



Five Scholars in the Underbelly of the *Dag Gadol*: An Aqua-Fantasy

BARBARA BAKKE KAISER

Who knows (Jonah 3:9)? What if—perhaps (Jonah 1:6)?—five Jonah scholars were swept into the sea by a great wind: Yvonne Sherwood,¹ Jack Sasson,² Phyllis Tribble,³ and father and son André and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque.⁴ Waves and billows surround the five scholars, and seaweed—or should we say *kelp*?⁵—wraps round their heads, until a *dag gadol* (דג גדול; big fish) swallows them all in one gulp. And yes, amidst the “kilos of blubbery flesh,”⁶ there really is, as the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* envisions, a great synagogue,⁷ in this case an assembly of five astute scholars coughing salt water and peeling weeds from around their heads.⁸

¹Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The title of this article plays with Sherwood’s references to marginalized readings of Jonah as “underbellies” and the psalm in Jonah 2 as an “aqua-psalm.”

²Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

³Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

⁴André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1990).

⁵Referring to Sasson’s desire to specify the plant; see *Jonah*, 184–185.

⁶Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 89.

⁷See *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. and ed. Gerald Friedlander (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971) 65–73, quoted in James Limburg, *Jonah* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 106.

⁸This fantasy is intended as evidence of the pleasure that these scholars have granted me through their astute studies of Jonah and as encouragement to all readers to share in the enjoyment. The speeches from the characters

In this fantasy, five recent scholars sit in the belly of a fish and do what scholars would do there: debate the meaning of the book of Jonah!

As they rest against the ribs, rocked back and forth, the Lacocques marvel at “the warmth, the darkness, the odour of the sea”⁹ in this great womb. But it is Sherwood—by far the most comfortable with backwaters and underbellies, with the eccentric and the fantastic—who finds a light already wired, hooks it to a spine,¹⁰ explores the fishy cavern, and begins the conversation.

SHERWOOD: Will you look at these piles of bones? And there are scraps of manuscripts and even whole books clamped in some of their skeletal hands.¹¹

[*She spends hours examining them carefully while the others tend to their seasickness.*]

SHERWOOD: This pile here appears to be the remains of the mainstream interpreters of the book of Jonah. Some of these are the very dry bones of the church fathers—Jerome, Pseudo-Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine—all with their fantastically allegorical manuscripts linking Jonah to Jesus. And here—with considerable flesh miraculously preserved on his bones—is Martin Luther with his commentary, musing over the absurdities of the book of Jonah, briefly letting slip a flicker of sympathy for the God-abused prophet, and finally settling on a supersessionist drama of Jonah the Jew, who forsakes mercy. John Calvin, also miraculously preserved in fish juices, clutches his fierce sermons about the disciplining of recalcitrant Jonah in God’s fish-belly torture chamber, which transforms into a hospital for the soul.

André and Pierre-Emmanuel, I believe you would be interested in that other pile of bones—not from the mainstream but some of your psychological interpreters.

P. LACOCQUE: André, will you look at this? Here’s Hyman Fingert, who subjected Jonah to Freudian analysis as if the prophet were a real person from the past. His diagnosis? Oedipal complex. The fish, the king, Tarshish, the booth, Nineveh are all mother symbols, and the gourd-devouring worm “represents Jonah’s fantasy of the destructiveness of the penis in intercourse”!¹² Here are the bones of Joseph More, who understood Jonah to be a mythical representation of biblical man, God as symbol for the father, and Nineveh as the bad mother,

below are *my summaries of their observations on the book of Jonah, not my own perceptions of the biblical book*, as much as I might like to claim them. My contribution here is the wild fantasy, the choice of points for discussion, the summaries, and the imagined interactions among the five characters. When I depart from summarizing their books and move to speculation on their interactions with thin evidence from the books themselves, I will signal that change in a footnote. Of course, actual quotations from the books are indicated with quotation marks and a note.

⁹Stephen Mitchell, “Jonah” in “Five Parables,” *Tikkun* 4/3 (1989) 31, quoted in Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 130.

¹⁰The image of the light already wired and hooked to a spine is from an episode of the television series *Northern Exposure*, quoted in Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 147.

¹¹Sherwood begins her book with a survey of Christian interpretation of Jonah, and the Lacocques offer a survey of psychological interpretations.

