

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE BOOK OF JONAH:  
A RHETORICAL-CRITICAL STUDY

by

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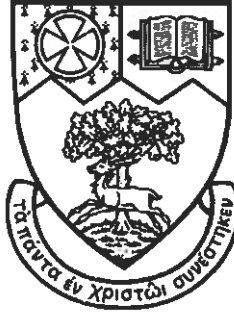
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## ABSTRACT

“Life and Death in the Book of Jonah: A Rhetorical-Critical Study”

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Consistently throughout the book of Jonah, the author draws attention to matters of life and death. The present study argues that by approaching this recurring subject through a rhetorical-critical approach it is evident that the author has intentionally constructed a motif of life and death, which they implement as the foundation for the theme of YHWH’s sovereignty that runs throughout the narrative. In this way, the motif is designed to build anticipation which comes to its climax as Jonah and YHWH converse directly in Jonah 4. This thesis argues that the presence of this motif is found in both the recurring key words and key situations connected with the concepts of life or death. Furthermore, the study identifies the purpose of Jonah as a declaration of YHWH’s sovereignty over matters of life and death, exercised through demonstrations of mercy and judgement, yet with a tendency toward mercy for the repentant. This is realized in and through the very motifs under examination.

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With my deepest appreciation, I have many to thank:

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*Thank you for your persistence of prayer and support for me and my family.*

To my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ:

*Thank you for blessing me with the support, courage, confidence, and capacity to draw near to you through your Word. May my work bring you glory and honour and praise.*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

### **Description of the Topic and its Importance**

Scholarship interacting with the book of Jonah has provided the Judeo-Christian communities with a great amount of excellent and thought-provoking material. There is no doubt that many of the dramatic elements of the narrative make for an exciting reading and studying experience; a wayward prophet provoking YHWH's anger, a fish swallowing and vomiting up said prophet, and said prophet having the gall to argue with YHWH about being merciful. However, despite the abundant research that has been done on the book of Jonah, there lacks sufficient dialogue on understanding the depth to which motifs are used within the text. Surely, scholars have had no trouble identifying themes and messages from the book of Jonah, though much needs to be done in terms of identifying the literary pieces that formulate the narrative whole.<sup>1</sup>

Of particular interest is a recurrence of a motif regarding life and death that permeates the text yet is virtually unrecognized as contributing anything of significance to the book. Examples of this include the threat of death that is posed by YHWH's storm (1:4–6), Jonah's salvation from death (2:1–11), YHWH's message of apparent death and subsequent relenting (3:4, 10), and Jonah's expressed wish to die (4:3, 8, 9). This thesis seeks to understand the relationship of these elements to the greater narrative in which they are embedded. The goal in doing this is to

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<sup>1</sup> While it is far from an exhaustive list, some of the scholars who contribute to recognizing themes and messages of Jonah include Magonet, *Form and Meaning*; Magonet, "Jonah," 936–42; Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*; Limburg, *Jonah*; Sasson, *Jonah*; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*; Robson, "Undercurrents in Jonah," 189–215; Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*.



determine if the elements could be recognized as a motif and what bearing that would have on the book's interpretation.

### Previous Approaches to the Narrative

In his commentary on Jonah, Douglas Stuart identifies a two-fold message of the book of Jonah. First, there is the statement made consistently throughout the text, "Do not be like Jonah!"<sup>2</sup> Second, YHWH is put on display in a way that testifies to the consistency of his character and the power of his will. He is consistent in his patience, forgiveness, and desire to see harm avoided; his will is powerful in his relentless pursuit of Jonah and refusal to allow him to oppose his God.<sup>3</sup> As Stuart understands it, the book is one that extends beyond a simple message of loving one's enemies and provides a more detailed argument that causes the reader to re-evaluate their understanding of YHWH's consistency of character to be more inclusive of other nations.

Highlighted in Stuart's work is the repetition of the words גדול ("great") and רעה ("evil," or more frequently, "trouble"), especially in relation to Nineveh.<sup>4</sup> His understanding is that YHWH views Nineveh as *important* (גדול) and that Jonah's message is meant to address specific *troubles* (רעה) the city was experiencing, rather than some intrinsic evil. This interpretation downplays the presence of an impending death in Jonah's mission by suggesting that God only meant to correct the city, not destroy it. While he does mention the irony in the use of the word הפך in Jonah 3:4, which could suggest that the city will be "overthrown" or that it would have a "change of heart," there is little effort made to reconcile this concept with the underlying

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 434.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 434.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 437.

assumption made in 3:10 that YHWH did, in fact, intend to destroy the city.<sup>5</sup> Stuart's misinterpretation of the use of the word *רעה* prevents cohesion in the narrative concerning the dramatic reality that Nineveh is faced with death (thus eliciting their response of great repentance in 3:5–9).

James Limburg identifies six theological themes in the book of Jonah: (1) God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world, (2) God rescues all who call upon him, (3) God cares for all people, (4) God is able to change his mind concerning punishment, (5) YHWH as the one true God, and (6) those who are saved are invited to respond with praise.<sup>6</sup> Limburg summarizes these six themes as being about portraying a “God who creates, sustains, and delivers” and providing a model for response to YHWH's deliverance.<sup>7</sup> Each of these themes, as they are realized in the text can be connected to the idea of life and/or death in some capacity, yet Limburg fails to note this consistency throughout his commentary.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he interacts with the concept of life and death as it appears in the text, though there is only one instance where he makes any connection to their multiple occurrences and even that lacks sufficiency in addressing the situation.<sup>9</sup>

In his rather dense commentary, Jack Sasson is hesitant to assign any specific meaning to the book yet concludes that the story of Jonah does highlight the omnipotence of YHWH through the presentation of the title prophet as a “Comic Dupe.”<sup>10</sup> This is largely based on Jonah's inability to comprehend YHWH's mercy. However, Sasson's conclusion on the message of the book as a whole is dependent entirely on this one interaction and shows no explicit connection to

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<sup>5</sup> See Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 488–89 for engagement with Jonah 3:4. For more on irony, see Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 48–49

<sup>6</sup> Limburg, *Jonah*, 34–36.

<sup>7</sup> Limburg, *Jonah*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the scene where the storm is calmed (thus eliminating the threat of death) and the sailors offer up their worship to YHWH exhibit themes 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6.

<sup>9</sup> Limburg, *Jonah*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 345–48.

the rest of the book. In his introduction, he offers a few words on the text's unity, in which he briefly and vaguely mentions structural and stylistic features that hold the text together, yet he offers no coherent unifying message that can be traced throughout.<sup>11</sup>

James Bruckner is of the few commentators who goes into any depth exploring the recurrence of life and death throughout the book of Jonah.<sup>12</sup> In his "Original Meaning" section of Jonah 1, Bruckner makes mention of the "larger theme of life and death."<sup>13</sup> He traces the major occurrences of life and death in the text, beginning with impending doom anticipated for the Ninevites and the sailors caught up in the sea storm in ch. 1. Jonah 2 is seen by Bruckner as the central piece of the narrative, where Jonah struggles with life and death in the belly of the fish.<sup>14</sup> In ch. 3, Nineveh's problems with life and death are resolved with the city's repentance at the preaching of Jonah. Likewise, Jonah's struggles with life and death are at least partially resolved, both in his prayer in ch. 2 and in his conversation with YHWH in ch. 4. Beyond outlining these occurrences, Bruckner does not engage with them in any more detail throughout his commentary.<sup>15</sup>

Motivated by the diverse interpretations of the book despite its apparent simplicity, Jonathan Magonet offers a close reading of the text that surveys both the structure of the text through various levels of repetition and the ideas they communicate.<sup>16</sup> Through this method, Magonet concludes that there is not one *single* correct message in Jonah, but rather that there are

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<sup>11</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 19–20.

<sup>12</sup> Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, ch. 1, para. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Within this section of the commentary, Bruckner engages with the elements of tradition exegesis, such as historical, literary, and cultural context; (*Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, ch. 1, para. 2).

<sup>14</sup> See Kozlova, "Jonah 2," for an interesting argument for ch. 2 being the interpretive key for chs. 3 and 4 because of its apparent death liturgy.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Allen notes the presence of four motifs within the psalm of Jonah: answered prayer, crisis, banishment, and assurance. However, he does not mention any other themes or unifying motifs throughout his study of the rest of the book of Jonah; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 198; cf. Barré, "Jonah 2:9," 237–48.

<sup>16</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*.

four themes that can be traced throughout that manifest themselves as polarities: (1) knowledge of YHWH/disobedience to YHWH; (2) particularism/universalism; (3) traditional teaching/new experience; and (4) the power of YHWH/the free will of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Intriguing as Magonet's conclusion may be, it is not convincing based on the fact that the four themes are able to be gathered up under the fourth and final theme: that YHWH's sovereignty places him in full control of all the happenings in creation, despite human desires and expectations.<sup>18</sup> Beyond that, he entirely misses the polarity of life and death that permeates the text.<sup>19</sup>

A key component to Magonet's work is his recognition of how ambiguity is used to create anticipation.<sup>20</sup> This is a worthy literary device to notice, however he fails to comment on other devices that may be implemented in the text, contributing to the anticipation. Particularly absent is a coherent acknowledgement of the motifs that contribute to the themes which he addresses. Indeed, much work is done to analyze the repetition of specific words within the text, but there is no interaction with key concepts that are repeated throughout—namely the concepts of life and death.

