



Jonah's Mission: Intercultural and Interreligious Perspectives

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The book of Jonah can be used to illustrate different approaches to mission and interreligious dialogue. As a Hebrew prophet who goes out to a hostile foreign nation, makes himself vulnerable, and yet meets an unexpected response, Jonah has been sometimes depicted as a model missionary. The sixteenth-century stained glass window of St. John's Church in Gouda, Netherlands, for instance, portrays a purposeful Jonah who strides from the gaping mouth of the fish to carry out his mission in Nineveh. However, since the book also reports about Jonah's flight from and protest against God, other interpretations point out that this is a story about mission in reverse, that it is Jonah who learns from God's dealing with the Ninevites about God's incomprehensible grace.

This has, so the argument runs, implications for our attitudes toward other religions—all the more so, since the story is not confined to the biblical canon. Jonah has meaning not only for Jews, who read from this part of the Scripture on Yom Kippur, and for Christians, who can see him as a symbol of the resurrection. Jonah is important for Muslims, too: he is mentioned in the Qur'an—the tenth Sura is entitled Yunus, which is the Arabic name for Jonah. His significance is indicated by the fact that he is one of the few prophets who received two names: Jonah

The book of Jonah, variously read and interpreted, can give rise to different approaches to interreligious dialogue. Western readers can be enlightened by paying attention to interpreters from other cultures.

is also Dhu-al Nun (Lord of the Fish). Moreover, the motif of the “swallowing monster” can be found in other religions, too.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a strong interest in such comparative material. This provided the background for a discussion on the meaning of the book of Jonah. In 1904, the anthropologist Leo Frobenius published a collection of whale stories from Oceania, America, Asia, and Europe.¹ Comparisons with Greek mythology—such as Jason and the dragon—formed the basis for Hermann Gunkel to conclude that the book of Jonah contained nice thoughts in a childish and fairytale way.² Later Mircea Eliade wrote that the book of Jonah brilliantly illustrated some archaic and universally spread symbols.³

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While religious scholars were interested in observations made by missionaries, there was hardly any discussion about the book in the missiological circles of the time. Some missiologists were cautious about using the Old Testament for mission.⁴ They thought it dangerous, because there are so many parallels to the traditional religious worldviews.⁵

Today, however, African theologians like Temba Mafico from Zimbabwe demand a more intense discussion of the Old Testament in missiology precisely because of this process of inculturation.⁶ And Julius Muthengi from Kenya states categorically that the African church has to study missiological key texts like the book of Jonah since this was important for the growth of African Christianity.⁷ It is difficult to contest this.

We are facing new challenges. Old Testament materials like the story of Jonah are well received partly because some of their elements are known from other contexts, but this raises questions about the relationship to other religions and about particularism and universalism. How does one translate the message—a central theme in mission—in new and fresh perspectives?

¹Leo Frobenius, *Das Zeitalter des Sonnengottes* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1904).

²Hermann Gunkel, “Jonabuch,” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1st ed., vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1912) 638–643.

³Mircea Eliade, foreword to André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) xi.

⁴David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) 17, sees the difference between Old and New Testament in the missionary character of the NT. For a different view, see Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁵G. E. Phillips, “The Old Testament in the Life of the Younger Churches,” *The International Review of Mission* 27 (1938) 662–666.

⁶Temba L. J. Mafico, “The Old Testament and Effective Evangelism in Africa,” *International Review of Mission* 75 (1986) 101–107.

⁷Julius K. Muthengi, “Missiological Implications of the Book of Jonah: An African Perspective” (Doctor of Missiology dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, 1992).

According to Hans Walter Wolff, the book of Jonah is divided into five scenes,⁸ and the interpretation of the story depends to a large extent upon which part one chooses as focus. In the following, we will start by sketching the scenes and by pointing to parallels and new readings in various cultural contexts. After this brief study of the story and its history, three different interpretations of the Jonah book will be introduced. The conclusion will suggest a dialectical hermeneutical perspective.

FIVE SCENES: THE STORY AND ITS HISTORY

1. *Commission and escape (1:1–3)*

From its beginning, we are faced with the question of whether the book of Jonah is a book about mission. After all, Jonah did not preach Nineveh's salvation, but Nineveh's destruction. It can be also argued that the story was written to call Israel to repent and not to convert the nations. It is obviously difficult to present Jonah as a model missionary, because he did not accept his fate. The Indonesian Catholic priest Yusuf Bilyarta Manguwijaya (1929–1999) reports that at his seminary the book of Jonah was avoided because students could draw the conclusion that one is allowed to run away from one's vocation.⁹ On the other side it could be stressed that God repaired or fixed the whole thing; the poem "How God Fix Jonah" of Lorenz Graham, an African-American missionary in West Africa, may serve as an example. He wrote in pidgin English:

God say "Jonah, O Jonah!"
Jonah say, "Yea Lord!"
God say, "Jonah
Go down to Nineveh and preach My Word."