¹²Hyman H. Fingert, “The Psychoanalytic Study of the Minor Prophet, Jonah,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 41 (1954) 62, quoted in Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 51.

whom Jonah wishes to destroy because he is jealous of her love for her population/other sons. It's a good thing these bones are very dry!

- A. LACOCQUE: But here are some of our interpreter-fathers with flesh still on their bones. Here's Carl Jung with his texts of timeless insights about the mythic hero leaving the protective mother-womb, integrating messages from the unconscious, and establishing connections to a "world-self." And this is Erich Fromm, who interprets plot events in the book of Jonah as symbols for the inner life of the prophet, representing universal spiritual struggles.¹³

"Erich Fromm interprets plot events in the book of Jonah as symbols for the inner life of the prophet, representing universal spiritual struggles"

SHERWOOD: Here's a skeletal hand clutching diagrams of fish, whales, and porpoises from a nineteenth-century ichthyology textbook. This must be E. B. Pusey, whose commentary, written a year after Darwin's famous work, painstakingly attempted to identify the kind of fish that engulfed Jonah, and summoned up a story of a sailor swallowed and then expelled from a shark to accompany calculations about weights and jaw sizes and body lengths of fish.¹⁴ I believe I suggested in my book that such attempts to ground the story in scientific reality are essentially dead today. However, while virtually no scholar argues that the story of Jonah represents a chronicle of "real" events, I think the impulse to ground the tale in reality—in this case, Ancient Near Eastern history—remains with us.

SASSON: I suppose you are referring to my textual notes recording Assyriologists' estimates of the size and population of Nineveh or my consultation of Neo-Assyrian sources about mourning customs to support my claims that seemingly absurd details in the book have a basis in the realities of Ancient Near Eastern life.

SHERWOOD: I also wonder what motivated you to expend such effort trying to identify the קִיקִיּוֹן plant that grows over Jonah's head. You do eventually give this up with the conclusion that "this plant is displayed with minimal realism."¹⁵ But I am interested in your stubborn attempt to hold on to the realism of a book that so noisily advertises its fantastic nature: a wind that hurls itself, a ship that shivers and considers breaking up, a fish who obeys divine command, sheep bleating and cows mooing their repentance, a plant growing to fantastic height in one night, Ninevites who repent instantly after hearing a threatening five-word oracle from a foreign prophet, and more.

¹³Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths* (New York: Grove, 1951).

¹⁴E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets* (Oxford: J. H. & J. Parker, 1860).

¹⁵Sasson, *Jonah*, 292.

SASSON: Of course I don't think the book of Jonah records "actual events," but on the other hand, I do not consider the narrative modern absurdist fiction either. The details are just not as bizarre as you present them. If you would spend more time in Ancient Near Eastern archives than in the backwaters of literature, I think you would find that the world of the story would not be so absurd to the ancient audience but would perhaps represent somewhat of an exaggeration of their real life. For my commentary I intended to ground the story in the particulars of the ancient world so that the great generalizing forces do not seize control of the book. Hence, the *qiqayon* is a *particular* plant recognizable to the ancient audience—not just any plant. Do any of you have a better idea of what to do with this troublesome *qiqayon*?

TRIBLE: Well, actually, for me the *qiqayon* is just a plant, and that is how I translate it in my book on rhetorical criticism. I am interested in observing the parallels between the four divine "appointments" in the book: fish, plant, worm, and wind. The association among the four elements of the natural world is clearest when we translate the Hebrew terms with very elemental, one-syllable words. "Fish-plant-worm-wind" works better than "fish-*qiqayon*-worm-wind," don't you think?

LACOCQUES: Oh, this is such a fascinating puzzle! First, we see a relationship between the Hebrew *qiqayon* and the Greek *kukeyon*, a beverage used in initiations to Eleusinian Mysteries.¹⁶ The relationship is rather complicated, but let us just say that this correspondence provides one piece of evidence for dating the book of Jonah to the Hellenistic period. On another level, the *qiqayon* functions symbolically as the *axis mundi* or the cosmic tree, communicating sacredness and divine care.