Phyllis Tribble offers a rhetorical analysis of Jonah through which she identifies similar structures between chs. 1–2 and 3–4.<sup>21</sup> She notes the parallel nature of the book and thus divides it into two scenes (chs. 1–2 and 3–4),<sup>22</sup> followed by further categorization of the parallel scenes

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<sup>17</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 89–111; cf. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 189–91.

<sup>18</sup> See Dupriez's distinction between a motif and a theme, where the latter is more general in nature. One could argue that the other themes which Magonet isolates are in fact motifs that build upon the larger theme of YHWH's sovereignty and human free will; ("Motif," 291).

<sup>19</sup> James Robson (who is noted below) picks up on this polarity in his study of Jonah ("Undercurrents in Jonah").

<sup>20</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 88–89.

<sup>21</sup> Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*; Magonet, "Jonah," 937; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps using the word "scenes" was an oversight on Tribble's part—a more appropriate word might be "acts" or "parts." For structures that adhere more specifically to the scenes of the narrative, see Limburg, *Jonah*; Salters, *Jonah and Lamentations*, 17–18; Sasson, *Jonah*, viii; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 41; Fretheim, "Jonah, Book Of," 1478–79.

into identical units.<sup>23</sup> The remainder of her study focuses on identifying the internal structures of each of the chapters. Though Tribble's work is informative in offering a comprehensive structure of the book of Jonah, it falls short in the same way that Magonet's work does—it fails to recognize the motifs that are at play within the structure of the narrative. Her structure is very aware of repetition of words, yet there is no effort made to look beyond the words and address the motifs that they create.

In his cleverly titled article “Undercurrents in Jonah,” James Robson argues that a surface-level reading of Jonah's plot and structure appears to have an “artless simplicity” to it, but that by digging beneath the surface, there are actually “hidden depths” to explore which he refers to as *undercurrents*.<sup>24</sup> One such undercurrent that he identifies is the polarized and complex understanding of life and death.<sup>25</sup> The reality of life and death are treated differently by each of the characters in the narrative, which results in a diverse—and often conflicting assortment of thoughts on the matter.<sup>26</sup> Robson argues that the primary purpose of this undercurrent (and the others he mentions) is to display the importance of intermingling credal confession with lived experience.<sup>27</sup> What he means by this is that there are many statements made throughout the book that are exemplary confessions of who YHWH is (such as in 1:9) yet there is often a disconnect between what is stated and the resulting action, or vice versa (such as Jonah's insistence on running from the Creator of the world).

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<sup>23</sup> Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 107–22.

<sup>24</sup> Robson, “Undercurrents,” 200.

<sup>25</sup> Robson, “Undercurrents.” Another scholar who recognizes this is Mary Donovan Turner, who states, “In the end, this story is about life and death. We have known this was so from the very beginning, though we are surprised at how these motifs are resolved—or not—in the story's end.”; Turner, “Jonah 3:10—4:11,” 413.

<sup>26</sup> In brief, the attitude of the sailors and Ninevites towards death is evident through their fear and reverence towards YHWH. However, contrasting these is Jonah, who embraces the concept of death for himself and also for his enemies. See Devora Wohlgelemler for more on the idea that Jonah was suicidal (“Death Wish,” 131–40).

<sup>27</sup> See also Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 84–85, who talks about credal confessions as an important part of Jonah's character.

Robson does well to recognize the presence of the life and death polarization.<sup>28</sup> However, nowhere in his study does Robson mention YHWH's active role in the life and death of the plant in ch. 4.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, his explanation of how the life and death undercurrent plays a role in the purpose of the book is lacking substance. It may be true that it aids in highlighting the dual practice of credal confession and lived experience, though an explanation is required to connect the dots. This also paints an incomplete picture because the presence of this specific motif points to more than just proper Yahwistic practices, but also to YHWH's sovereignty—it speaks of the nature of YHWH as much as it does the activity of humanity.

More recently, Stuart Lasine published a work that investigates human mortality.<sup>30</sup> The study, which merges biblical scholarship and psychology examines various biblical perspectives on the human condition before narrowing in on Jonah as a case study in order to ponder if the Hebrew Bible offers any sort of optimism in death or not.<sup>31</sup> Lasine's work attempts to delve deep into the supposed or implied psychological mind of Jonah and the reader, helping to understand the impact such motifs have on the mind of those receiving them. He addresses the fact that literature is used as a sort of "safe space"<sup>32</sup> for humanity to explore the reality of death and the feelings that come along with it in profound ways.<sup>33</sup>

Lasine's interdisciplinary argument is quite innovative, but there are two main grievances to note. The first is that there is no clear delineation of what the death motif is. There is

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<sup>28</sup> Robson, "Undercurrents," 197–98, 208–11.

<sup>29</sup> In the article, Robson offers more information about Jonah than for the sailors and the King of Nineveh in regards to their perspective of death, though there is still a lack of critical interaction with the text on the matter. Robson, "Undercurrents," 208–11.

<sup>30</sup> Lasine, *Jonah and the Human Condition*.

<sup>31</sup> Lasine, *Jonah and the Human Condition*, xi–xii.

<sup>32</sup> Branson Woodard provides an interesting case of how this intense use of death images in the "safe space" of literature plays out; Woodard, "Death in Life," 3–16.

<sup>33</sup> Lasine, *Jonah and the Human Condition*, 64, 69, 75; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 177–78; Sasson, *Jonah*, 331–34.

considerable amount of time spent looking at perceptions of death in other books of the Bible, though there is never an explicit attempt to define the death motif and its parameters in the Jonah text. Second, there is a lack of sophistication in the adherence to any biblical methodology throughout the study. Lasine opens his study with the confession that he does not have any *one* method that he looks to and even seems to suggest that the psychological approaches will be given privilege over the biblical literary approaches.<sup>34</sup> Though it is understandable that an interdisciplinary study may favor one discipline over the other, working specifically with biblical literature and seeking out interpretation thereof should merit a heavy lean towards biblical studies, not psychological studies which is seeking out the supposed mind of a literary character.

#### Preliminary Assessment

Previous approaches to the book of Jonah that have contributed to the understanding of its motifs have varied in their arguments and conclusions. However, it is evident that biblical scholarship has not come to a consensus regarding the importance of these motifs and their contribution to the narrative. As such, a study must be conducted that offers a rhetorical-critical analysis of these life and death motifs in order to bring some form of unity to the diverse ideas currently being brought to the table by other scholars.

#### Thesis Statement

The present study argues that through implementing a rhetorical-critical approach to the motif of life and death in Jonah, it is evident that each occurrence of the motif is intentionally and skillfully structured throughout the text for the sake of preparing the reader for the final

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<sup>34</sup> Lasine, *Jonah and the Human Condition*, 18.

conversation between the prophet and YHWH in Jonah 4. Ultimately, they are designed to build an anticipation that will come to its climax as the prophet and YHWH converse directly. Furthermore, the study identifies the purpose of the book of Jonah as a declaration of YHWH's sovereignty over life and death, entirely independent of human interference and petition, exercised through demonstrations of mercy and judgement, but with a tendency toward mercy for the repentant. This is realized in and through the very motifs under examination.

## **Research Methodology and Procedure**

### Overview of Rhetorical Criticism

The present study will analyze the use of the life and death motif in the book of Jonah through a rhetorical criticism. Paul S. Evans notes that rhetorical criticism is not one specific methodology, but an umbrella under which a number of methods reside—methods such as new criticism, formalism, structuralism, and narrative criticism.<sup>35</sup> The essential idea behind rhetorical criticism is to treat the biblical text as literature. As Tremper Longman III states, “It recognizes that artful verbal expression is frequently encountered in the Old Testament and New Testament and therefore employs tools and concepts used to study the formal features of literature.”<sup>36</sup> To put it plainly, rhetorical criticism is focused on analyzing the rhetorical devices and characteristics of the biblical text.

Though the practice of rhetorical criticism is something that can be traced as far back as Augustine and Jerome,<sup>37</sup> there was a more recent resurgence of interest initiated by James

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<sup>35</sup> Evans, *Invasion of Sennacherib*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Longman, “Literary Approach,” 386; also see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*.

<sup>37</sup> Longman, “Literary Approach,” 13–15.



Muilenburg in 1969.<sup>38</sup> His work was intended as a sort of call for scholars to shift perspective away from form criticism which dissected the text and instead focus on the stylistic nature of the biblical text. Muilenburg's greatest interest was in "understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and in discerning the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole."<sup>39</sup> For Muilenburg, form—or genre—has but a limited role in the fabrication of meaning because its implementation differs from author to author. The message that the author is attempting to relay through the use of the form is the other key component because that is where the particularities of the author's use of the form is observable.

Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* contributed much to the field, though he admits that his approach lacks sophistication.<sup>40</sup> He defines his literary approach as "the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else."<sup>41</sup> As a result of this new interest surfacing, many other scholars—some who had already been writing relevant material prior to Alter<sup>42</sup>—produced and reproduced works that contributed greatly to the field.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond." Other notable scholars who contributed to the early concepts of rhetorical criticism are Auerbach, *Mimesis*; Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*; Fishbane, *Text and Texture*; Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*; Weiss, *Bible from within*.

<sup>39</sup> Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," 8.

<sup>40</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*.

<sup>41</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> For example, Weiss, *The Bible from within* which was first published in Hebrew in 1962; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* was originally published in Hebrew in 1979.

<sup>43</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*; Fokkerman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*; Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*.

Due to the wide scope of definitions and implementations attributed to rhetorical criticism, some scholars have opted to mark their methods with more general and open terminology. For example, Lyle Eslinger assesses 1 Sam 1–12 through what he calls a “close reading.”<sup>44</sup> Sandra Berg, whose study has a very narrow scope of literary devices being analyzed—primarily motifs—makes for an even more general statement by labelling her method simply as a “literary approach.”<sup>45</sup> This study will adopt the term “rhetorical analysis” bearing in mind a similar openness.

#### Current Study’s Procedure

It is the goal of this thesis to analyze the motif of life and death throughout the book of Jonah. In certain instances, throughout this thesis, a particular paragraph or section may deal specifically with one “half” of the life and death motif and thus employs the shorter phrase “motif of life,” or “motif of death.” While these two concepts are very much interconnected throughout the narrative, employing the shorter phrases allows for more clarity and conciseness when addressing particular instances. Before any further explanation may be given about the means by which that is done, it is necessary that the term “motif” be defined properly. Throughout this study, “motif” will follow closely to the definition offered by Sandra Berg in her study of the literary and stylistic features of the book of Esther, who states:

the term ‘motif’ is used to indicate a situation, element or idea which recurs ... in such a manner that the repetition contributes to the unity of the narrative. A governing motif ... is not portrayed in isolation but is bound to a specific context or situation to which the narrator draws attention. The term ‘motif’ thus points to situations, elements or ideas which pervade the story, potently recalling or anticipating their earlier or later occurrences.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis*, 42; see also Evans, *Invasion of Sennacherib*, 31.

<sup>45</sup> Berg, *Book of Esther*, 14–18.

<sup>46</sup> Berg, *Book of Esther*, 16.

Therefore, a motif is not a repetition of words or situations simply for the sake of repetition, rather it is the intentional placement of recurring words or situations by the implied author for the sake of developing the narrative and its themes. In this way, the object of the motif then requires the context of the narrative in order for it to have meaning.<sup>47</sup> Also, note the use of the adjective “governing” used by Berg to describe the relationship between the motif and its context. In this way, “theme” and “motif” are not to be used interchangeably. A “theme” may be defined as the message or idea that is the cumulative product of the motifs implemented.<sup>48</sup>

But how does one locate a motif in the text? Based on the definition above, identifying a motif will require an in-depth look at the repetition of key words and situations.<sup>49</sup> Alter argues that the repetition of key words plays a prominent role “in the development of thematic argument,” and calls this sort of repetition *word-motifs*.<sup>50</sup> Most typically in the Bible, word-motifs are used across larger units of text to develop a theme and tie together scenes that are otherwise seemingly disparate.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, there is the repetition of situations. Alter notes that these repeated elements are not necessarily intertwined with the verbal texture of the narrative, but rather are the actions, images, and ideas that the reader constructs as a part of the world of the narrative.<sup>52</sup> Included within the concept of a situational motif are individual words that, though they are not recurring and therefore not *word-motifs*, nevertheless highlight the life and death motif. Examples of this include דם (“blood,” 1:14) and נכה (“to attack,” 4:7–8), both

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<sup>47</sup> See Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 17; Dupriez, “Motif,” 290–91.

<sup>49</sup> Fokkelman states that “the biblical writer ... has received an extensive training in exploiting as many forms of repetition as possible in the interests of effective communication”; *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116–19. Alter recognizes this technique in the description and application of his type-scenes in biblical narrative. He states “Thus, the formal technique Buber and Rosenzweig first identified as *Leitwortstil*—the use of reiterated key words or key roots to advance and refine the thematic argument—can be resoundingly demonstrated as a conscious technique because it is so pervasive, and hundreds of elaborate instances could be cited” (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 75).

<sup>51</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 118.

<sup>52</sup> Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 119.

of which are directly related to death through their circumstance, but each appear only within the context of their immediate situation. The implied author is aware that the circumstances of the narrative will evoke specific thoughts and associations in the reader's mind that they will then integrate into their reading experience, and they use that to their advantage as the storyteller. The motif of life and death fits both of these categories.<sup>53</sup>

Shimon Bar-Efrat offers insight to the use of key words in Old Testament literature.<sup>54</sup> The purpose of a keyword is to imply the theme of the narrative internally, without the need of an explanation. He states that in order to identify a keyword, one must take into consideration three things: (1) the frequency of the word in the Bible, (2) the frequency of the word in the text under examination, and (3) the proximity of the words within the examined text.<sup>55</sup> The more frequent the word is in the Old Testament the more the word must appear in the text in order to be considered a keyword. This also works the other way; if the word appears less frequently in the Old Testament, then it is less common and more identifiable, meaning not as many occurrences are needed in the text to detect it as a keyword.<sup>56</sup> To make an example of מות, the word has a concentrated use in Jonah 4, appearing four times (4:3, 8b, 8c, 9) in the chapter while אבד is the predominantly used word throughout the rest of the narrative (also appearing four times, but spread throughout the entire narrative: 1:6, 14; 3:9; 4:10).<sup>57</sup>

This study will work through the book of Jonah chronologically, chapter-by-chapter for the purpose of following the narrative as it plays out. In order to best understand this text, one must look at its narrative and stylistic features as they are building into the book as a whole. As

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<sup>53</sup> The words מות (“death”) and אבד (“perish”) are both used directly (death: 4:3, 8b, 8c, 9; perish: 1:6, 14; 3:9; 4:10). Other words, such as רעה also have connections to the concept of death (as noted above).

<sup>54</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 197–237, esp. 211–16.

<sup>55</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 212.

<sup>56</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 212–13.

<sup>57</sup> Fretheim, *Message of Jonah*, 48–49.

Alter pointed out with the use of word-motifs in biblical narratives, the repetition is meant to tie units together. As such, the motifs should be understood progressively, seeing first how it is used in the introductory scene, and then how it is reused subsequently. A pitfall that many of the above scholars found themselves in is the analysis of individual units isolated from the literary whole.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, this study will set as its primary focus the recurrence of key words and situations throughout the story. The repetition of both words and situations will be analyzed within the context of each scene they appear in. The goal of doing this is to trace the accumulation of the motifs as they build into the theme of the book.

### Defining Sovereignty for This Study

To ensure clarity on what this thesis means by YHWH's "sovereignty," it is best to define it here. While there are a number of philosophical and theological understandings of divine sovereignty that have been argued for over the years addressing both scriptural and contemporary contexts and issues, this thesis utilizes the word differently.<sup>59</sup> Instead of addressing a more broad, intertextual understanding of divine sovereignty, this thesis addresses the concept of sovereignty that is portrayed by the author in the book of Jonah. More specifically, there are three declarative statements made about YHWH throughout the text that inform the reader's understanding of YHWH's sovereign nature. In Jonah 1:9, YHWH is named "the God of heaven... who made the sea and the dry land" when Jonah is identifying the cause of the storm he and the sailors are caught in. At the end of the psalm in Jonah 2:10, Jonah declares "Salvation belongs to YHWH" as he is saved from death. Finally, in Jonah's complaint about YHWH's

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<sup>58</sup> A prime example of this is Limburg, *Jonah*, who made note of each of the instances death and life appeared in the text, but missed the opportunity to tie them all together under a coherent motif.

<sup>59</sup> To read in detail about other concepts of divine sovereignty, see Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*; Ellis, *The Sovereignty of God in Salvation*; Laing, *Middle Knowledge*.

decision to spare Nineveh in Jonah 4:2, he states “I knew you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in love, and one who relents of calamity.” Each of these statements makes a claim concerning YHWH’s decisive power and control over life and death, thus indicating his sovereignty. Furthermore, this control over life and death is determined by the giving of mercy or judgement—as the statement in Jonah 4:2 stresses, it is by YHWH’s merciful tendencies that life is offered. Thus, “sovereignty” as a term in this thesis refers simply to the understanding of YHWH as having the final determining action on matters of giving and taking of life.

## CHAPTER 2: MOTIFS IN JONAH 1:1–16 (HB)

### Introduction and Overview of Jonah 1

This first chapter of the book of Jonah begins the narrative with a rather intense predicament which is driven by a motif of life and death: the title prophet refuses a commission from YHWH to cry out against the wicked city of Nineveh by fleeing in the opposite direction. In response, YHWH intercepts Jonah at sea by causing a storm that threatens the lives of everyone aboard his boat. After attempts are made in vain to be freed from the storm, the solution is found as Jonah is hurled into the sea as judgement for his disobedience to his God.