Nineveh be one wa-wa place¹⁰
And Jonah fear that town too much.
And he fear God, but small
He make like go, but he hide.¹¹

2. *Jonah's fear of God and the sailors' fear of God (1:4–16)*

Jonah boards a ship to Tarshish. However, Yahweh causes a storm. All the seamen call to their gods—the crew is international. Only Jonah sleeps, until the captain wakens him. A casting of lots determines that Jonah is the cause of the problem. Questioned by all sides, he confesses Yahweh, the Lord of the sea and the land. After some debate Jonah is thrown overboard, the sea becomes calm, and the seamen recognize the power of Yahweh.

⁸Hans Walter Wolff, *Studien zum Jonabuch* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965) 84–89.

⁹Yusuf Bilyarta Manguwijaya, *Pohon-pohon Sesawi* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 1999) 19, quoted in Karel A. Steenbrink, "Jonah: From a Prophetic Mission in Reverse to Inter-Religious Dialogue," *International Review of Mission* 91 (2002) 49.

¹⁰"Wa-wa" is pidgin English and means "bad" or "evil."

¹¹Lorenz B. Graham, *How God Fix Jonah* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946) 4.

Not all Christian interpretations have identified themselves with Jonah. In a sermon before Edward VI and the Privy Council in 1550, the Reformed Pastor John Hooper said that the cause for the “slinging ship of the state” were the “harmful Jonasses”—Hooper referred to Catholic bishops, untruthful traders, and exploitative lawyers. His conclusion was that one cannot live in peace with so many Jonasses. One has to throw them into the sea.¹²

During the Enlightenment an anti-Jewish interpretation of the book of Jonah emerged. The Old Testament scholar Johann David Michaelis stated in 1782 that the story proved the hatred and the envy of the Jews. Jonah was seen as an example of a people that resisted progress and did not want to share God with others.¹³ Perhaps the Nobel prize winner Elie Wiesel, who survived internment in a Nazi concentration camp, had this misinterpretation in mind when he wrote that not only the seamen but also the sea were guilty of complicity.¹⁴

3. Turnabout and new commission (1:17–2:10)

Jonah then is swallowed by the fish and prays a psalm: “Salvation is of the LORD.”

In the early twentieth century, interpretations about Jonah’s journey inside the fish started to flourish. Leo Frobenius understands this as a mythological description of the sunset—the sun is swallowed by the sea. Such demythologizing deconstruction does not go well in African congregations today. In Jos, Nigeria, my colleagues argued that the story must be taken in a literal sense. I was told a joke that turns the tables: Two students (presumably Africans) are discussing the book of Jonah. One says: “It was Jonah who swallowed the fish.” The other answers: “No. The fish swallowed Jonah.” So they go on arguing for a while. Eventually, they approach their (presumably European) professor. After a long silence, the professor answers: “You know, it does not really matter whether Jonah swallowed the fish or the fish swallowed Jonah. There is a deeper meaning beyond this. It is important that there was a swallowing.”

However, approaches that try to explain Jonah’s journey scientifically—the nineteenth-century Oxford theologian Pusey, for instance, argued that some species of fish could swallow whole human beings and even whole horses¹⁵—also do not lead very far. For a modern Western reader, it is difficult to go beyond Hans Walter Wolff’s statement that it was not the intention of the book of Jonah to give a

¹²John Hooper, “An oversight and deliberation upon the holy prophet Jonas” (Lent 1550), in *Early Writings of John Hooper, D.D., Lord Bishop of Gloucester and Worcester*, ed. Samuel Carr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843) 435–558; cf. Yvonne Sherwood, “Rocking the Boat: Jonah and the New Historicism,” *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997) 364–402.

¹³Johann David Michaelis, *Deutsche Übersetzung des Alten Testaments mit Anmerkungen für Ungelehrte* (Göttingen: Gotha, 1782) 106, quoted in Sherwood, “Rocking the Boat,” 389.

¹⁴Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 140–141.

¹⁵E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885); cf. Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 44–46.

direct account of historical events.¹⁶ Those Jewish commentators probably had a better understanding of the story, according to whom the eyes of the fish were like windows and the curious Jonah could watch what was happening on the bottom of the sea.¹⁷

“it was not the intention of the book of Jonah to give a direct account of historical events”

There are also Qur'an passages that mention Jonah's journey. As noted before, he is called “Dhu-al Nun” (Lord of the Fish) or “Sahibil-Hot” (fellow of the Fish). He also prays in the belly—not the biblical psalm, but the Muslim confession “There is no God but God” (Sura 21, 87).

