Bible Commentary series, where he reads the story of Jonah both "forward as well as backward." In the second half of the book, reading backward (from the end of the beginning) implies that Havea takes seriously the animals of the city of Nineveh, as evident in the title of his chapter, "Beasts That Mattered" (ch. 4), which he proposes "had something to teach God . . . and readers about life and rescue." Also, the intriguing titles of the rest of the chapters in Havea's backward reading of Jonah—such as "A Bush That Moved" (ch. 5), "A City That Believed" (ch. 6), "A Fish That Vomited" (ch. 7), and "A Boat That Thought" (ch. 8)—reveal the interpretive possibilities associated with an alternative point of view, in addition to Havea's commitment to the minor characters in the text that, if given a chance, may yield meaningful insights.

Finally, even as he emphasizes the harm inflicted by the empire, Havea (2013, 53) warns against demonizing the Other, even the Imperial Other, who has undoubtedly done wicked and terrible things. Havea helps readers recognize that, viewed from another vantage point, Nineveh may not be all wicked. Instead, as Rebecca Lindsay (2016, 55) has shown, there are a multitude of "vulnerable subjects" in Nineveh, who more likely have been on the receiving end of its evil ways rather than inflicting the violence that in Jonah 3:8 is

said to be on the hands of the city's inhabitants. Purposefully looking out for these "minor" characters, who are "kept voiceless and unseen," may help us remember that there are also powerless, disenfranchised entities in the heart of the empire, as well as in the colonies under imperial rule. Attentiveness to the consequences of social and economic class structures, for instance, might draw our attention to the plight of the sailors in Jonah: innocent bystanders caught up in a power struggle between a recalcitrant prophet and his God. Likewise, one might be more conscious that behind the figure of Jonah, fleeing away to Tarshish, is a community of ordinary men, women, and children who, for many generations, have been suffering under the imperial presence in their land.

Feminist Biblical Interpretation

This commentary also seeks to contemplate questions of gender, with insights yielded by feminist biblical interpreters being particularly helpful to postcolonial and trauma readings of the book of Jonah. Steed Davidson (2016, 518), for instance, has considered the way that gender relates to imperial power in the prophetic tradition, making visible women who are otherwise hidden in the text and its interpretation by drawing attention to the realities behind the language of sexual violence used in descriptions of military invasion. Indeed, imperialist rhetoric itself is highly masculinist: bravery, strength, and military might are associated with an invading army that enters and occupies the land, penetrating its defenses. It is thus not surprising that the occupied land and its defeated male soldiers are imaged in female terms. For instance, especially in the book of Jeremiah, the metaphor of a woman in labor is repeatedly invoked to express feelings of extreme helplessness in the face of the conquering army, not only of the people of Judah (Jer 4:31; 6:24; 22:23; 30:6) but also of Judah's neighbors (Moab, Edom, Damascus in Jer 48:41; 49:22, 24), and even of Babylon, which has been responsible for the invasion (Jer 50:43; Claassens 2013, 118–19; Davidson 2016, 519). Moreover, the language of sexual violence that is regularly used concerning Judah (Jer 13; Ezek 16; 23; Lam 1), as well as the foreign nations of Babylon (Jer 50–51) and Nineveh (Nah 3), is particularly well suited to portray the invasion of cities. As Brad Kelle (2008, 104) has noted, "the stripping, penetration, exposure and humiliation" associated with the rape of women is "analogous to siege warfare, with its breaching of the wall, entrance through the gate," and one could add, violation of the city's most sacred spaces (cf. the temple and inner sanctuary).

Notably, this type of rhetoric does not feature in the book of Jonah. The imperial center does no raping or pillaging, instead appearing quite docile and harmless, perhaps as a fantastical, inconceivable, counterreality that offers a sharp contrast to the revenge fantasies one encounters in Nah 3 and Jer 46–51 (Claassens 2015, 663–64, 669). However, as Davidson (2018, 293) notes,

Jonah's readers would have been well aware of empires' propensity for violence. By pointing to the possibility rather than the reality of violence, Jonah thus actually reinforces violence "as the rule and operating principle of empire" (cf. Davidson 2016, 520).

Moreover, viewed through a feminist lens that is intent on reading between the lines, filling in the gaps, and surfacing what is hidden, one could perhaps imagine Jonah's anger in the context of the "sexualized military aggression of territorial conquest" that "ultimately expresses itself in the actual bodies of women" (Davidson 2016, 518). In a #MeToo world, new significance has been given to the importance of such (feminist) anger as a way to bring experiences of not being heard or not being believed to the surface.

Queer Biblical Interpretation

The manifold elements in the book of Jonah that are unstable, incoherent, and ambiguous, or one could say queer, offer fertile ground for interpretations that seek to challenge, trouble, or interrogate seemingly fixed, set-in-stone (heteronormative) power structures and norms (Williams 2016, 528). For instance, the exceedingly strange plot twist of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish becomes even stranger when one realizes that this is no ordinary fish but a gender-bending fish. Commentators throughout the ages have been intrigued, or one could say confounded, by the fact that it is a *male* fish that swallows Jonah (2:1) but that Jonah then proceeds to pray from the belly—or rather, the womb—of a *female* fish (2:2; for more on this, see below in "Text").

Another queer moment, in which categories of time and space do not line up or appear out of sorts, regards Jonah calling out for deliverance and speaking of drowning when the sea already has calmed down (2:3; see 1:15). Or even more strange, how can he perform liturgical acts of thanksgiving associated with a worship service, praising God for being saved, all while still trapped inside a big fish (Claassens 2023a)?