It is common among scholars to simply divide the chapter according to the locations of the two scenes: an unspecified location on land (vv. 1–3), and at sea (vv. 4–16).<sup>1</sup> However, a more detailed breakdown is necessary in order to examine the use of the motif. Shimon Bar-Efrat explains that a plot is made up of individual incidents which are each used as building blocks to construct the larger narrative whole.<sup>2</sup> Each of the units in a narrative are typically arranged both chronologically (taking place one after another) and causally (each unit being the result of the previous unit and the cause of the following one).<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, there are four central

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of this breakdown of the text, see Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 200; Fretheim, “Jonah, Book Of,” 1478; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 41; Limburg, *Jonah*, 47; Sasson, *Jonah*, 18; Simon, *Jonah*, xxv; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 308.

<sup>2</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93–95.

<sup>3</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 95. Jan Fokkelman notes the chronological aspect of plot, but looks at the causal relationship slightly differently. For Fokkelman, there are two axes on which a plot is organized: the horizontal axis and the vertical axis. The horizontal is the chronological arrangement of a narrative, and the vertical is the vision of the narrator who includes only information which contributes to the thematic goal of the narrative. This would include the causal arrangement of the text, which would connect the events into one functional and unified story. The motif of life and death (as well as other motifs) would also fall into this category, as they too work together for thematic unity. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 78.

events that take place, each propelling the narrative through a motif of life and death. First, Jonah's commission and subsequent flight present the reader with two predicaments that both anticipate some form of death or life—Nineveh's judgement and Jonah's fear for Nineveh receiving mercy (vv. 1–3). Second, as YHWH begins judgement on Jonah at sea through the great storm, the sailors and Jonah react according to the value they place on life and death vv. 4–6). Third, Jonah is prompted to offer a confession that he is a worshipper of YHWH, the Sovereign of the world, highlighting YHWH's control over the storm (vv. 7–10). Fourth, and finally, Jonah's judgement is brought to a close as he is hurled overboard and dies (vv. 11–16). Each of these events builds upon the previous one and collectively produce a complex motif of life and death.

#### Importance of the Narrative's Dramatic Language

Before analyzing the chapter chronologically through each of these sections, there is one key concept that appears in all four of the narrative units that fosters the narrative environment that allows the life and death motif to thrive and should thus be addressed beforehand. Consistently throughout the chapter—and indeed, throughout the entire book—the narrator makes use of dramatic language. This is displayed through the repetition of the word גְּדוּל, as well as through the use of polarities throughout the text.<sup>4</sup> Looking particularly at Jonah 1, the narrator's repetition of גְּדוּל is used as a descriptor for the city of Nineveh (1:2; 3:2, 3), the wind (1:4), the storm (1:4, 12), and the sailors' fear (1:10, 16). By describing these elements of the story in this way, the narrator is creating an intense image for the reader, which becomes the catalyst for the

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<sup>4</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 89–111; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 189–91; Robson, "Undercurrents," 196.



life and death motif to be presented.<sup>5</sup> Polarities within the text function in much the same way; by presenting two contrasting concepts, the narrator crafts a story of opposites which allows for the presentation of the ultimate polarity in the text: life and death. In this way, the use of this dramatic language is not in itself a presentation of the motif, but it is producing the environment within the text for the motif to be presented.

One of the most significant ways in which polarities are displayed in this chapter is through the noticeable contrast in the use of directional language between YHWH and his will and Jonah's action. In v. 2, YHWH calls for Jonah to "get up" (קום) and go to Nineveh because their evil has "gone up" (עלה) to him. Jonah's response in v. 3 is to "get up" (קום), but then flees to Tarshish, which requires that he "go down" (ירד) to Joppa, then board a ship and "go down" (ירד) into it. When the storm hits in v. 5, Jonah is found to have "gone down" (ירד) into the innermost part of the ship, "laid down" (שכב) and "fallen asleep" (רדם).<sup>6</sup> The captain of the ship finds Jonah and asks him how he could "be asleep" (רדם) and urges him to "get up" (קום) in v. 6. Finally, when Jonah is thrown into the sea in v. 15, though it is not explicitly stated in the text as downward, it is nevertheless obvious that this action results in the furthering of the downward motion.

The initiation of Jonah's downward actions are prefaced with the phrase "from the presence of YHWH" (v. 3). This contrasts the commission of YHWH, which is motivated by the

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<sup>5</sup> Robson, "Undercurrents," 194–95; Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 60–67. For example, the word אבד ("perish"), which is uttered twice by the sailors (vv. 6, 14) contributes to the presentation of the motif and is an appropriate verb to use in this scenario as they respond to the *great* storm and out of their *great* fear—the amplified nature of the word is more suitable than מות ("death") in light of the adjectives describing the situation. As Robson states, "The incidents would need to be 'great' to elicit 'great' responses." The exciting circumstances provide opportunity for the life and death motif to flourish within the narrative. In this instance, the great response that embodies the motif is the cry of the sailors to have their lives spared, so that they would not perish; Robson, "Undercurrents," 195. Van Dam, "אבד," 223–25

<sup>6</sup> Though רדם is not a downward motioning verb, the vocalization of the word in this particular instance has a wordplay where "וירדם" evidently has the ירד sound in it. For more on this, see Magonet, "Jonah, Book Of," 938.

evil of Nineveh coming up “to [YHWH’s] presence.” Though Jonah is being called to work within the presence of YHWH, his actions continually move him further away, which ultimately results in his death as he is thrown into the sea.<sup>7</sup> Though the words קום, עלה, ירד and שכב (and םרד) do not specifically denote life or death, their use within this chapter is instrumental in fostering the motif of life and death by relating the downward motion with Jonah’s disobedience. By distancing Jonah from YHWH, the narrator is moving him closer and closer to his grave.

### **Two Unresolved Death Motifs in Jonah’s Commission and Flight**

The first three verses in Jonah 1 provide the reader with more questions than answers as YHWH commissions Jonah for the specific task of delivering a prophetic message to the great city of Nineveh. In his command, he says, “Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and cry out against it, for its evil has come up before me” (v. 2).<sup>8</sup> However, instead of moving in obedience or offering some form of rebuttal, Jonah mysteriously turns and flees. Despite the lack of answers given for what YHWH wishes to do with Nineveh or why Jonah runs away, two motifs of death are begun that will remain unresolved until later on in the narrative. First, the command YHWH gives has implications that judgement will come to Nineveh; and second, Jonah’s flight suggests some form of opposition towards Nineveh or the mission and presumes a desire to see the wicked city perish.

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<sup>7</sup> Magonet, “Jonah, Book Of,” 938.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations of the biblical text are the author’s translations from the BHS, unless otherwise noted.

### Death Motif in YHWH's Commission Against Nineveh

Looking first at YHWH's command, a death motif is implicitly established through the wording used to describe how Jonah must "cry out against" (קרא עליה, v. 2) the city of Nineveh. While the phrase itself does not denote death, there is precedent throughout Scripture for the phrase to be the introduction of judgement.<sup>9</sup> To an audience that is aware of YHWH's judgement through exposure to prophetic literature and Israelite culture, there would be little doubt in their minds that Nineveh is at risk of receiving harsh punishment.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that YHWH's command does not immediately infer that an irrevocable judgment has been made. Rather, at this point, the text has merely stated that the city is to be prophesied against, which may only heed a warning that judgement will come if repentance does not occur quickly.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the implication may be, it is evident that YHWH intends to take action concerning Nineveh's sins and Jonah does not wish to participate. This negative assumption about the prophetic material begins an underlying death motif that remains incomplete and contributes to the puzzling situation that immediately follows the command, which is that Jonah flees from the mission entirely. At this point, it should be noted that a correlation between judgment and death is being

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of this include 1 Kgs 13:2, Jer 25:29, and Ps 105:16; Simon, *Jonah*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> The specifics of the evil the city has committed are not specified in the text, but it is clear that whatever it was, it has caught the attention of the Almighty YHWH. The prophetic books of Nahum and Zephaniah both make it explicitly clear in their prophecies against Nineveh the kinds of evil they have done to receive punishment. Zephaniah 2:15 points to pride as being their downfall, and Nahum gives a number of reasons: The city is worthless (1:14), a ferocious lion (2:11–12), filled with lies and plunder (3:1), and has been faithlessly promiscuous towards other nations (3:4). These two texts highlight how corrupt and disturbing Nineveh was as a city, and James Limburg argues that when Nineveh is mentioned in Jonah, it should be read with these passages as the backdrop; Limburg, *Jonah*, 41–42. However, this is not entirely necessary; if Nineveh was truly as bad as other texts make it out to be, it would not require reference to other prophets in order for the audience to understand. Rather, YHWH's mention of Nineveh would have been immediately seen as shocking simply because of the impact that Nineveh had on the ancient world, in general. Of course, the modern reader of the text would need to rely more on other biblical texts to piece this together, though that would not necessarily been on the mind of the author. A cross-examination of YHWH's statement here and other prophetic works about Nineveh could produce interesting conclusions, though they would not aid in understanding the motif of life and death in Jonah. It is suffice to know that "the great city" has committed evil enough to deserve a special visit from one of YHWH's prophets.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 169; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 449–50.

formed, whereby the audience assumes some understanding of death or suffering to be connected to the judgement that comes from YHWH's hand.