4. Jonah's sermon, Nineveh's repentance, and God's compassion (3:1–10)

Jonah goes to Nineveh and delivers a minimalist sermon (“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown”), which is nevertheless successful: All the humans and even the animals repent.

In medieval art, Jonah is often portrayed as a symbol of the resurrection (cf. Matt 12:40). In the Cathedral of Cologne, Jonah emerging out of the fish and Jesus rising from his tomb occupy adjacent stained glass windows (thirteenth century). To August Hermann Francke, the founder of the first German Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society, the Jonah-Jesus typology was important; and he was also impressed by Nineveh's penitence.¹⁸ The comparison between Nineveh and the bad moral and social conditions of inner cities provides an interpretative framework that becomes even more important in the twenty-first century. According to Mangunwijaya, Jonah does not attack the timeless sins of a big city, but the concrete moral collapse of Indonesian politics and society in the 1990s, “with all its corruption, uncontrolled power, money-lenders, the cooperation between mafia and bureaucracy.”¹⁹

5. Jonah under the gourd plant (4:1–11)

The image of Jonah the prophet, stretched out, blissful under his gourd plant, has often been represented in the art of Islam. It offered to believers a glimpse of the true ease of self that would be theirs in the kingdom of God. In Muslim accounts of the Jonah story, this peace and joy is the last and lasting mood of Jonah. According to Sura 37, 139–148, the gourd plant grows when Jonah needs rest and recovery after his journey in the belly of the fish. In one of its websites,

¹⁶Wolff, *Studien zum Jonabuch*, 13.

¹⁷A. M. Goldberg, “Jonas in der jüdischen Schriftauslegung,” *Bibel und Kirche* 17 (1962) 18; cited in Oswald Loretz, *Gotteswort und menschliche Erfahrung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963) 17.

¹⁸August Hermann Francke, *Predigten II*, ed. Erhard Peschke (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989) 454–471.

¹⁹Mangunwijaya, *Pohon-pohon Sesawi*, 10–11, quoted in Steenbrink, “Jonah,” 49.

the Ahmadiyya Movement for the Propagation of Islam in Lahore, Pakistan, pointed out that this Jonah is a model, since from then on he preached more purposefully and at last his efforts were rewarded. The moral of the story is that one should not lose patience.²⁰ According to the tenth Sura, Jonah is among the messengers of Allah who come with clear signs to each people. A parallel is drawn between Jonah and Mohammed.²¹

As we know, the biblical story is different. After initial enthusiasm in preaching, Jonah is disappointed for lack of success. He retires in a mood of self-pity. He is even more irritated when his plant withers. When he tells God about his anger, God answers, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” The book ends with this question.

INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES

1. The missionary interpretation: Jonah as (insufficient) messenger

Under certain circumstances the Jonah story can be understood as a missionary story. The focus is then on the fourth scene. The glass window in Gouda that depicts Jonah as the energetic missionary has been mentioned before. We find another illustration of this view in the church at Duszniki Zdroj (the former Bad Reinerz) in southwestern Poland (Silesia), where the pulpit is a whale pulpit.²² That implies that the preacher is speaking to the congregation like Jonah did to Nineveh, that there are “the unbelieving masses” on the one side and “God’s prophet” on the other.²³

In some evangelical and pentecostal missionary organizations, this interpretation is emphasized even today. Reinhard Bonnke (whose organization Christ for All Nations is based in Frankfurt) is interested in Jonah as “a book that stands out from the rest of the Bible” because of its emphasis on evangelism. Indeed, it is “almost the evangelist’s vade mecum.”²⁴

However, this works only if the fifth scene—Jonah’s anger and God’s questions to Jonah—is discarded or if Jonah’s insufficiency is emphasized. Bonnke chooses this option; to him, Jonah preached only out of duty, with no passion for

²⁰See <http://aaail.org/truestories/darkprisonjonahyunus.shtml> (accessed 25 Feb 2007).

²¹Uwe Steffen, *Die Jona-Geschichte: Ihre Auslegung und Darstellung im Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1994) 123, 124.

²²I am grateful to my colleague James Limburg, who introduced me to his art collection on Jonah. African and Asian artists, such as He Qi (China), Nalini Jayasuriya (Sri Lanka), or Azariah Mbatha (South Africa) have also worked on Jonah.

²³I am grateful to my colleague Charles Amjad-Ali for this interpretation.