Many of these queer moments have attracted the attention of previous generations, generating a wealth of interpretations that seek to make sense of the text's strange inconsistencies. As will be evident below ("Text" and "Reception"), especially the rabbis have gifted us with some fantastical interpretations, such as that the belly of the whale has been turned into a synagogue (Pirqe R. El. 10; Tiemeyer 2021, 139), or that God created the fish male *and* female to match the male and female monsters created in the image of God (Pirqe R. El. 10; Erickson 2021, 85), or that there were not one but two fishes, including a very pregnant fish with 365,000 baby fishes that made Jonah's stay in the fish's womb quite uncomfortable (Midr. Jonah 98; Erickson 2021, 289; Bolin 1997, 107).

Read through a decidedly queer lens, these strange elements of the book of Jonah that have already yielded such creative interpretive possibilities could be

utilized in service of theologically productive interpretive (re)orientations, not only as the characters in the text but also as the book's readers are encouraged to redirect their gaze, from the expected to the unexpected. A queer orientation opens up new vantage points, in the text and in the world, by reading from below and for vulnerable bodies, which have all too often been considered "bodies out of place" (Ahmed 2010).

One example that illustrates the value of a queer interpretive lens for Jonah that will be further developed in the rest of this commentary concerns the unconventional aspects of Jonah as a prophet. Rhiannon Graybill (2016, 121–22) argues that the very notion of prophecy is queer because it is disruptive and destabilizing. In addition, the prophetic body in general, and Jonah in particular, is unstable and "resists heteronormativity and other norms." For instance, Graybill (2016, 132–33) reflects on Jonah's presence in the male-turned-female fish (cf. 2:1 and 2) and the interpretive possibilities associated with this fluidity of the fish in addition to the fluidity of the water into which Jonah is submerged for contemplating a more "fluid prophetic masculinity" (more on this in "Text" and "Reception"). Such a queer reading holds distinct implications for both how we think about Jonah's prophetic identity, as well as how we perceive many other individuals who do not fit the norm or what is deemed normal by society at large.

Common Ground

Postcolonial interpretation, trauma hermeneutics, feminist, and queer biblical interpretation have in common that these contextual approaches take as a point of departure the wounds of individuals and communities who are rendered "other" by the dominant voice within a community: those with gendered bodies, racialized bodies, colonized bodies, migrant bodies, and disabled bodies, who share the trauma of not fitting in, or not belonging, or not being valued as whole persons by those in power.

Contextual interpreters of various kinds are thus united by a common task, to read a book like Jonah against the grain, seeking to interrogate the default interpretive setting of white, male, heteronormative privilege, striving to imagine other ways of being in the world. These interpreters seek to open new interpretive vistas for specifically theological purposes and, more broadly, introduce a more comprehensive range of perspectives on the text. Such approaches are well suited to a theological commentary such as this one. Rooted in an understanding of a God on the side of those who are hurt and hurting and in the belief that, individually and collectively, we are called to stand likewise, these approaches to the biblical text are not afraid to ask difficult theological and ethical questions.

2. Context

Trauma hermeneutics and postcolonial biblical interpretation are concerned with the way a specific traumatic period (or periods) in Judah's history relates to the biblical text as they seek to understand how Judean authors, in literary form, responded to the historical events that upended their world. Viewed through a trauma lens, the following aspects of the book of Jonah's context are especially noteworthy.

Time Out of Joint

On the one hand, it is clear that the book of Jonah derives from a postexilic Persian context (ca. 550–331 BCE; Erickson 2021, 29–30; Niditch 2023, 8–9; Ben Zvi 2003, 6–8). Despite its narrative setting in the Neo-Assyrian period (745–612 BCE), the book's use of Late Biblical Hebrew, with distinct linguistic and semantic features, suggests that Jonah should be grouped among other biblical books written during the Persian period, including Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, and the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Erickson 2021, 20–24). For instance, Erickson (2021, 22–23) has compiled a helpful list of Aramaisms and unique vocabulary associated with the postexilic period, such as the repeated use of the verb *mnh* (to assign or appoint, in Jonah 2:1 [1:17 Eng.]; 4:6, 7, 8); the late variant verb *zʿq* instead of *ṣʿq* ("to cry out," in 1:5; 3:7) and the word for "journey" (*mahălāk* in 3:3, 4) that also appears in later texts (e.g., Ezek 42:4; Zech 3:7) instead of *derek* (as in Gen 31:23; Exod 3:18).

However, even though most scholars date the book to the postexilic period, they refrain from narrowing it down to a particular temporal period due to a paucity of historical and linguistic evidence (Erickson 2021, 30). For instance, Sherwood (2000, 235) reminds us that Jonah may derive from anywhere between the fifth and third centuries BCE; the book's "context" is thus inevitably rather "loosely and imaginatively defined."

The book of Jonah's representation of time is even less clear with lines between past, present, and future repeatedly blurred. Jonah's postexilic readers would have known all too well that Nineveh, to which Jonah is called to proclaim its destruction, had long since been destroyed (by the Babylonian Empire in 612 BCE). In the literary world of the text, however, Nineveh is resurrected—leaving the book's later readers to wonder which empire (or empires) loomed so large in the minds of the book's first readers that the book would end with the empire still thriving. Most recently, several scholars have argued that Nineveh functioned for Jonah's Persian-period readers as a symbol of another empire, specifically, the Persian Empire, which exerted control over Yehud at the time of Jonah's composition. It is also possible that Nineveh represented the

Babylonian Empire. David Downs (2009, 40) has argued that the Babylonian Empire continues "to haunt the story of Jonah" and that the traumatic memories of the Babylonian invasion and exile cast a "spectral shadow across Jonah's narrative" (cf. Rees 2016, 43). Nineveh, in any case, is not simply or only Nineveh. The onetime Assyrian capital represents all the empires whose violent authority has exerted itself over the land of Judah and its people. Time is thus strangely out of joint in the book of Jonah—a fact that may be well suited to capturing the intergenerational effects of trauma, as generation after generation lives under the shadow of empire, suffering its effects. Memories of Assyria's destruction of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE) and, in turn, of the fall of Nineveh (612) to the Neo-Babylonian Empire would have both been evoked by the book's invocation of Nineveh, triggering memories of and reflection on "the most painful destruction in memory, that of the Jerusalem in which the intended readers dwelt" (Walsh 2015, 265; Fischer 2018, 308–9). Subject to attacks in 597 (2 Kgs 24:10), 587 (2 Kgs 25), and 582 BCE (Jer 52:28), Persian-period Jerusalem still bore the physical scars of its subordination to imperial power.