### Death Motif in Jonah's Reaction

Jonah's reaction to this task is surprising, partly because he is disobedient to YHWH, and partly because he is running from an opportunity to see Nineveh, a well-known enemy of the ancient Israelites, dealt with. This unpredictable response demands a deeper investigation because, if understood properly it is an interpretive key for understanding the prophet's perceived emotional state, which is the source of other motifs of life and death throughout the book. However, this task is quite difficult as no proper explanation of the prophet's goal is ever given—an explanation of his motive is provided in 4:2, but what he attempts to accomplish by fleeing YHWH's presence is left to speculation and inference.<sup>12</sup> It is consensus among scholars that, in some way, Jonah's reaction is rooted in a lack of desire to have Nineveh shown mercy.<sup>13</sup> The reason for this assumption is twofold: (1) reading Jonah 4:2 retroactively into the situation asserts that Jonah takes issue with YHWH's merciful tendencies,<sup>14</sup> and (2) relating Jonah to the

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<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 204; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 41. Bar-Efrat draws a distinction between direct and indirect characterization by saying this of indirect characterization, "Indirect ways of shaping the characters are found in all of those external features, like speech or actions, which indicate something about the individual's inner state. The reader has to interpret these details and construct the character's mental and emotional make-up accordingly, a task which is not undertaken for the reader by the narrator." *Narrative Art*, 64. Such inferences must be undertaken in this situation with the prophet because the narrator offers no details about his inner state.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 131; Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 328; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 120–21; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 83; Sasson, *Jonah*, 295–97; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 328; Turner, "Jonah 3:10–4:1," 413; Wohlgeleinter, "Death Wish," 132. Limburg suggests that Jonah's actions are bent on putting as much distance between himself and YHWH or Nineveh; Limburg, *Jonah*, 42. Stuart furthers this suggestion by stating that in Jonah's absence, YHWH would choose a new candidate for the mission; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 452–53.

<sup>14</sup> This issue is addressed in depth in chapter 5 of this thesis.

prophet by the same name in 2 Kgs 14 offers a connection to ancient geo-politics that factors into Jonah's feelings. The second of these two requires further examination in order to flesh it out.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Connecting Jonah to 2 Kings 14***

According to the book of Kings, Jonah, son of Amittai lived and held prophetic office in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:25). Concurrent to Jeroboam's reign, which spanned from 786–746 BCE, was experiencing a 35-year period of weakness following the death of the King Adad-nirari III in 782.<sup>16</sup> During this time, Assyria was “[f]ragmented by internal revolts and weakened by massive Urartean aggression,”<sup>17</sup> leaving their southern side of the kingdom at a disadvantage. This is significant when acknowledging that the only noted portion of Jonah's ministry is that he was the prophetic voice of YHWH who brought about the expansion and restoration of the Israelite borders as far south as the Dead Sea (or the Sea of the Arabah) and as far north as Lebo-Hamath, including the recovery of the city of Damascus (1 Kgs 14:28), a city south of Lebo-Hamath that was previously held by the Assyrians.<sup>18</sup> Israel's expansion during Jeroboam's reign, then, takes advantage of this weakened state of their enemy's Western border. The specific goal of Jonah's prophetic mission, according to 2 Kgs 14, was to extend YHWH's mercy to the nation for “there was no help for Israel” (2 Kgs 14:26) and because he “had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under the heavens” (2 Kgs 14:27).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This thesis is focused on the study of the book of Jonah and so an extensive examination on 2 Kgs 14 would not be appropriate. Nevertheless, some understanding of the prophetic activity of Jonah in this historical account is necessary for understanding the present narrative's primary character.

<sup>16</sup> Bolen, “Jeroboam II,” 82; Grayson, “Assyria: Ashur-Dan II to Ashur-Nirari V,” 270–81; Grayson, “History of Assyria,” 743.

<sup>17</sup> Bolen, “Jeroboam II,” 83; Grayson, “Assyria: Ashur-Dan II to Ashur-Nirari V,” 276; Halo, “Qarqar to Carchemish,” 167; Hayes, *Amos*, 24; Horn and McCarter, “Divided Monarchy,” 159; Saggs, “The Assyrians,” 160.

<sup>18</sup> Bolen, “Jeroboam II,” 84; Tadmor, “Azriyau of Yaudi,” 239.

<sup>19</sup> Lissa Wray Beal argues that the success of the northern kingdom at this time is solely attributed to YHWH's remembrance of his promise to Israel in Exod 32:32–33 and his graciousness. She likewise emphasizes

From this information, it can be gathered that Jonah's prophetic mission to Israel was to bring a message of hope and the fruit of this mission included pushing against the borders of Assyria as Israel expanded northward. As such, Cohen argues that Jonah's flight is rooted in the fact that YHWH's commission jeopardizes Jonah's mission in Israel.<sup>20</sup> With YHWH sending him to Nineveh and he knowing that YHWH is a merciful God, Nineveh is likely to be spared, the implications of which are that the Assyrian nation remains in a place to cause great harm to Israel.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Jonah's flight is not simply in a disdain for Nineveh, but also (and more importantly) in fear of how the mission might negatively affect his own country.

To further support this conclusion, Cohen makes the argument that the swift chain of actions by Jonah in v. 3 in conjunction with v. 5, where it is clarified that Jonah has gone down into the ship and fallen asleep is "a clear clinical picture of despair and, more fundamentally, of depression."<sup>22</sup> This is made more evident in the fourfold appearance of the word חרה in Jonah 4, where Jonah's emotions are finally displayed. Though the word is primarily translated as "anger" throughout the Bible, it may also be rendered as "despondency,"<sup>23</sup> which is opted for by Cohen in this instance.<sup>24</sup> He observes that the biblical understanding of depression involves a degree of, or a resemblance to, anger against oneself.<sup>25</sup> This rendering shifts the perspective of Jonah's actions from being selfish and opposed to YHWH's will to being caught up in the thralls of a

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Jonah's prophetic word as a key element to the deliverance that Israel experiences, as Jeroboam is the cause of the problem; Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 421–22; see also Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 8:444.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 174.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 131; Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 328; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 120–21; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 328.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 170.

<sup>23</sup> Consider Gen 4:6 "And the Lord said unto Cain, why are you distressed (למה חרה לך) and why is your face fallen?" A synonym for חרה is כעס, which also bears a dual meaning of anger and despondency, such as Ps 31:10 or Eccl 1:18 and 7:3, where the word is understood to mean the latter; Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 171.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 170–72.

<sup>25</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 171.

depressive state. Even still, his flight is in direct disobedience to YHWH's command, which incurs guilt upon him.

In evaluating the commission YHWH gives to Jonah and Jonah's absurd reaction, there is made visible the beginnings of the motif of life and death. YHWH commands Jonah on a prophetic mission that anticipates judgement upon the Ninevites because of their wickedness, inserting the possibility of death into the narrative. Relating Jonah to the prophet of 2 Kgs 14 and reading Jonah 4 retroactively into the text, it is made evident that Jonah's flight from this mission of delivering a word of judgement comes from a fear of seeing Nineveh receive mercy, which has the potential to bring about disaster for Israel. This fear draws Jonah into a state of depression, which becomes the cause of further death motifs throughout the narrative. As the next section of the text unfolds, it is made evident to the reader that Jonah's flight condemns him as YHWH hurls a massive storm upon the sea in order to intercept him. However, as this section looks forward on the rest of the narrative, both of the death motifs initiated are left unresolved—Nineveh has not received judgement, and Jonah is still running.

### **Life and Death Evaluated in YHWH's Storm**

The narrative progresses as Jonah goes down to Joppa and boards a ship to Tarshish. In his fleeing, YHWH pursues his prophet by sending a storm that causes a great fear in the boat's crew. The motif of life and death is displayed in different ways through the reactions of each of the characters, as well as through the mere presence of the storm. The storm presents the characters with a situation that threatens death in v. 4a, and in turn, the characters display the

value they place on life through their reactions. This chronological and causal order of events all compiles together into a single yet diverse motif of life and death.<sup>26</sup>

### The Threat of Death in the Storm

Of first importance is the examination of the storm and how it provides the situational motif of death. Following in the dramatic nature of the text, YHWH “hurls” (טול, v. 4) a great wind upon the sea in order to stir up the great storm.<sup>27</sup> It is evident that טול is a keyword specifically for Jonah 1 because the word is only found 14 times throughout the Old Testament, with four occurrences found here in this chapter of Jonah (1:4, 5, 12, 15).<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word is associated with YHWH’s violent and decisive judgement against troublesome individuals.<sup>29</sup> As such, it is made evident that this storm is not meant as a means to merely stop Jonah, but to cast judgement upon him. This word is used also in the following verse as the sailors “hurl” their cargo into the sea, as well as in vv. 12 and 15 where Jonah is likewise “hurled” into the sea, both being actions that are made in an attempt to end the judgement. The severity of the storm is emphasized through the reaction of the boat which “threatened to break apart” (v. 4).<sup>30</sup> Sasson understands this idea of the ship threatening to break apart in v. 4 to be the

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<sup>26</sup> This section perfectly embodies Bar Efrat’s concept of chronological and causal units: v. 4a introduces the deadly storm, v. 4b–5 outline the reactions to the storm, and v. 6 takes one step deeper and portrays the captain’s reaction to Jonah; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Chisholm, “טול,” 359.