²⁴Go to cfan.org, click on “United States,” search on “Jonah I”; for similar interpretations, see Roger E. Hedlund, *God and the Nations: A Biblical Theology of Mission in the Asian Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997); Wayne G. Strickland, “Isaiah, Jonah and Religious Pluralism,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 153 (1996) 24–33.

the lost. "An evangelist's heart should beat in tune with the heartbeat of God, expressive of His heart's longings and compassion."²⁵

Such a view of mission has been severely questioned by some theologians from Asia. Wesley Ariarajah (Sri Lanka) criticizes a language that refers to indigenous peoples as "unreached millions." To Ariarajah, proclamation, not conversion, is the task of the missionary. Conversion is the work of God.²⁶ I would agree with that.

2. *"Mission reversed": The Jonah story as argument for interreligious dialogue*

In his own interpretation of the Jonah story Ariarajah focuses on the fifth scene and concludes that not Jonah but the unknown author of the book of Jonah is the true prophet, who tells us a crucial message about the relationship between humans and God. According to Ariarajah, Jonah represents a particular religious attitude and a corresponding understanding of people of other faiths. Jonah's annoyance centers around three things. First, he does not expect repentance from the people of Nineveh; he simply announces the impending destruction. Second, he does not expect God to respond so quickly and so readily, and by doing so to put to shame the prophet of doom God himself commissioned. Third, Jonah suspects from the beginning that God is not entirely reliable in these matters. But the central message of the book, in Ariarajah's view, is that the grace of God is not limited to a nation or a people. While this may be nothing new from a Christian perspective, he then continues by saying that God is a God of grace who forgives rather than destroys. "The Book of Jonah is meant to illustrate God's absolute sovereignty over the whole of creation." Therefore the book gives us an important message in our relationship to people of other faiths.²⁷

"The story is a missionary story reversed. Jonah is the one who changes his life and experiences a conversion."

In Karel Steenbrink's opinion, the story is a missionary story reversed. Jonah is the one who changes his life and experiences a conversion. To Steenbrink, the questions of God and the actions of God are crucial. A central theme is the freedom of God: "God is free to deal with Nineveh and to act differently from what Jonah wants. This is a very important missiological conclusion. People preach, convey their message, their conviction, but the result is often, nay always, different from what the preacher wants." Similarly to Ariarajah, Steenbrink regards the book as an example for interreligious dialogue in which Jonah is the one who learned the most and still is not really familiar with God's mystery.²⁸ Thereby it remains undecided

²⁵Bonnke, "Jonah I," page 2.

²⁶Masao Takenaka and Ron O'Grady, *The Bible through Asian Eyes* (Auckland, New Zealand: Pace Publishing, 1991) 162.

²⁷Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985) 13–15.

²⁸Steenbrink, "Jonah," 50.

whether the book addresses the universality of the one message or the relationship to other religions.²⁹ There are indeed many layers in the book and it is open to different interpretations: While Jonah is sent by the God of Israel and the seamen confess to Yahweh, by name, there are other general references to “God” (elohim), as for instance in the repentance of Nineveh. Another difficulty arises for some, since other religions are not recognized in their otherness, uniqueness, and resistance: Jonah speaks and Nineveh repents.

Jonah can be seen as a starting point for interreligious dialogue because he is known in different religions. But here too, things are not so easy. Apart from the common ground—which is important—there are also differences, differences that are pointed out by adherents of other faiths. For instance, Sheik Ahmed Deedat (1918–2005) aimed specifically to reject Christian interpretations. As the founder of the Islamic Propagation Centre in South Africa, Deedat was influential. When he was not granted entry into Nigeria in 1991—while at the same time an evangelization campaign of Reinhard Bonnke was allowed—there were violent clashes between Christians and Muslims. In his booklet, Deedat quotes Matt 12:39–40 and its reference to the sign of the prophet Jonah. Then Deedat asks whether Jonah was dead or alive when he was thrown overboard. For Deedat, the conclusion then is that Jesus was also alive for three days or three nights.³⁰

In whatever ways one may understand cross and resurrection, here is a point at which one will react as a Christian. One cannot avoid an answer to Deedat that is grounded in confession. Indeed, to conceal the differences would make the dialogue with other religions moot.

3. “*Simul iustus et peccator*”: God calls Nineveh and Jonah

Martin Luther became interested in Jonah in 1525/26, shortly after the Peasants’ War and in the year of the Battle of Mohacs, in which the Turks defeated Hungary. Luther understands the Jonah book as a story of “God’s goodness to all the world” and “a comforting illustration of God’s mercy.”