SHERWOOD: I think the writer chooses *qiqayon* because he loves to play with words and sounds. The whole book is a narrative "directed by the plasticity of the word."¹⁷ The *qiqayon* is not here "to tantalize would-be scholar botanists with whether it is a castor-bean plant or a *ricinus communis*, but because a *qiqayon* can weave its tendrils back to the verb **קִי** (*qi*, to vomit) in Jonah 2:10, and so can sound potentially like 'the vomiting of Jonah,' and can also resonate with the phrase 'innocent blood' **דַּם נָקִי** (*dam naqi*) in 1:14."¹⁸

SASSON: Notice how that little exercise with *qiqayon* exposes some of our broader interpretive interests: particularity, structure, dating, symbolism, and play.

SHERWOOD: Yes, I do enjoy the play with words, Jack, and my interpretation is as playful as the text I am examining. But you recognize, of course, that even

¹⁶For the discussion of this proposal, see Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 156–158. I suspect that the proposed association is too much influenced by the desire to date Jonah to the Hellenistic period to support the thesis that the biblical book fits the genre of Menippean satire, named after the Cynic writer Menippos of Gadara (third century B.C.E.).

¹⁷Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 252.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 271.

for me it's not all play. We have written our works with sober commitments to expose lingering anti-Semitic distortion in mainstream interpretation of Jonah.

LACOCQUES: Yes, our scholarly efforts in that regard even fit very well with the theme of the book of Jonah—accepting the social responsibility of one's vocation.

SASSON: Whatever sinister psychological impulses are at work, this lingering anti-Semitism is another example of the eroding effects of the generalizing forces. Under their influence the sailors and Ninevites coalesce as "Gentiles" and then "proto-Christians." The generalizing reader proceeds to magnify the positive qualities of the sailors and the Ninevites so they can function as the representatives of "good" in a dualistic morality tale: Jonah the Other, the narrow-minded Jew who rejects mercy, versus the saintly Gentiles who convert to the gospel of universal love. If we look carefully, however, we can see that neither the sailors nor the Ninevites are portrayed in such an unambiguously positive light. Consider those so-called "humane" sailors who try valiantly to save Jonah's life and their own by attempting to row to shore even after Jonah has commanded them to toss him overboard to calm the sea. Their response betrays panic, self-interest, and maybe even disobedience of the will of God more than their exceptional humanity. They show that they do not really trust Jonah's word but fear that tossing him overboard would incur even greater wrath from this God of this sea, should Jonah really be innocent. And as for the attempt to row to shore, "centuries of nautical common sense taught [that] steering a ship to shore when in the midst of a storm is a foolish, even suicidal enterprise! To the contrary, a ship must at all costs not be driven to the coastline where it will surely wreck. It could be...that the difficult circumstances led the sailors to lose their cunning, skill, and knowledge."¹⁹ In any case, this attempt to row to shore betrays the sailors' unwillingness to listen to a prophet of God or to submit to the divine will.

"if we look carefully we can see that neither the sailors nor the Ninevites are portrayed in an unambiguously positive light"

TRIBBLE: Now you are letting extrinsic concerns distort your reading of the text. There are two external interests governing your interpretation here. First, I see your own resistance to a positive view of these sailors in order to avoid a reading that moves in the direction: sailors + Ninevites = Gentiles = saintly proto-Christians. Second, you are assuming the author of the text has proper nautical procedures in mind. But if we keep a disciplined eye to the rhetorical strategies within the text itself, we can see that the author does, in fact, set up

¹⁹Sasson, *Jonah*, 142.

the sailors and the Ninevites as positive characters in contrast to Jonah. Many rhetorical strategies *do* lead to the conclusion that “unlike Jonah, [the sailors and the Ninevites] model true piety.”²⁰

SASSON: It’s simply not possible that an ancient Israelite audience could regard Ninevites—even repentant ones—as “models of true piety.” Once again one must place this text within the realities of the ancient Israelite world. Even though the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E. lies in the remote past for this postexilic writer, Nineveh continued to be a symbol of evil empire.