Compounding the book's unstable positioning in time is an absence of clear temporal cues. The repeated use of imperatives ("Go now to Nineveh, and call against/to her" in 1:2; 3:2), participles ("The sea was stomping and storming" in 1:11, 13), and questions ("Is it good/right for you to be angry?" in 4:4, 9) convey a sense of immediacy, rather than tying the story to a specific time or, as discussed further below, a specific place (Erickson 2021, 36–37). According to Erickson (2021, 37), it is precisely the book's "dehistoricized," "decontextualized," and "despatialized" temporal and spatial setting that is responsible for why so many later readers have found themselves drawn to this book. The fact that Nineveh is "nowhere and everywhere at once, where past, present and future coexist simultaneously" (Erickson 2021, 36) affords current and future readers the space to wrestle with the ever-new, but all-too-familiar manifestations of empire in their own contexts (see "Criticism" and "Reception").

Space and Place

The great city of Nineveh looms large throughout Jonah; a central question in the book's interpretation concerns the relationship between Nineveh as a geographical place and the conceptual space that Nineveh comes to represent. From the first chapter, in which Jonah is called to prophesy doom for this capital of the Assyrian Empire, to the final chapter, which leaves Jonah perpetually stuck on a hill outside the metropolis, Nineveh has a firm hold on the prophet and his audience's imagination (Erickson 2021, 35).

Yet it is not precisely clear what Nineveh signifies. On the one hand, Nineveh represents an actual historical place: the capital of the Assyrian Empire, destroyed in 612 BCE by the Babylonian Empire. On the other hand, in the

book's narrative world Nineveh is alive and well. This contradiction has led scholars to make a distinction between the way the city is imagined in Jonah's narrative and the concrete, bricks-and-mortar city (the terms "firstspace," meaning the historical reality; and "thirdspace," i.e., the narrative reality—or even the "super-reality"—are sometimes used to distinguish between these two manifestations of Nineveh; see Graybill, Kaltner, and McKenzie 2023, 52–53; Erickson 2021, 36; Sherwood 2000, 240).

What Nineveh represents for Jonah's interpretive communities is thus rather ambiguous. For much of the history of interpretation, Nineveh has been remembered for its extreme wickedness: the Jerusalem Talmud, for example, imagined the fasting animals in Jonah 3:7 as a sign of the Assyrians' cruelty, calling into question the Assyrians' purported acts of repentance.

> Said R. Simeon b. Laqish: "The repentance that the men of Nineveh carried out was deceitful." What did they do?
>
> R. Hunah in the name of R. Simeon b. Halaputa: "They set up calves inside, with the mothers outside, lambs inside, with the mothers outside, and these bellowed from here, and those bellowed from there."
>
> "They said, 'If we are not shown mercy, we shall not have mercy on them.'"
>
> "This is in line with that which is written: 'How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dismayed'" (Joel 1:18). (y. Taʿan. 2.1; cited in Tiemeyer 2021, 184)

Thomas Bolin (1995, 109–13), however, has argued that, when Jonah is read against the backdrop of ancient Greek traditions, Nineveh should be understood not in terms of its wickedness but as the great ancient city that had been destroyed a long time ago (see also Bolin 1997).

The cruelty of the Assyrian Empire, as documented in imperial art and through the self-descriptions in the Assyrian accounts of battles, aligns more clearly with the picture painted by the book of Nahum (Timmer 2009, 6–7). In contrast with the Nahum Pesher from Qumran, in which Nineveh (Assyria) has lost "its historical particularity and becomes the symbol of all that oppress the faithful" (O'Brien 2002, 30), Assyria in the Hebrew Bible is viewed as the "ultimate enemy," "a concrete, formidable foe—a remembered trauma of the nation's past." As the traumatic memories encapsulated in Jeremiah 50 attest: "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured it, and now at the end King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon has gnawed its bones" (Jer 50:17 NRSVue)

In this regard, the so-called double ending of the book of Jonah is notable. Scholars have often observed the fact that postexilic readers of Yehud would have known that Nineveh had been destroyed in 612 BCE—even though Nineveh is *not* destroyed in the literary world imagined in Jonah. This tension

would have served as a source of great "irony and cognitive dissonance" for the book's readers (Walsh 2015, 261; like Ben Zvi 2003, 15). For Ehud Ben Zvi (2003, 27), this double ending points to the diversity of theological voices in Yehud at this time, which challenged and informed one another and formed the backdrop to the first readers' quest for meaning-making. As he writes:

> Neither of these two fates can be dismissed as irrelevant without losing much of the integrity of the reception of this book in these rereaderships, and concomitantly, much of the theological/ideological message that these communities could have "drawn" from the book. (Ben Zvi 2003, 18)

This double ending, and Nineveh's dual fates, continue to inform readers' contemplation on the ongoing presence of empire, the nature of God, and most importantly, God's relationship with suffering in the literary world of Jonah and many contexts since then. In this commentary we will see that, through the lens of contemporary approaches such as postcolonial biblical interpretation and trauma hermeneutics, the real question underlying this contradiction—Nineveh destroyed and/or *not* destroyed—is deeply existential as interpreters contemplate the question that in Jonah 4 fuels Jonah's anger: How can God save a ferocious empire represented by the Assyrian capital if God knows that they, and also the other empires they symbolize, will come back to destroy Jerusalem?