“it is a difficult task, Luther writes, to declare mighty and powerful rulers guilty of wickedness”

Luther does not judge Jonah, the Jew, but tries to understand and to identify with his situation. To be commanded to go to Nineveh, he comments, was “an unusual and peculiar and unprecedented order,” “just as if someone today would be sent to the kingdom of the Turks.” It is a difficult task, Luther writes, to declare mighty and powerful rulers guilty of wickedness, especially if you are sent as a

²⁹See also Richard J. Plantinga, *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) especially chap. one, “The Bible and Religious Pluralism,” 11–26.

³⁰Ahmed Deedat’s pamphlet *What Was the Sign of Jonah?* can be found online at <http://www.jamaat.net/jonah/signofjonah.html> (accessed 24 Jan 2007).

lonely and lowly man. In what follows, Jonah is described as a “queer and odd saint” who does not obey God’s will willingly but in the end has to bow to God’s will unwillingly. Luther also captures the irony that God’s prophet sleeps while the seamen are praying. “These people,” he comments, “regard God as a being who is able to deliver from every evil. It follows from this that natural reason must concede that all that is good comes from God.” Jonah’s missionary message to the Ninevites does not appeal to the Wittenberg Reformer, who says, “He straightway judges them and rashly condemns them to death.” This message is in marked contrast to the promise of the incomprehensible mercy of God.³¹ Luther then refers to Jonah who is angry because of God’s mercy for sinners. But despite all his shortcomings this strange prophet is God’s dear child.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

There are different layers in Luther’s interpretation from which we can start to draw our conclusions. Luther not only emphasizes that Jonah confesses God, the God of Israel, but also points out that Jonah in the Hebrew tongue means dove and that in the New Testament the dove is a symbol for the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:22; John 1:32), who is bestowed for the proclamation of Christ in all the world through the gospel.

However, the Wittenberg Reformer also stresses that God has a message not only for Nineveh but also for Jonah, who is subject to the dialectic of *simul iustus et peccator* (at once, saint and sinner). According to Paul Rajashekar, this dialectic and other Lutheran distinctions are not intended to draw a rigid boundary between Christians and others in the world, but rather provide the courage for engagement with people of other faiths.³² The message—God’s message—is a constant call to all. In a way, this interpretation can be found in the lithographs of the South African Azariah Mbatha. Jonah has become the story of an African preacher. In his village, amidst the cows, he is called to his mission. He is swallowed by the great fish, head first. Within the fish the conversion takes place and Jonah learns how to pray. As a person himself converted, Jonah can start to preach conversion. The great village, with a chief and many warriors surrounding him, is his audience.

Luther compares Jonah’s situation in Nineveh with the situation of a Christian in the Ottoman Empire. The fact that Jonah crosses boundaries and becomes vulnerable is important indeed. At the same time, it is remarkable that Luther translates and applies the story to the specific context in Europe at the time. The process of translation is important for the spread of Christianity in general as well as for the dramatic southward shift in recent decades. Biblical stories are inter-

³¹Martin Luther, *Der Prophet Jona ausgelegt* (1526), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 19:169–251, my translation; cf. also James Limburg, *Jonah* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 118–119.

³²Paul Rajashekar, “Navigating Difficult Questions,” in *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*, ed. Richard H. Bliese and Craig van Gelder (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 92–112.

preted and retold by African, Asian, and Latin American Christians in new ways. In Madagascar, for instance, Pastor Rabary (1864–1947), who was known as one of the great preachers of his country, compared the persecution of his own church with “the Night” of Jonah’s experience in the whale. According to Rabary, Jonah, who prayed to God for salvation from his distress, prefigured the church in colonial Madagascar, praying for deliverance from its yoke.³³ Another example of a contextual application of the Jonah story is related to Simon Kimbangu (1889–1951), one of the most important African prophets in the Congo. Since Kimbangu first refused to go to Kinshasa but then accepted his call, he is explicitly compared to Jonah.

Luther also recognizes that Jonah is an imperfect missionary who does not obey God’s will willingly but has to bow to it unwillingly. Mission is God’s, not ours. The Jonah story is full of surprises. Jonah fails in three essential regards. He fails as a refugee, because after all he appears in Nineveh; he fails as a prophet, because his prophecy does not come true; and he fails in his wish to die, because he continues to live. And yet he has a place in God’s mission.³⁴ It is precisely this frustrated prophet whose call meets with a fantastic response. The minimalist message of destruction is hardly in line with any modern evangelistic strategy, yet the outcome exceeds all expectations. Despite the missionary’s shortcomings, God acts in unexpected ways. ⊕

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³³Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 491.

³⁴Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, 137–138.