SHERWOOD: I agree. The Ninevites cannot be interpreted abstractly as the Gentiles who repent. Throughout the Hebrew Bible Assyria is the empire who destroys the northern kingdom of Israel, “the swarm of (killer) bees that Yhwh whistles for from across the river (Isaiah 7.18); the razor that God uses to shave the nation’s genitalia and expose its shame to the world (Isaiah 7.20); the rod of God’s anger and the staff of his fury (Isaiah 10.5...) and the force that devours the surrounding countryside, leaving Jerusalem tottering like a pathetic allotment hut (Isaiah 1.8).”²¹ Its capital Nineveh “is the ‘bloody city, full of lies and booty’ (Nahum 3.1) and the lion that tears its prey, brings back enough torn flesh for its whelps (Nahum 2:11–12).”²² For the biblical character Jonah, cooperation in bringing Nineveh to repentance would be assisting in the destruction of his own people.

LACOCQUES: Yes, “Nineveh is the nest of cruelty, inhumanity, and bloodthirstiness....Hence, to present Jonah as a ‘reluctant missionary’ is to resort to a false cliché, insensitive to the real purpose of the tale. The truth of the matter is that Jonah’s theology cannot reconcile a God who stands in covenant with Israel with a God who stands on the side of the Nazi SS. For Nineveh is as *gemütlich* (nice and cute) as a Gestapo torture-chamber.”²³ To understand what “Nineveh” evoked for Israel, a modern reader should think of Berlin of the Third Reich.

SHERWOOD: I understand your point, but that particular analogy goes too far.²⁴ In fact, references to the horrors of the Holocaust are grating in your interpretive work on Jonah that is interspersed with colonizing references to the New Testament. There are some disturbing inconsistencies in your interpretation that undermine your concern about anti-Semitic readings of Jonah. On the one

²⁰Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 172.

²¹Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 124.

²²Ibid.

²³Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 102–103.

²⁴Here I am taking some liberties in developing my Sherwood character’s response, but I am basing this imagined response on clues in her book. She does offer a qualified approving nod to the Lacocques’s suggestion that the modern reader might think of Berlin of the Third Reich to capture the connotations of Nineveh for the ancient reader, but her note admits to “certain reservations about this analogy which tends to be somewhat overplayed” (*Afterlives*, 125). She also critiques their earlier work, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), as conceiving of the tone of the book of Jonah as too “confident and triumphalistic” (*Afterlives*, 280). I am also imagining how her stern critique of Christian colonizing of the text of Jonah might operate in her response.

hand, you present Jonah as the satiric antihero; the opponent of God; representative of the isolationists in Hellenistic Jerusalem; a man overcome by solipsism, who runs from the call of the Outer Voice, who is “‘loaded’ with the cowardice and treason of us all.”²⁵ But elsewhere you insist he is not a coward, and he might just represent a bold “man opposing his justice to the justice of God in the name of the countless Jewish victims—at the hands of Ninevites, at the hands of Nazis—of a paradoxically merciful God.”²⁶ The one view of Jonah undermines the other. The different Jonahs in your interpretation slide into one another, and the hapless reader comes perilously close to viewing Jonah as a solipsistic representative of “Jewish justice” opposed to divine mercy.

“Jonah is a man whose concept of justice and urgency for survival are as valid as God’s impulsive mercy”

LACOCQUES: Let us say that we do not expect an argument for consistency from an interpreter who scavenges around the literary waters salvaging scraps ranging from stories of Jonah scaring Leviathan with the sign of his circumcision to Jonah the tobacco salesman. And you yourself offer a rather impassioned argument for dialogic readings of the text. We think you have overlooked the fact that we explicitly state in our book that we intend to offer a *multi-layered* interpretation of Jonah. On one level the text is a satire, with Jonah representing the views of the isolationist party in Jerusalem, whom the writer rejects. On quite another level, Jonah represents Everyman, called by the Outer Voice to leave solipsism and embrace his vocation. But we also wish to leave open the reading of Jonah as the bold voice of protest opposing God, Jonah as a man whose concept of justice and urgency for survival are as valid as God’s impulsive mercy. These layers function separately and contiguously for a deep, rich reading of the story of Jonah.

SHERWOOD: Of course I am not a slave to that hobgoblin consistency. My own interpretation of Jonah “comes from fusions, conjoinings and regurgitations, and from allowing Backwater readings to come home to the text and to settle in and put their feet up as naturally as if they had always had the right to be there.”²⁷ Shifting the metaphor a bit, I take into my reading all kinds of exotic ingredients and mix them together, but I do mix them thoroughly, creating a kind of “fluid pudding.” In the end, it is a cooked thing. And it has consistency: “the consistency of blancmange.”²⁸ But there are just *too many lumps in your dough!*

²⁵Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 90.