The Scribes behind the Book

Any approach to Jonah that concerns itself with the impact of the context of its original composition on its contents and meaning must also think about who the community behind this book could have been. Concerning the question of who is responsible for writing the book of Jonah, Ehud Ben Zvi (2003, 6–7; see also Ben Zvi 2009, 5–8) argues that Jonah's intended audience is the literate leadership of postexilic Judah (the "literati," as he calls them), which would have included both members of society who have experienced exile as well as those who have not. Recent discussions regarding a scribal practice, or "scribal ethos," in postexilic Yehud offers interesting interpretive possibilities for contemplating the process of producing the book of Jonah.

For instance, Amy Erickson (2014, 63, 73) paints a vivid picture regarding the scribal practice (*habitus*) in the ancient Near East, which involved a growing emphasis on writing to achieve textual stability. The postexilic literary production included the arduous task of writing and rewriting, copying and memorization, that formed part of a broader phenomenon in which prophecy was increasingly "scribalized"—that is, the primary mode of divine revelation was increasingly perceived to be through written texts, rather than oracular pronouncements (cf. Brummit and Sherwood 2011, who outline the exceedingly

fragile and painful process regarding writing the prophetic word in their essay on Jer 36).

In this process of writing and rewriting, the scribes behind the book of Jonah drew on earlier prophetic material and other written texts. These scribes recognized the authority of these traditions, yet they also wrestled with the ongoing significance and relevance of these texts in new contexts when faced with new challenges (Erickson 2021, 40, 64, 76). In contrast to Ezra-Nehemiah, written around the same time, Jonah's relationship to past traditions thus does not consider those traditions timeless and universal. Instead, in an act of creative contestation, Jonah's scribes constantly struggled to either perpetuate or subvert tradition (Erickson 2021, 32, 62; cf. Erickson 2014, 61–62).

A further characteristic of the scribal culture of this time is the tendency to produce texts that are able to generate multiple layers of meaning. Erickson (2021, 263–64) observes that many of the books written in Persian-period Yehud were "marked by ambiguity and filled with sophisticated wordplays and obscure allusions because they created opportunities for them to engage in rich scholarly dialogue about a work's meanings and theological implications" (cf. Ben Zvi 2003, 1–13). The scribal practice at the time of Jonah hence corresponds with the ongoing search for wisdom that was to be found during the same period among the wisdom writers (e.g., Qoheleth and Job) that increasingly contemplated the idea of the open-ended nature of wisdom (Erickson 2014, 71). Carey Walsh (2015, 265), who imagines Jonah among the wisdom writers, describes the scribes or literati as follows: "The literati seem to be intuiting the limits of their work, namely, that while religious texts instruct, they also retain significant ambiguities and uncertainties about the divine will. The textual collection, then, is not an information storehouse, but a space for self-reflection, conflict, healing, and processing the trauma of exile."

Through a trauma lens, this scribal search for (new) meaning aligns with the phenomenon of narrating trauma experiences that forms a central aspect of the community's meaning-making process. In the wake of the trauma of exile, a central question is how the community that created Jonah engaged with that trauma in narrative form. And how did they navigate the ongoing relevance—or not—of the religious traditions/texts they had inherited (Walsh 2015, 262)?

By remembering and reconstructing painful memories associated with the effects of colonization—widespread destruction, loss of life, exile, and an end to life as they knew it—"narratives of loss and wounding" contribute to the formation of collective identity by offering a collective response to trauma experienced by an entire group of people (Visser 2014, 111; J. Alexander 2012, 4). In such narratives, there is often a "symbolic construction and framing," in which authors create "stories and characters" that represent the group as a whole as they seek to confront and mitigate disorder (J. Alexander 2012, 3). In the book of Jonah, the prophet thus represents the broader community—this

symbolic trauma narrative offering space for the community to process their experiences of empire.

The Prophet and the Book

Is Jonah among the prophets? The answer to this question at the heart of our consideration of how Jonah, the prophet, relates to Jonah, the book, is "yes" and "no." On the one hand, Jonah is included in the Book of the Twelve, with scholars like James Nogalski (2011, 1–4, 14–16) and, most recently, Susan Niditch (2023, 9–11), exploring common themes, vocabulary, and features within this collection of "Minor Prophets" that is found on a single scroll (compare with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel with each its own scroll).

On the other hand, Jonah is a rather unlikely prophet, one "who breeches several of the conventions of prophetic etiquette" associated with prophets in the Hebrew Bible (Davidson 2018, 293). Scholars have employed a variety of tools, such as satire, irony, and humor, to explain the significance of this unconventional behavior by this atypical prophet, who has been called an "anti-prophet" (Schellenberg 2015), "a caricature of a prophet" (Whedbee 1998, 211), or even a joke of a prophet (Biddle 2013, 70; see comments under "Text").

A useful concept that helps us to reflect on the atypical nature of both the prophet and the book comes from Ehud Ben Zvi (2003, 80–89), who introduced the term "meta-prophetic" to contemplate the very notion of prophecy, as well as the concerns and themes raised by other prophetic books (cf. Walsh 2015). Viewed in this way, Jonah is a literary figure that inhabits a narrative world created by the literati for the readers to, on a metaprophetic level, contemplate issues regarding God, the nature and the cause of suffering, and justice and judgment in a complex geopolitical world dominated by foreign superpowers (Erickson 2021, 39–40; cf. Schellenberg 2015, 357–58).

Jonah (the prophet and the book) thus is in conversation with what Schellenberg (2015, 357) describes as a rich "inter-textual web of meta-prophetic statements." The community behind this book critically and creatively applied the traditions they received to the current challenges they faced (Ben Zvi 2003, 51–52; see also Erickson 2021, 220–21). The assortment of possible intertexts with which to read various aspects of Jonah's story helps readers reflect on, for instance, the nature of prophecy itself and also changing perceptions of God in a world hurled into turmoil.