<sup>28</sup> Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 1:480.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of this are when YHWH “hurls” Shebna from his position of stewardship (Isa 22:17), when he “hurls” Judah and Jehoiachin into exile (Jer 16:13; 22:26, 28), and when he “hurls” Pharaoh into an open field to be devoured by scavengers (Ezek 32:4); Chisholm, “טול,” 359.

<sup>30</sup> That the boat as an inanimate object would take on animate characteristics is not unheard of within ancient Near Eastern literature. Jack Sasson highlights that there are a number of occasions in the biblical text where personification is used as a literary device, not least of which is in Isa 23:1, where the ships of Tarshish are called to “howl.” To aid in this dramatic moment, there are alliterative and onomatopoeic elements of “הַשִּׁבְיָה לְהַשְׁבֵּר” that also contribute to producing a dramatic presentation of the boat receiving the storm. According to Sasson, the vocalization of הַשִּׁבְיָה לְהַשְׁבֵּר is reminiscent of wood planks cracking against the pressure of the waves of the sea. For more on his analysis of this phrase, see Sasson, *Jonah*, 96–97.



height of the dramatic moment in the narrative when the calamity sent from above makes a tremendous impact as the waves and wind connect with the boat. The narrator is making clear the dire circumstances that have suddenly befallen the ship and its passengers.

#### Life and Death according to Each Character

The first characters to be introduced following the onset of the deadly storm are the ship's crew as they are hurling the cargo of the ship into the sea and praying to their gods to help them. On one level, these actions taken are a presentation of their physical reactions to the storm.

However, there is a deeper level to be acknowledged and that is the intrinsic value they place on life that motivates their response. By refusing to accept death as an outcome, the sailors demonstrate that they place great value on living.<sup>31</sup> Later on, v. 13 describes how the sailors rowed against the storm in protest to Jonah's instruction to throw him overboard, further demonstrating their value of life.

Jonah 1:6 shows the captain of the ship crying out to the prophet, "Arise, cry out to your god! Perhaps the god will consider us and we will not perish" (v. 6), which offers a glimpse of the sailors' perspective of the divine in the ancient world. According to the captain's words, deities are distant and busy beings that consider the happenings of humanity—or at least these lowly sailors—to be beneath their daily tasks and responsibility.<sup>32</sup> This command to cry out to

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<sup>31</sup> Robson, "Undercurrents" 209.

<sup>32</sup> There is a degree of piety in the captain's call to prayer that refrains from assuming any god would help them; Limburg, *Jonah*, 51. This same degree of piety will be later presented in the king of Nineveh's call to repentance, and will also contrast Jonah's exclamation of frustration when he *knew* that YHWH would be merciful.

the gods demonstrates how great of lengths the sailors will go through to save their own lives—their actions are bent on getting the attention of a god who might spare them a thought.<sup>33</sup>

The captain's command to Jonah includes the incentive for prayer that they might not **אבד** or "perish." The word **אבד** is found 184 times throughout the OT and is repeated four times throughout the book of Jonah (1:6, 14; 3:9; 4:10).<sup>34</sup> It's consistency throughout the Jonah narrative makes a key word for understanding the motif of life and death.<sup>35</sup> This word is most commonly associated with situations of judgement and destruction, so rather than simply use the word **מות** ("die") which denotes the loss of life, **אבד** implies both intentionality and hostility towards the object (in this case the sailors and Jonah) receiving death.<sup>36</sup> As mentioned above, this word is used emphatically, contributing to the dramatic element that saturates the scene. Furthermore, the connotations of the word are demonstrative of how undesirable death is for the sailors, be it their own death or the death of Jonah.

The strong wills and persistence of the sailors are dramatically contrasted by Jonah's apparent passivity as he slumbers below them. There are two lines of thought regarding why Jonah is asleep despite what is going on around him: he is either entirely indifferent towards the

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<sup>33</sup> The irony is potent throughout this section as the sailors struggle to get the attention of a god to save them from this natural disaster, yet the storm itself is far from a natural occurrence as YHWH has stirred it up specifically because he is involved very intimately in the sailors' situation through Jonah. Their lack of understanding about the divine progressively shifts throughout this chapter, moving from ignorance of YHWH's existence (vv. 5–6) to identifying him as a deity (v. 10) to crying out to him for help (v. 14) to sacrificing and making vows to him (v.16). However, in this present section, the irony is almost humorous as the sailors' actions are in vain, not because the gods won't spare them a thought, but because *the* God is entirely present in the situation.

<sup>34</sup> Wigram, *Englishman's Concordance*, 1:8–9.

<sup>35</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 118; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 212.

<sup>36</sup> Van Dam, "אבד" 224. It is possible to understand the captain's word usage here as an acknowledgement that the storm is of a divine nature, however there is not enough evidence within the text to suggest that. The rest of his statement, which harbours a lot of doubt about their situation does not assume any divine interaction. Additionally, in the previous verse, the sailors are depicted as hurling the cargo overboard in an attempt to *lighten the ship*—such actions would not be necessary if they were aware of the situation being one of judgement. Ironically, in v. 14, the sailors are fully aware that the storm is judgement for Jonah and now use the same word to accurately describe their situation.

storm and using sleep as a tactic to retreat from the chaos,<sup>37</sup> or he is so caught up in the thralls of depression that he is unaware or unresponsive to what is going on.<sup>38</sup> Both of these ideas are plausible explanations, though the former invites criticism and disdain for the prophet while the latter invites sympathy. Magonet offers insight that clarifies the second as the more appropriate interpretation.<sup>39</sup> The verb used to describe Jonah's slumber is םרד, which is "to sleep deeply" (vv. 5, 6). Magonet compares the use of this word to its other appearances throughout scripture and concludes that the word is used either in situations where the subject is nearing death (Judg 4:21; 1 Sam 26:12; 19:15; Ps 76:7) or where the subject is about to receive revelation (Gen 2:21; 15:12; Job 4:13; 33:15; Dan 8:18; 10:9).<sup>40</sup> The first of these two associations is more applicable to this situation since Jonah does not experience a revelation in this scene. Furthermore, both Jonah and Elijah sleep (1 Kgs 19:5; ךשׁ) while experiencing their bout of deep depression; this parallel in addition to the fact that both prophets offer death wishes in their narratives (1 Kgs 19:4; Jonah 4:3, 8) verifies that Jonah's deep sleep is meant to be a signal of either his desire for death or his nearness to it.<sup>41</sup>

By analyzing the reactions that each of the characters have to the storm YHWH produces, it is evident that the motif of life and death is not only present throughout this section of the text, but is in fact its backbone.<sup>42</sup> The sudden onset of the storm is a deadly situation meant as

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<sup>37</sup> Kahn, "Analysis of Jonah," 90; Simon, *Jonah*, 9; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 312.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 170.

<sup>39</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 67–69.

<sup>40</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 67–69.

<sup>42</sup> Limburg identifies three instances within the Jonah narrative where matters of life and death are central: in this section where the captain expresses his desire to not perish, when the sailors cry out to not perish at the death of Jonah (v. 14), and when the King of Nineveh hopes that YHWH will change his mind so that they will not perish (3:9). Specifically, he states that the book "deals with matters of life and death. Three times that concern is expressed." His justification for this assertion is based on the utterance of the word אבד—which he is right to acknowledge—but he is too narrow-minded in his acknowledgement of what centralizes life and death. The arguments made for this section of the text recognize that it is not simply this one keyword, but the overall situation that centralizes the motif of life and death; Limburg, *Jonah*, 51.

judgement for Jonah that the characters must collectively and individually overcome. As they react, their perceptions on the value of life are made known: the sailors collectively fear death and actively work against it in order to preserve their lives and Jonah's, whereas Jonah accepts death and draws near to it as he falls into a deep sleep in the depths of the boat. These contrasting reactions display either side of the motif of life and death as each party yearns for life or death, respectively.

### **YHWH as Creator and Sovereign Over Life and Death**

The unrelenting storm forces the sailors to re-evaluate their tactics—despite their persistent prayers and their attempts to fight against the storm, chaos continues to ensue around them. As is a common practice in the ancient Near East, the group casts lots to determine who is at fault for the storm.<sup>43</sup> The lots determine that Jonah is the guilty individual and the sailors demand to know more about who he is and how to stop the storm, prompting Jonah to confess his own identity as well as YHWH's and that he must be thrown overboard in order to end the storm. Throughout this section, the motif of life and death is displayed through Jonah's confession that centralizes the source of life and death around YHWH by identifying him as the Creator and Sovereign of the world.