²⁶Ibid., xxiv.

²⁷Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 211.

²⁸Ibid., 238. “Fluid pudding” is also Sherwood’s metaphor for her own interpretation.

[*Silence. The Luther skeleton rattles, restless.*]

TRIBBLE: Maybe it's time for a psalm.

SHERWOOD: Jonah's psalm—the "aqua-psalm"!

LACOCQUES: Here we think a Jungian analysis shows its strength. Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish is a classic example of the story of the engulfment of the hero by the chaos monster, symbol for return to "the fetuslike condition within the motherly womb."²⁹ As Fromm recognized, the belly of the fish, the ship's innermost part, the booth, the ocean, and sleep all coalesce as symbols of "the same inner experience...a condition of being protected and isolated, of safe withdrawal from communication with other human beings."³⁰ Within that great fish womb, Jonah is reborn, and his psalm is eloquent testimony to his inner transformation, as he recounts the victory over chaos in past tense. What is essential here is that Jonah is communicating with God, and he has discovered a meaning to his existence. He is now ready to accept his call, even if that means his own death, for "Jonah's death would be a death *for something*. The waves and billows that surround him are not simply what they appear to be; rather, they are 'Your billows and Your waves'! Jonah faces not nothingness but God, not death but life."³¹ In the womb of the chaos monster, Jonah is reborn. That is why he now accepts the call to Nineveh.

TRIBBLE: I do not think Jonah's reference to "your billows and your waves" indicates that Jonah has now broken out of his self-centeredness and turned his attention to God. The fact that "first person singular as subject, object, or possessive occurs twenty-six times"³² in the psalm suggests that Jonah is still as wrapped up in himself as he was earlier wrapped in seaweed. Employing several strategies to create dissonance, the writer signals the audience to interpret the psalm as irony rather than a sincere expression of piety. The psalm's placement in the plot, stereotypical borrowing from lament psalms ("swallow," "pray," "distress," "darkness," "the pit"), and the 3/2 rhythm lead the reader to expect a typical lament; but instead Jonah sings a thanksgiving song, ending with the triumphant self-affirmation, "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!" (Jonah 2:8–9). The psalm clearly reveals Jonah's "distorted perception of reality"³³ and a piety so false that his words "have a nauseous effect."³⁴ Hence the fish's vomiting!

²⁹Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 80.

³⁰Fromm, *Forgotten Language*, 22, quoted in Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 80.

³¹*Ibid.*, 100.

³²Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 171.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*, 172.

SASSON: I don't think we should read all those first-person references as indications of self-centeredness any more than we would do so when we read the psalms. Traditionally the psalms are expressions of worshipers' thoughts and feelings, and therefore they frequently use first-person language. The kind of disparity you recognize between Jonah's dismal situation and the language of thanksgiving is also common in traditional psalms. I interpret the psalm as Jonah's sincere expression of fear of being alienated from God and his "resolve to remain near [God's] presence."³⁵

SHERWOOD: But Jack, let me refer to one of your own astute observations from your commentary to turn the argument in Phyllis's direction. You have observed that this is one of the only literal uses of the verb בלע, "to swallow." I might also add that this is one of the only literal uses of the verb קיא, "to vomit," in the whole Hebrew Bible. Consider also that the situation of being swallowed by a chaos monster, drowning, darkness, and being in the Pit are conventional metaphors for a situation of peril. "Jonah simply turns the metaphors into flesh—his Pit/Sheol comes with matching blubber and fins...[T]he book of Jonah is already inaugurating the tradition of over-actualising the tradition, of taking it too literally, to comic effect."³⁶ This ancient writer anticipates the literalization of traditional metaphors that modern surreal literature employs.

TRIBLE: Furthermore, if we were to take Jonah's psalm as a serious expression of piety or his transformation to a mature self, ready to embrace his vocation, how could we make sense of his "regression" in the final scene?

"Jonah has more to learn. The process continues after his mission to Nineveh, to the end of the story, and even beyond."

LACOCQUES: Jonah simply has more to learn. Maturation is a process that has only begun for him. The process continues after his mission to Nineveh, to the end of the story, and even beyond.