For instance, scholars have fruitfully explored numerous intertextual connections between Jonah and its immediate literary context in the Book of the Twelve, on, for example, the theme of the fate of God's people, and also the question of theodicy, which will be important for our exposition of Jonah (see, e.g., Nogalski 2011, 8–16; Yates 2016, 223; H. Kim 2007). Of particular interest is the way the credo in Exod 34:6–7 is cited and altered in Jonah 4:2, as well as

in other texts in the Book of the Twelve concerning the question of God's mercy (or not) (Joel 2:13; Nah 1:3; cf. Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:5, 15; Davidson 2018, 294; for more on this discussion see the comments under Jonah 4:1–4). For instance, even though Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:13 radically change the reference that God will execute punishment for generations to come (Exod 34:7)—both texts introduce the idea that God will refrain from or renounce punishment—they do very different things with the original text. In Joel 2:13, the altered credo is invoked to extol God's mercy in response to the people of Judah's repentance. In contrast, Jonah uses this same alteration to challenge God's incomprehensible turning away from executing punishment upon Nineveh, who surely deserved it! (Marcus 1990, 126–27; Tillema 2023, 154–55).

There are also clear connections between Jonah and Nahum given the fact that these books both, at least on the surface, address Judah's fraught relationship with the Assyrian Empire (Davidson 2018, 291)—even though imagining radically opposite outcomes for Nineveh (see comments under Jonah 3:4–5). According to Davidson (2018, 294), such oracles against (foreign) nations, as found in many of the prophetic books, serve the purpose of underscoring the Bible's imperial character. Foreign nations are shown to be destroyed entirely or pacified under a new (divine) world order. Concerning Jonah, Davidson (2018, 294) argues that "the oracle Jonah delivers in Nineveh falls within what can be considered the genre of the oracle against the nation(s)." However, Jonah's proclamation of judgment is the only instance in which the oracle is actually presented *in* the center of the foreign city, turning out quite differently than he and the readers expected (more on this under comments on Jonah 3:10).

Beyond the Book of the Twelve, there is a wealth of other interpretive possibilities, depending on the intertexts with which one reads Jonah. When deciding which manifold possible connections one would explore, one should note that the interpreter's particular interpretive framework is decisive in choosing intertextual conversation partners. One's interpretation of Jonah will be shaped by the book (or books) and literary figures one deems to be the most pertinent conversation partner, as well as how the specific intertextual connection is interpreted.

For instance, an obvious connection is to read the Jonah of the book in conjunction with the only other occurrence of a Jonah, a prophet found in 2 Kgs 14:25, which mentions a Jonah, son of Amittai, who served as a prophet in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of King Jeroboam II. This Jonah is said to have proclaimed the good news of God's salvation involving the expansion of Israel's borders by the hand of an evil king. We read in the preceding verse that King Jeroboam, son of Joash, was evil in God's sight (2 Kgs 14:24; Jenson 2008, 29; Nogalski 2011, 401).

Annette Schellenberg (2015, 356) argues that this particular connection with the Jonah of 2 Kgs 14:25 offers an ironic perspective on Jonah's ministry

insofar as Jonah is typically considered as a type of antiprophet, acting in ways that would not be expected from a prophet. Jonah not only runs away from his calling but also plays a rather incidental role in convincing the people of Nineveh to repent and has no role at all in God changing God's mind. By making Jonah of 2 Kgs 14 the main character of the book of Jonah, Schellenberg (2015, 361) thus proposes that the authors of the book of Jonah may be challenging Amos's declaration (6:14) that Israel will be subjugated in the very territory at the heart of 2 Kgs 14:25's proclamation of royal expansion.

In addition, Hyun Kim (2007, 505–6) has explored several intertextual connections that assist an interpretation of Jonah. He draws a comparison between the exuberantly repentant king of Nineveh in Jonah and the unrepentant kings of Israel in the books of Kings. Unlike the foreign king in Jonah's immediate and grandiose acts of contrition in response to the prophetic word, the Israelite kings time and again refuse to heed God's word. By reading these disparate texts together, one is left with the impression that even recalcitrant kings and reluctant prophets may serve as instruments of the God portrayed as Israel's real Helper (2 Kgs 14:25–28).

Jonah, furthermore, has been read in relation to Moses, Noah, the Elijah/Elisha Cycle, Job, and the psalmists, as well as prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. In an intriguing comparison between Jonah and Jeremiah, Gary Yates (2016, 232) demonstrates how both prophets express anger toward God regarding the prophetic ministry forced upon them, specifically the life-threatening circumstances it has produced for them. Yet, informed by the antiprophet framework that has dominated Jonah scholarship in the past decades, Yates (2016, 238) considers Jonah to be a caricature of a prophet—an unfaithful prophet whom he calls "the poorest excuse for a prophet in the OT" and hence undeserving of our sympathy. Yates rather identifies with Jeremiah, whom he deems to be a faithful prophet, interceding for his people. He likens "the weeping prophet" Jeremiah to the suffering servant in Isaiah, who is "beaten, shamed" and ultimately "vindicated" (Isa 50:4–9; Jer 20:7–12).

A different understanding of Jonah and Jeremiah, in which both are recognized as traumatized prophets, allows a different interpretation to emerge: one in which both prophets embody the suffering of traumatized people, carrying the people's wounds on their bodies and souls. Both Jonah and Jeremiah are shown to interact with God "in a personal and intimate way," with both prophets complaining to God about their calling and raising their voices in lament (Niditch 2023, 13–14). Interpretations that explore the connections of Jonah's prayer (ch. 2) to the lament tradition, as well as readings that develop parallels between Jonah and Job, may be particularly productive, highlighting shared experiences of suffering in the face of the trauma of exile (Havea 2016a).