The epithet that is given to YHWH in Jonah's confession is "the God of heaven... who made the sea and the dry land" (v. 9). The first component of this statement is an ancient epithet

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<sup>43</sup> Casting lots is a practice of determining the will of the gods—or in the case of Israel, determining the will of YHWH. Proverbs 16:33 says "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is YHWH's alone." Typically, the lots, which are pebbles of some sort are tossed into a concealed location, such as someone's cloak or into a bag or container and then drawn out (Num 33:54; Lev 16:9). For more information on casting lots, see Sasson, *Jonah*, 108–110. Also, note that the change in tactics appears to be the result of a change in perception of their circumstances; they no longer see the storm as a natural disaster that they need saving from, but rather that the calamity has been sent to them on account of somebody's actions.

given to YHWH that regained popularity in the Persian period and places him as the highest God or the chief God.<sup>44</sup> This title is one that carries with it the assumption that YHWH is the source of all power and authority. The second component reiterates this sovereign power over all things by explicating that he is the one who created both the land and the sea.<sup>45</sup> By introducing YHWH in this way, Jonah has identified him as the cause of the storm—and by association, the controller of their fates—by attributing the sea’s creation to him.<sup>46</sup> The reaction of the sailors also verifies this as they cry out in fear, “What have you done?” (v. 10) in recognition that Jonah’s actions are to blame for their peril. The intensity of the life and death situation they are in is now clear to them: the storm is upon them as a form of judgement from YHWH, the Creator. This has been evident to the audience since v. 4, but the sailors are only coming to the realization now.

### **Death as Judgement for Jonah**

Now understanding the reality of the situation they are in, the sailors seek a remedy for the situation by enquiring of Jonah, “What should we do to you so that the sea will calm down against us?” (v. 11). In response to their demand, Jonah gives the instruction that he must be thrown overboard (v. 12). Some scholars understand Jonah’s command to be tossed to the sea as a desperate, final attempt at fleeing from the presence of YHWH.<sup>47</sup> The evidence above that

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<sup>44</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 209. This information is useful for dating the book of Jonah to the exilic or post-exilic period. Though it would sidetrack from the present argument to explore how this affects the dating of the text, it is nonetheless interesting to note.

<sup>45</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> YHWH’s control over the sea becomes increasingly important in Jonah 2 as the prophet’s descent into Sheol is recounted through depictions of the water acting in a hostile manner towards him. Chapter 3 interacts with this concept more fully.

<sup>47</sup> Uriel Simon offers an interesting take on this perspective where Jonah is both admitting defeat in his flight from YHWH but continues to choose not to go to Nineveh and so opts to die instead. In this way, there is continued rebellion and his descent continues intentionally away from YHWH, but his motive has changed from

argues for Jonah's depression as a motivation for fleeing could support this idea. However, there are two pieces of evidence that suggest otherwise. First, Jonah specifically uses the key word טול ("hurl") to describe what must be done to him. Second, the sailors cry out to YHWH before throwing Jonah overboard and in this cry they recognize both the weight of their involvement in the situation and that YHWH approves of their actions. All of these evidences work together to form a particular motif of death, and that is the judgement of Jonah.

#### The Use of טול in Jonah 1:12 and 14

The narrator's use of the key word טול to describe Jonah's removal from the boat is quite intentional, as it ties in with the description of how YHWH began the storm and how the sailors were emptying the cargo from the ship. As mentioned above, טול is frequently used in connection with YHWH's decisive judgement against individuals.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Jonah's request to be thrown overboard maybe read as a statement of his judgement. Allen argues that Jonah recognizes the sinfulness in fleeing and so must submit himself to YHWH's judgement.<sup>49</sup> In his confession just previous to this instruction, Jonah demonstrates his loyalty to YHWH, suggesting that this instruction as following suit in submission and loyalty. The narrator's use of טול works well as a bookend for the beginning and ending of Jonah's judgement.<sup>50</sup>

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fleeing to Tarshish and instead, simply dying; Simon, *Jonah*, 13. This concept is fascinating but unlikely due to the fact that if it were only Jonah's idea to die, then YHWH would not have worsened the storm to prevent the sailors from heading back to shore. YHWH plays an active role in bringing about Jonah's death.

<sup>48</sup> Chisholm, "טול," 359.

<sup>49</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 211.

<sup>50</sup> The sailors, apparently unsatisfied with this course of action (and demonstrating the value they place on life, as stated above) attempt to row back to shore. However, the storm worsens, which must be understood as an act of YHWH, if YHWH is indeed the one in control of the storm through the great wind. In preventing them from getting to shore, YHWH's action is verifying Jonah's words.

### Motif in the Cry of the Sailors

With a great deal of reluctance, the sailors finally oblige to throw Jonah overboard, but not before crying out to YHWH to forgive them if they happen to be making the wrong decision. Specifically, they cry out, “Please, O YHWH, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not bring us guilt over innocent blood; for you, O YHWH, have done what is pleasing to you” (v. 14). In this statement, they confirm that they have understood YHWH’s will through Jonah’s command. Yet, a degree of doubt remained within them because they did not wish to cast judgement upon Jonah—they knew that they could not make the decision on whether or not Jonah should live, so they finally commit to understanding Jonah’s word as truth, beg YHWH for mercy and they toss him overboard.<sup>51</sup>

Three significant words appear in the cry of the sailors that emphasize their understanding of this situation and the gravity of their role in Jonah’s judgement. The first of these has already been addressed above, which is the key word אָבָד. Fitting for the request they are making before YHWH, they ask not to perish in judgement from hurling Jonah overboard.<sup>52</sup> Following closely along is the second significant term: דָּם, which means “blood.” More specifically, it is used within the context of violence, bloodshed, and murder.<sup>53</sup> Though, this word is not a key word according to the definition laid out in this thesis due to its lack of repetition, it still contributes to the situational motif by highlighting the severity of the situation; spilling innocent blood throughout the Hebrew Bible is a very serious matter and such an action

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<sup>51</sup> Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets*, 315; Simon, *Jonah*, 14; Watts, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 81.

<sup>52</sup> Van Dam, “אָבָד,” 224.

<sup>53</sup> Trebilco, “דָּם,” 963–64. Examples of this association with violence and murder: Hos 4:2; 2 Sam 16:7; Ps 5:6[7]; 1 Kgs 2:9; Ezek 5:17; Joel 2:30–31[3:3–4].

demands the life of the perpetrator as atonement.<sup>54</sup> The third significant word is נפש (“life” or “breath”).<sup>55</sup> At its very roots, this word simply means “breath,” though it commonly means “life,” or even “living creature.”<sup>56</sup> Using the context clues within this situation, it is clear that the sailors are speaking about Jonah’s life. While it is a fairly commonly used word—appearing 754 times throughout the Hebrew Bible—its connection to the situational motif it is a part of and its recurrence throughout Jonah (1:14; 2:8; 4:3) qualifies it as a key word.<sup>57</sup> With Jonah’s judgement being the looming situation at-hand, there is reason to identify this word as a key word as his life is the very object being negotiated in his judgement.

Together, these three keywords demonstrate two realities that the sailors are acknowledging by following through with Jonah’s instructions. First, they understand that they will be killing him, demonstrated through their concern for his דם on their hands. Second, they understand the moral consequences involved in the matter—they would be enacting judgement upon him by taking his life, and if wrong in their convictions, they would be casting judgement upon themselves. By stating “for you, O YHWH, have done what is pleasing to you” (v. 14), the sailors are acknowledging that they are trusting Jonah’s words to be a command given not by the prophet, but by YHWH through the prophet.

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<sup>54</sup> No doubt, the greatest example of this in Scripture is Gen 4:10 with the brutal murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Other examples include Num 35:19, 21; Deut 32:43; 2 Kg 9:7; Ps 9:12[13]. Interestingly enough, Ezek 3:17–19 and Ps 51:13–15[15–17] both express situations where someone is able to witness to sinners and offer them a chance to seek repentance, that way if the sinner continues in their path, the one who witnessed to them is free of guilt in the death that results from their sin because they had forewarned them. In a similar way, the sailors in the present narrative heard Jonah’s request and denied to follow through with it by attempting to row back to shore, implying the supposed folly in his request. When rowing was impossible, they offered up this prayer as a means of showing that they had done their due diligence in trying to prevent Jonah’s death and are left with no other option.

<sup>55</sup> Fredericks, “נפש,” 133.

<sup>56</sup> נפש should not be intertwined with a later Greek understanding of psychology, which imports the idea of a “soul.” Though the word may denote the innermost part of an individual, it is more connected to the idea of biological life force than the psychological mind or sense of intrinsic identity; Fredericks, “נפש,” 133.

<sup>57</sup> Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 2:829–33.



As verification of all the above evidence in favor of Jonah's instruction being YHWH's will, the sea ceases its raging as soon as Jonah is thrown overboard (v. 15). In response to the chaotic event that they just experienced, the sailors offer sacrifices and make vows before YHWH (v. 16).<sup>58</sup> The narrator means to draw attention to the fact that, just as Jonah demonstrated his acknowledgment of YHWH's power by submitting to death, the pagan sailors had acknowledged their salvation from death by the power and mercy of YHWH. In this, it is evident that there is a connection between mercy and life, as well as judgement and death—as far as this narrative is concerned, life and death are the results of YHWH giving mercy or judgement, respectively.