SASSON: Let's think about that enigmatic ending to the book. Didn't we all struggle over that! So much depends upon how one reads חסד in YHWH's final speech comparing Jonah's response to the withered plant with YHWH's own response to Nineveh: "pity"? "have compassion"? "feel sorry"? Are we to believe that Jonah harbors emotional feelings for a plant? "In fact, Jonah welcomes death because of his own suffering and not out of passion for the plant's demise."³⁷ Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible חסד is almost always directed toward another human being, not an inanimate object. Here, then, there must be two distinct

³⁵Sasson, *Jonah*, 181.

³⁶Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 257.

³⁷Sasson, *Jonah*, 309.

meanings of צר, which I reflected in translating the term differently as it applies to God and then to Jonah: “The Lord then said, ‘You yourself *were fretting* over the *qiqayon* plant...; yet I myself am not to *have compassion* on Nineveh...?’”³⁸ (4:10–11).

“picking up on those biblical references to Nineveh as an instrument of punishment, we might suspect that God needs Nineveh for Israel’s destruction”

SHERWOOD: Yes, I agree that Jonah’s affection for a huge, trifold-like plant seems unconvincing. Instead, we might recognize a more sinister reading here as the punster God plays with two different meanings of צר: “To have pity on”/“to have need for.”³⁹ Maybe the “divine quipper” really means that as Jonah *has need for* the plant as a shade, even more does God *have need for* Nineveh. And what would that need be? Picking up on those biblical references to Nineveh as an instrument of punishment and the backwater literature questioning God’s intentions, we might suspect that God *needs* Nineveh for Israel’s destruction. Again, there is no merciful God here, and Jonah is not your average fool, the butt of satire. He might have a good, honorable reason to protest a mission that would implicate him in his own people’s demise, as our old friend Jerome suggested so long ago.

TRIBLE: If you can take delight in angry seas, a shivering ship that contemplates breaking up, a fish who responds to divine commands, sackcloth-swathed cattle mooing their repentance to God, and a vulnerable child worm, then why not a prophet who really loves a plant? I think our key to understanding צר here lies, as always, in a careful analysis of the structure of 4:6–11 and in recollection of the writer’s strategy of withholding important information. In 4:6–8 there are three divine appointments: plant, worm, and wind; we hear of the effect of each of the divine appointments: the plant shades and delivers Jonah, the worm attacks and withers the plant, and Jonah faints under the hot sun and wind. In the first and last case, the writer also spells out Jonah’s contrasting reactions: delight over the plant and a death wish because of the wind and sun. Conspicuously lacking is Jonah’s reaction to the central effect, the worm attack on his plant. This remains a gap in the text until YHWH fills it with his revelation, “You pitied the plant” (4:10). Really, this is probably the best example I can offer of how attention to structure yields meaning in this book. So “Jonah pitied the withered plant *qua* withered plant. He pitied it in and for itself.”⁴⁰ And that reading uncovers the most significant irony of the text:

³⁸Ibid., 300 (italics mine).

³⁹Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 272. Reference to God as a punster and a “divine quipper” is also from Sherwood.

⁴⁰Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 222. This entire argument is from Tribble’s book, pp. 207–223. For clarity, she offers a very helpful chart of the argument on p. 220.

“Jonah’s showing pity becomes a valid premise from which to argue for Yhwh’s showing of pity [for Nineveh].”⁴¹

SASSON: That is ingenious, Phyllis. Here you do seem to give Jonah more credit than you allow him in your exegesis of previous chapters, where he is always the antagonist to the Great Protagonist, the disobedient, the fool who needs to learn a lesson. But here you give him credit for feelings that encourage God’s articulation of his own compassion. I think it worth reiterating a point that you all have picked up from previous commentaries: the text allots equal time to both characters for direct speech in chap. 4: most impressively the thirty-nine words in Jonah’s opening monologue are matched by thirty-nine words in YHWH’s closing question.⁴² That balance is even more impressive if we recognize that God’s first three-word question is matched by a three-word answer from Jonah, and the second five-word query from God receives a five-word answer. To me this suggests that both are equally protagonists in this narrative, and we cannot therefore dismiss Jonah as the fool who is silenced by God’s more powerful voice. The fact that “God’s responses are [balanced] countermoves to Jonah’s utterances”⁴³ also confirms my point that readers are not invited to interpret the story as a general lesson to be applied to all peoples at all times. This is a particular dialogue concerning a particular situation that might not be reproducible. But even if we were to accept Jonah’s emotional response to a plant, the ending is still not satisfying to me. We would expect that God would use a few of those thirty-nine words to offer Jonah a compelling explanation for his pardon of Nineveh, something about Nineveh’s phenomenal repentance or God’s boundless love. Instead, God wastes his thirty-nine words to comment on the size of the city, the population’s ignorance, and their number of cattle!