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (2019a, 259–60) furthermore draws parallels between Jonah's anger at God's perceived injustice (4:1, 4) and the story of Cain (Gen

4:5–6). Viewing both characters as restless wanderers—Jonah exiting God's presence "east of the city" (4:5) is reminiscent of Cain's sojourn "east of Eden" (Gen 4:16)—Tiemeyer explores the notion of Jonah as a perpetual exile (see also Erickson 2021, 57, who characterizes Jonah as an exiled and alienated prophet). Marian Kelsey (2020, 137) similarly suggests that correlations between Jonah and Cain highlight "themes of expulsion and loss of God's favor or presence"—this association captures something of Israel's experience of exile, specifically the experience of being "driven out from a place of (perceived) safety and patronage into an uncertain and dangerous future."

3. Text

Text and Versions

This commentary will use the Masoretic Text (MT) for its translation and interpretation of Jonah. For many Hebrew students, Jonah often is the first book to be translated, given its relatively uncomplicated Hebrew structure and repetitive vocabulary, particularly in the narrative sections of the book (cf. the poetic section in ch. 2, which requires some more advanced Hebrew reading skills) (Tucker 2018, 1–2).

Erickson (2021, 7–20) offers a detailed overview of the various textual versions important to a text-critical analysis of Jonah, including a helpful summary of what we know regarding Jonah's presence at Qumran as part of the Book of the Twelve manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls; the Greek translations including Old Greek and the LXX; the Latin translation of the Vulgate as it relates (or does not relate) to the Old Latin; and finally, the Aramaic translations of the Targum Jonah (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and the Palestinian Targum). The consensus is, generally, that there are few differences between the Hebrew text and its various manuscript traditions (Graybill, Kaltner, and McKenzie 2023, 20). Niditch (2023, 4–5) characterizes slight differences that may exist due to the "aesthetic or theological choices of the ancient translators" rather than representing a different text altogether.

For the purpose of this commentary—with its focus on the reception and interpretation of Jonah, as read through a trauma lens as it intersects with feminist, postcolonial, and queer criticism—the following aspects regarding the text and versions of Jonah are important. First, it is helpful to think of these translations as the earliest readers that applied and shaped the book of Jonah to their specific contexts (Muldoon 2010, 59). We find minimal differences between the Qumran texts and the MT of Jonah. Yet in some of the translations, we see some minor interpretive changes that show a critical and creative interpretive process not unlike the inner-biblical conversation referenced in the previous discussion on the repurposing of Exod 34:6–7 in the Book of the Twelve.

For instance, in the Old Greek Jonah, one finds that the psalm in Jonah 2 is translated more in the genre of a lament rather than a song of thanksgiving. According to Erickson (2021, 14), this use of lament has the effect of minimizing "the readerly disorientation occasioned by Jonah's speaking of a psalm of thanksgiving from a place of distress." Another example where the versions yield some interesting interpretive possibilities regards the different words in Old Greek for the Hebrew root *rʿ* (evil) to describe Nineveh's "evil" (*ponēros*, with its connotations of immorality) in contrast to God's "evil" (*kakos*, which denotes "disaster"). In addition, the change of wording for the plant (Jonah 4:6) in Jerome's Latin translation in the Vulgate led to a crisis in the church; the real reason was that Jerome went back to the Hebrew text instead of the Old Latin version, which was based on the authoritative Greek translation of Jonah (Erickson 2021, 16–17).

A second line of inquiry that lends itself to interesting interpretive possibilities regards the ordering of the Book of the Twelve in the various versions of Jonah. For instance, in the MT, Jonah is followed by Micah (i.e., Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum), while in the LXX, Jonah is followed by Nahum (i.e., Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum). At Qumran (4QXII), it seems that Jonah appears to be the final prophet in the Book of the Twelve, after Malachi (Niditch 2023, 10; Nogalski 2011, 3–4; Muldoon 2010, 57–58, 198–99). Scholars have given different explanations for this divergence in the placement of Jonah, finding significance, for instance, in the connection of Jonah to Micah in the MT as signaling a concern for the restoration of Jerusalem (Niditch 2023, 10). Or, in terms of Jonah's close association with Nahum in the LXX, perhaps thinking of the destruction of Nineveh imagined in Nahum as a way to offer closure to the book of Jonah, which ends with a cliff-hanger par excellence.

Conversely, if one were to follow the order of the LXX, Jonah is not just in conversation with Nahum, but rather Jonah and Nahum both may be responding to Joel and Micah. Regarding Nah 1:3, "The LORD is slow to anger but great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty," which takes the credo in Exod 34:6–7 in a very different direction than Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:13, H. Kim (2007, 509) argues that Nahum emphasizes God's righteousness in contrast to God's mercy in Jonah and Joel: "Put together, the concept of forgiveness toward the repentant in Jonah is counterbalanced by the concept of consequence before forgiveness in Nahum."

Jonah as Textual Art

Trauma scholars have long noted the critical role of art, including textual art, to mitigate the effects of trauma. As Louis Stulman (2014, 183) writes, "Art steps forward . . . to imagine a world in and through and beyond the traumatic

violence." The artistic quality of the book of Jonah is especially evident in literary treatments that identify some clearly defined structure in the book, with chapters 1 and 3 mirroring chapters 2 and 4 (Trible 1994, 110–17; Green 2005, 85–88; Erickson 2021, 21). In such interpretations, attention is drawn to the way the call narrative in Jonah 1 is repeated in Jonah 3; the way Jonah's lament in chapter 2 may be read in conjunction with his angry complaint in chapter 4; the way the sailors/captain (ch. 1) may be compared to the Ninevites and king (ch. 3); and the way the storm winds sent by God in 1:4 find a counterpart in the sweltering desert winds of 4:8. Not only do attention to such rhetorical features attest to a well-crafted story and an artist at work, but they also inspire readers to produce innovate interpretations regarding the characterization of Jonah, God, the foreigners, and also Nineveh. Moreover, as Green (2005, 86) notes, Phyllis Trible's seminal outline of a balanced structure helps one to be cognizant of what "sticks out oddly," such as the final two words of God's concluding response to Jonah: "And many animals" (4:11).

Others have hailed the repetition, clever wordplay, and puns that point to an artist at work. For instance, attention is often drawn to the repetition of "great": the great storm, a great fear, and the great city, all bestow a larger-than-life character in this story. Moreover, the verb "to appoint" (*mnh*) contributes to portraying the Deity who exerts control over all creation. In the same vein, the storm, the desert winds (Jonah 1:4; 4:8), the fish (2:1 [1:17]), the plant (4:6), and the worm (4:7) are all instrumentalized in pursuit of a recalcitrant prophet (Nogalski 2011, 406; Erickson 2021, 21). Several scholars have shown how the repetition of God as an "appointer" of wind, fish, plant, and worm serves the function of highlighting this God who, as Yvonne Sherwood (2000, 252) well says, is "an irresistible force and a master of strategic planning." As she writes, "Cumulatively, the descriptions reinforce the image of omnipotent, omnicontrolling divine monarch" who pushes "his armies [the wind, weather, fish] across the text as if it were a strategy game board" (Sherwood 2000, 253; cf. Fretheim 2007; Bolin 1997, 147).

There are also several ironic wordplays to explore in the book of Jonah, such as the dual meaning of the verb *hpk* in Jonah's exceedingly short prophecy of doom (3:4), which can mean either "to turn" or "to overturn." The ambiguity of this term is central to how we understand the text: the *niphal* form signals the threat that Nineveh will be overthrown; but, as events play out, it also foreshadows a surprising twist (or "turn"), as the city's king and inhabitants—including the animals!—change course and turn away from their earlier wickedness (Green 2005, 95–96). To some extent the city *is* overturned, but certainly not in the way Jonah, or perhaps also the reader, would have thought this would transpire. And the people's as well as the king's dramatic response to the prophetic word, moreover, has the effect that also *God* turns away from his decision to overturn (overthrow) the city.

Green (2005, 98–99) is thus right that in terms of this double meaning of the verb *hpk* (overturn/turn), neither Jonah nor the reader exercises control over the multiplicity of possible meanings associated with this wordplay.

And then there is the gender-bending fish. Commentators have long since been intrigued, even confounded, that a male fish swallows Jonah (2:1) but that Jonah prays from the belly (or womb) of a female fish (2:2). This grammatical anomaly opens a range of metaphorical associations that may be fruitfully explored in a queer interpretation of the prophet and the book (Erickson 2021, 291, 310–11; see Tiemeyer 2017a for a counterargument). Noting the birth imagery associated with this male-fish-turned-female, Erickson (2021, 285, 310–13) explores the metaphorical possibilities associated with the presence of birth imagery in Jonah 2 that aptly capture the prophet's situation of life-in-death (for more on this intriguing metaphor, see commentary on 2:1–2). For instance, Erickson (2021, 311) draws our attention to the perils associated with the birthing process, showing how references to "the bars (or bolts) of the earth" take on new significance if read in terms of the obstacles preventing a baby from being born.

And yet, this tomb-turns-womb will turn out to be the source of new life. So Graybill argues that the gendered space of a gender-bending fish in "the watery deep" opens Jonah to (finally) take up his prophetic role in 3:2–4. Graybill (2016, 134) explores this "association of water with rebirth" and the connection "between fluidity and openness to new forms of being" as a way to rethink Jonah's prophetic identity.

The intriguing literary features associated with the book of Jonah have inspired interpreters past and present to come up with wonderfully creative interpretations. Yvonne Sherwood underscores the pliability of the language used in Jonah as she characterizes Jonah as a story propelled by the imagination, "a story that 'can go anyplace and take off into the stratosphere,'" a story in which "'words jump around like fireflies'" (Eva Hoffman, cited in Sherwood 2000, 236). Erickson (2021, 21–22) emphasizes that the ambiguity, wordplays, and double meanings central to the book of Jonah have been the source of inspiration for the diversity of interpretations that fall within a comprehensive history of the book's consequences. Time and again, interpreters of Jonah return to the text, exploring even more complex questions regarding what it means to be human in a complicated world and how to imagine God in relation to this world and to the people in it.

The complexity and paradox at the heart of a carefully crafted story like Jonah are well suited to representing an uncertain world, which has become ever more uncertain and complex due to the violence inflicted by one empire after another. The intersection of trauma hermeneutics and gender, postcolonial, and queer biblical interpretation seeks to recognize the relationship of Jonah's literary ambiguities, textual contradictions, and the book's other artistic features to its

roots in a community traumatized by imperial violence. As described in more detail in "Reception," Jonah's imaginative inclinations are also picked up by later interpreters: examples of art's propensity to lure one in, inviting the reader to serve as a cocreator in the ongoing process of meaning-making.

Trauma and Genre

When it comes to the genre of the book of Jonah, there is range of possibilities to choose from: satire, parody, allegory, midrash, parable, legend, prophetic narrative, didactic story, or skeptical wisdom text (Green 2005, 95; D. Alexander 1985, 36–37; cf. Fretheim 2007, 125). Some scholars have viewed Jonah as a parody that subverts or challenges a well-known genre, such as the traditional prophetic call narrative or the oracles against the nations (Miles 1990). Others have explored the role of satire and humor in the book (Marcus 1990; Holbert 1981; cf. Claassens 2015, for an overview of scholars who have used humor as an interpretive category). Indeed, much appears funny or strange in the book of Jonah: a ship is described as having a nervous breakdown; in a ridiculous scene, animals garbed in sackcloth represent the "exaggerated piety" of the Ninevites; and the prophet-swallowing whale regurgitates Jonah as if utterly disgusted by the prophet's fake religiosity (Sherwood 1998, 51).