SHERWOOD: I am with you on that, Jack. The book closes with a most bizarre question. “The problem with God’s summary is itself mathematical: when asked to account for his forgiveness of Nineveh, Yhwh shuns the expected explanation (‘I saved the Ninevites because I love them’)...God’s argument would add up if it were not about adding up, if it did not seem to rely so much on body-counts—one hundred and twenty thousand people and considerable livestock holdings. It would work so much better if it did not conjure up the troubling spectre of divine auditor, or creator-as-stock-manager, for whom size seems to matter where (pragmatic) issues of destroying and reconstructing big cities are concerned.”⁴⁴

⁴¹Ibid., 221.

⁴²Apparently this thirty-nine-word symmetry was first pointed out by C. A. Keller, “Jonas. Le portrait d’un prophète,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 21 (1965) 329–340. Sasson adds the other symmetries between the speeches of God and Jonah in chap. 4. See his chart in *Jonah*, 317.

⁴³Sasson, *Jonah*, 318.

⁴⁴Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 269–270.

SASSON: I suspect the writer ends on YHWH's question without a response from Jonah "because the narrator cannot let [Jonah] rip into the weaknesses of God's logic."⁴⁵

LACOCQUES: We don't think this is a writer who has lost control of his story. To us the untidiness, the lack of closure seems important to the book. First, it fits perfectly with Jonah's character that he does not necessarily capitulate to God but remains resistant to the end. We are left to wonder if Jonah is convinced by God's logic—or you would say "illogic." "Perhaps the hero is still to live other exhausting experiences before he understands God's will. Is this not the case with most of those who encountered God? There will perhaps be for Jonah still another ship and another 'shark.'...Those for whom [the author] has told his tale in the first place were themselves left with the uncomfortable necessity of creating a proper end for Jonah's story."⁴⁶

TRIBBLE: I admire the persuasive rhetorical strategy of that ending. It is particularly effective that the writer has YHWH conclude not with a statement or a command, but with a question. The narrative opens up as the reader is drawn into the story.

"The writer has YHWH conclude not with a statement or a command, but with a question. The narrative opens up as the reader is drawn into the story."

SHERWOOD: Most mainstream interpretations do, however, assume a sense of closure here. They offer monologic conclusions that confirm and console with hackneyed moral lessons "that have clung to the text like limpets."⁴⁷ We are supposed to laugh sardonically as the narrow-minded Jonah learns lessons about justice versus mercy, Jew versus Gentile, xenophobia versus universalism. But scavenging through the backwaters to pick up ancient and modern Jewish interpretations and popular readings of Jonah has the effect of destabilizing the confident mainstream. Treasures from the backwaters open our eyes to the strangeness of the book, to "images of mutability, chance, caprice, fragility, vulnerability, and the 'plot [that] does not shelter us.'"⁴⁸ The God of Jonah is no longer the merciful and loving refuge, but an irrepressible and capricious Mystery. Jonah is no longer the despised Other, the narrow-minded Jew, champion of justice over mercy. Instead, Jonah becomes Everyman/Everywoman "or baby man, living a brief life between shade/protection and the

⁴⁵Sasson, *Jonah*, 349.

⁴⁶Lacocque and Lacocque, *Psycho-Religious Approach*, 164.

⁴⁷Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 176.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 237. Reference to a "plot that does not shelter us" is from Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995) 46.

assault of smiting/striking things, between being consumed and being regurgitated, between danger and survival, exile and safety, and life and death.”⁴⁹

TRIBBLE: Let a much-maligned, word-counting, chart-making, text-focused “mainstream” critic respond. Even “intrinsic readers” like us rhetorical critics recognize “that reader-response is a major ingredient of interpretation.”⁵⁰ So let me be the one to remind us that our books were written before 2001, and the reader responding to the book of Jonah in the twenty-first century is a different person than any of us envisioned, a person traumatized by a fresher wound than the Holocaust. Yes, self-gratifying, comforting lessons about a merciful God from a narrator playing “Jewish xenophobia” against “proto-Christian universalism” still ring trite, false, and insidious in our post-Holocaust world. As an antidote, you propose that readers embrace the challenge of a “plot that does not shelter us.” And what *is* that plot? It is the very traditional story—as you suggest in your last chapter—that depicts us all as Jonahs, “baby man” alienated and powerless in a universe dominated by an irrepressible and capricious Force. But maybe that traditional and postmodern tale of alienation, powerlessness, and a possibly hostile universe *is* now the strangely confirming truism. Maybe that *is* “the plot that shelters us” because it seems to move us only to shuddering together in our ship-wombs and fishbellies. Maybe “the plot that does *not* shelter us” is now closer to the mainstream (minus the anti-Semitism): a story exposing the xenophobia of Everyman/Everywoman, one that depicts a God in rapport with our enemies, a God who calls the reader not just to *angst* but to empathy, repentance, and compassion.

SHERWOOD: And there’s that annoying narrator again! Jonah is wrong; the all-knowing narrator must correct him. How will any reader see herself in Jonah with that Calvinistic narrator wagging his finger?

[The scholars hear a rumbling from deep within the bowels of their fishy cavern. The light goes out. They are pitched against blubbery walls.]

LACOCQUES: Before we are unceremoniously birthed, maybe we should try the thirty-nine-word thing. Suppose you had to conclude your thoughts about studying the book of Jonah in just thirty-nine words. What would you say?

SASSON: And we know how sly you are, Yvonne. With your penchant for hyphenated words, you’ll go way over the limit, claiming that five words are one. So we’re counting each word in the hyphenated clusters as one. Got it? (That’s how long a comment of thirty-nine words is, by the way.)

TRIBBLE: I think we should speak in reverse order from the way we began, so I’ll

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 280.

⁵⁰Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 95. In what follows I am freely inventing a response from Tribble not based upon her book. Since the conversation has turned to readers’ responses to the book, I thought one of my characters should bring the discussion up to date, and I don’t think this is inconsistent with Tribble’s argument.

start: Rhetorical criticism operates under the principle that “appropriate articulation of form-content yields appropriate articulation of meaning.”⁵¹ Applied to the book of Jonah, the method reveals a rhetorically rich, ironic narrative that expresses a theology of repentance and pity.

SASSON: The book of Jonah does not teach a simplistic lesson about a merciful God and a narrow-minded Jewish repatriate. Only by watching over the general from the vantage point of particular commentary can we expose the book’s complexity.

LACOCQUES: The book functions on two levels: as a Menippean satire⁵² criticizing the isolationist temple establishment in Hellenistic Jerusalem and as a universal message to heed the call of the Outer Voice to leave solipsism for vocation and social responsibility.

SHERWOOD: My study of Jonah exemplifies a new kind of biblical interpretation broader than the delimited biblical studies. It opens the floodgates to the neglected backwaters of ancient and modern Jewish interpretation and popular readings to refresh the stagnant mainstream.

[*Rumble. Rumble.*]

SASSON: Vomit!

LACOCQUES: Rebirth!

SHERWOOD: *Dag...dagah*⁵³...*dag* gone...doggone! ⊕

BARBARA BAKKE KAISER is associate professor of religion at Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, where she teaches courses in Bible. Her special interest is poetry of the Hebrew Bible.

⁵¹Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 225.

⁵²See note 16 above.

⁵³Here my Sherwood character, who loves the rolling and shifting of words and sounds, is playing on a famous conundrum in the Hebrew text of Jonah 2:1–2, where the fish is first masculine *dag* and then feminine *dagah*. Rabbinic tradition offers a marvelously imaginative midrash to explain the change in gender: There are two different fish. First a male fish swallows Jonah, but Jonah is too comfortable to pray in the roomy belly. Therefore God appoints a female fish pregnant with 365,000 babies to order the male fish to spit Jonah up. She promptly swallows the prophet. Uncomfortable and afraid in his cramped and dirty quarters, Jonah finally yields up a prayer to God. See the discussion in Sherwood, *Afterlives*, 116–117.