Much of this laughter has been directed at the prophet, who has been called foolish, ridiculous, and a laughingstock. True to the description of satire as a form of "militant irony," Jonah and the community he represents have often been caricatured and treated with disdain (Jenson 2008, 33). More recently, Boase and Agnew (2016, 6–7) have argued that interpretations berating the prophet for his self-centeredness, narrow-mindedness, particularism, and nationalism have the effect of (re)traumatizing an already traumatized Jonah and, with him, his traumatized community. Moreover, this line of interpretation holds potentially harmful consequences for other and later communities; several scholars have thus warned of the danger of anti-Semitic interpretations arising from applying "a Christian caricature of postexilic Judaism," assumed to be the target in the book of Jonah, to Judaism in general (Bolin 2007, 2–3; Bolin 1997, 58–60; Sherwood 2000, 57–58; Jenson 2008, 34).

Instead of targeting a specific person or group, Stephen Cook (2019, 3–4) proposes that satire—produced by a combination of irony, humorous puns, and wordplays—is employed in the book of Jonah to challenge the fixed system of theodicy that draws a direct connection between suffering, sin, and God's anger. Thus, similar to wisdom books like Job and Ecclesiastes, the book of Jonah, "under the cover of fiction," includes and addresses "voices of theological discontent" in a way that not only leaves the status of God's mercy ambivalent but also uproots the conventional understanding of divine justice—as found in much of the Hebrew Bible, notably including Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and the

prophetic tradition—as one involving an elaborate system of punishments and rewards (Walsh 2015, 263, 267).

Irony is well suited for a reading of Jonah that foregrounds traumatic experience since it captures the multiplicity and ambiguity associated with the complexity of finding words to express what is beyond words. According to Arnold Band (1990, 179), "Irony usually suggests the capacity or the need to entertain two contradictory positions simultaneously; there can, however, be no irony in a position which insists upon one exclusive claim to the truth." Throughout the book of Jonah, we see examples of irony as a means of holding multiple incongruous truths in tension. Jonah is depicted as swallowed by the big fish, from which he is simultaneously delivered and not delivered, representing the people of Jerusalem and Yehud, who may be said to be both saved and not saved. The double ending, likewise, holds in tension that Nineveh is both destroyed and not destroyed, coinciding with the portrayal of God as merciful and not merciful at the same time (Claassens 2023a).

Irony is a vital key for contemporary interpreters concerned with the relationship of biblical texts to systems of power and oppression, including postcolonial, feminist, and queer interpreters. As Carolyn Sharp (2017, 151) has argued, "Ambiguity in biblical texts is a potentially subversive resource with which to dismantle oppressive structures and ideological distortions." Readings of Jonah that embrace ambiguity and celebrate paradox may thus be considered ongoing acts of resistance. To undermine interpretive structures perceived as fixed and immutable may serve the purpose of liberating biblical texts from centuries of interpretive hegemony while seeking interpretations that better mirror the ambiguous realities of reading communities.

Trauma and Symbol

The book of Jonah provides a safe space for communities to work through trauma wrought by a succession of empires. Metaphors and symbols, in particular, are vital in helping a traumatized community come to terms with the debilitating effects of trauma on the brain. During a traumatic event, connections between the brain's left and right hemispheres are reduced, preventing the mind from attaching emotions and feelings to traumatic events or translating these experiences into words (Anker 2009, 51–52). This severance between emotion and language is evident in the difficulty that trauma survivors face when describing their experiences. Trauma theorists have drawn attention to the ability of symbolic language to activate several areas of the brain simultaneously, assisting the brain in reintegrating emotion and cognition in reframing traumatic events (Anker 2009, 55).

The vivid metaphors and symbols in the book of Jonah may thus be seen as part of a community's attempt to recount, at a safe distance, the exceedingly painful experience of seeing one's city and temple destroyed. In the symbolic

representation of trauma that involves foregrounding only selected aspects of the traumatic experience in the form of literary symbols, readers individually and collectively are invited to work through their trauma, viewing the traumatic incident at a distance to protect themselves from being retraumatized (Claassens 2023b). By transforming traumatic memories into narrative and poetic memories, victims may recover some control over what they have experienced, which is vital for the long and often painful process of healing and recovery (Claassens 2020, 9–10; Claassens 2017).

A central aspect of literary symbolism in trauma fiction concerns the way in which the trauma novel deconstructs categories such as time and space, thus mirroring the disorienting effects of trauma on the human psyche (Claassens 2023b, 40; Granofsky 1995, 6–7). In the book of Jonah, Nineveh has a similar symbolic function, destabilizing expectations regarding time and space. Jonah's postexilic readers would have known that the Assyrian capital had been destroyed, with Nineveh likely functioning as a symbol of the Persian Empire, which then was exerting control over Yehud. In addition, as Downs (2009, 40) has argued, the traumatic memories of the Babylonian invasion and exile continue to "haunt the story of Jonah." By invoking the symbol of some empire(s) long gone, the book of Jonah functions as a symbolic trauma narrative through which readers may deal with the wounds of an imperial past, albeit a past far from over and thus reaching well into the present and future.

Finally, read in the context of the great harm inflicted by centuries of colonization, the humor in the book of Jonah may be fruitfully read as what Jacqueline Bussie (2007, 4) calls "tragic laughter," laughter that "interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief." Imagining the ferocious enemy in a vulnerable position (lamenting, repenting, and quite comically dressing their animals in mourning clothes) may diminish these oppressors' hold on the community behind this book (Claassens 2015, 663). By imagining a fantastical counterworld in which no one is hurt or killed except for the *qîqayōn* plant, traumatized individuals may gain control over their traumatic memories, altering a traumatic narrative and transforming it into a story with a positive outcome (Whedbee 1998, 216–17; cf. Poser 2016, 37).

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