### **Conclusions on Motif of Life and Death in Jonah 1**

From the outset of this narrative, the text is saturated with the motif of life and death. Jonah's commission and flight initiates the motif by presenting the reader with the upcoming judgement of Nineveh but also with the disobedience of Jonah, which is rooted in his fear that YHWH would be merciful to his enemy and results in a depressive state of fleeing. YHWH's interception of Jonah's boat prompts reactions from the sailors and from Jonah that demonstrate the value they place on their own lives and on the lives of each other. Jonah's confession of faith highlights YHWH as the Creator and Sovereign of the world, thus placing the control of life and

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<sup>58</sup> There is no articulation on when or how they did this—it is not specified whether they sent up offerings on their boat or returned to Joppa and then visit the temple in Jerusalem. Neither is there any elaboration to the types of vows made—whether they were meant to resemble full conversion to a Yahwistic faith or simply that they were committed to including YHWH among their personal pantheon of deities to pray to. Stuart suggests that it is most likely that the sailors only committed themselves to bringing regular sacrifices to YHWH in thanksgiving and that a full conversion is not what is being described. The text does not say, for that is not what the narrator wishes to get across; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 465.

death in his hands. Finally, the sailors acknowledge that YHWH wishes for judgement to fall upon Jonah and they throw him overboard to his death.

Three key words are presented in this chapter that aide in the production of the motif of life and death. The use of טול (“hurl,” vv. 4, 5, 12, 15) as well as אבד (“perish,” vv. 6, 14) both reinforce the idea that YHWH’s pursuit of Jonah is, in fact, his judgement, as both words are primarily used in texts referring to divine judgement. Furthermore, אבד is a word synonymous to “die,” which directly connects it to the general motif of life and death. The word נפש (“life,” v. 14) is used in connection to Jonah’s death as the sailors prepare to throw him overboard. In addition to the recurring key words, the word רדם (“sleep deeply,” vv. 5, 6) was acknowledged as significant, as it is a word used to indicate that someone is nearing death, which the author uses to foreshadow Jonah’s fate in the scene. דם (“blood,” v. 14) is also acknowledged because of its connection to the situational motif of fulfilling Jonah’s judgement.

Individually, these key words and situations present instances where the motif of life and death are present, but collectively, they produce a complex narrative that demonstrates the sovereignty of YHWH over his creation. This chapter of the narrative prepares the reader for more interactions with the concept of life and death, including dealing with the issue of Jonah’s apparent death after being flung from the boat. Jonah’s emotional state is set up in this chapter and will play a significant role in the rest of the narrative, particularly in chapter 4 as Jonah and YHWH argue over the resolution of Nineveh’s judgement.

## CHAPTER 3: MOTIFS IN JONAH 2:1–11 (HB)

### **Introduction and Overview of Jonah 2**

Much like the previous chapter, Jonah 2 presents the reader with an intense and dramatic experience—in this case, the descent of the prophet into the depths of creation through the form of a psalm that recounts the experience. The previous chapter is concluded by the sailors hurling Jonah overboard and then offering sacrifices and vows to YHWH in response to his display of sovereignty. Now, the second chapter opens up with a redirection from the worshipping sailors to the sinking Jonah. The motif of life and death is implemented to describe Jonah’s predicament as he is interacting with his death beneath the waves and as YHWH performs his miracle of deliverance through a great fish. More specifically, the motif presents itself through the presentation of Jonah being in the belly of the fish for “three days and three nights” (v. 2), the depiction of Jonah drowning as both judgement and a burial ritual (vv. 3–7a), and YHWH’s decision action to save Jonah from Sheol (vv. 7b–8). This implementation of the motif guides and prepares the reader for the final verses of the psalm, where the prophet confesses that “salvation belongs to YHWH” (v. 10).

In the previous chapter, Jonah 1 was assessed according to the four major events that form the narrative chronologically.<sup>1</sup> While this was beneficial for the assessment of that chapter, a different approach must be undertaken in this chapter for two reasons. First, there is a transition

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<sup>1</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93–95; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 78.

from prose to poetry between vv. 2 and 3 and from poetry to prose between vv. 10 and 11.<sup>2</sup> Due to the stylistic nature of Hebrew poetry in general as well as in this passage, assessing the narrative by its chronological events is more difficult than by its stanzas.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Bar-Efrat's concept of individual units is simply taken to the next level to see groupings of units that work towards depicting the same scenario within a larger narrative.<sup>4</sup> Second is simply because the motif is only present in some parts of the narrative, as demonstrated through the breakdown above.

### Note on Dramatic Language in Jonah 2

The utilization of dramatic language and scenarios that was instrumental in presenting the motif in Jonah 1 continues in Jonah 2, though it manifests itself differently in each of the relevant sections, unlike in the former chapter where similar language was found throughout. There is only one use of the adjective גָּדוֹל in the narrative which is used to define the fish in 2:1, though the word certainly does provide a dramatic element to the narrative and propels the motif, which

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive outline of the use of poetry within prose, see Sasson, *Jonah*, 161–67. It is of worth to note that scholars have questioned and assessed the psalm's placement within the book of Jonah. A number of valid issues are addressed concerning its inclusion in the original composition of the book. However, this issue is one that sidetracks the current study and should therefore be avoided delving into. It is assumed in this study that the psalm is integral to the overall structure of the narrative. For more on this topic, see Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 39–54; Simon, *Jonah*, 15–16; Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 106–7; Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 132–44. Also, it is important to note a distinction in language, especially for this chapter of the study. To avoid confusion, the term “narrative” is used to speak of the overarching story that is being told throughout the entirety of the book of Jonah, including Jonah 2. When speaking of the style of writing employed to convey the *narrative*, the terms “prose” and “poetry” are used. Alastair Hunter explains that poetry is very much capable of telling stories, just as prose does. In fact, the dramatic language used in poetry is quite suitable for depicting intense scenarios, such as the one currently under examination; Hunter, “Jonah from the Whale,” 153–54.

<sup>3</sup> Delineating an exact definition of a stanza is a difficult matter, as there are no fixed rules provided for identifying them; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 117. However, it is typical that stanzas are divided according to subject matter, which is the case in this study; Lucas, “Poetics,” 524.

<sup>4</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93–95. Fokkelman outlines the distinction between an action and sub-action that is helpful in understanding this. An action, as he states “goes hand in hand with the notion of grasping the story at a glance or making a summary,” whereas the sub-actions are the individual and minute details that work together to form the action. In this way, Fokkelman's “sub-actions” are comparable to Bar-Efrat's “units”; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 73.

is discussed below.<sup>5</sup> Beyond this word usage, there is a notable dramatic quality to the way in which Jonah portrays his descent to the netherworld. The language employed identifies non-human elements—particularly water—as being active agents participating the death of the prophet.

Just as dramatic language continues to play a fundamental role in expressing the motif of life and death, so too does the use of polarities, particularly in vv. 3–8. In these verses of the psalm, there is a meaningful contrast built between the downward motion of Jonah into the netherworld and the upward focus of his gaze towards YHWH’s holy temple.<sup>6</sup> By mapping the chasm between the netherworld and the heavenly abode through this polarity, Jonah’s psalm highlights the reality of death being a separation from YHWH and his life-giving provision. In this way, death and life are anchored to the specific locations of Sheol and the temple. Within the Israelite tradition, the temple is symbolic of the ordered cosmos (See Ps 78:69; Isa 66:1–2) This prompts the discussion among scholars about which temple is meant to be envisioned in this psalm: the temple in Jerusalem or the heavens? Jonah speaks of “seeing” the temple again in v. 5, which would likely mean the building in Jerusalem. Later in the psalm, however, Jonah speaks of his prayer reaching YHWH “in [his] holy temple” (v. 8), which some would argue is the heaven abode. However, this argument is not as essential as it may first appear because the Jerusalem temple is meant to be symbolic of YHWH’s heavenly abode and so, in some ways, to

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<sup>5</sup> Sasson notes that the use of גָּדוֹל in this instance is less interested in attempting to construct an image of a believably massive fish that is capable of swallowing a human whole. Rather, its purpose is to include the creature in the “aggrandizing” of objects in the narrative (as witnessed in the previous chapter and throughout the narrative), and providing a means by which to explain the salvation of Jonah; Sasson, *Jonah*, 149–50.

<sup>6</sup> Tribble mentions that life and death are tied to these motions of ascending and descending, with the middle-ground being the belly of the fish. As she says, “The belly of the fish contains the polarities of life and death without digesting them.” By this, she is asserting that the very notion of the belly of the fish being the vehicle in Jonah’s journey sets it as this liminal space between life and death, Sheol and temple; Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 159.

speak of one is to speak of them both.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Jonah's downward focus in vv. 3–4 and 6–7a and upward focus in vv. 5, 7b–8 can be characterized as directed toward death and life, respectively.

### **The Great Fish as Salvation from Death**

Understanding the role of the great fish in the narrative sections of Jonah 2 is the interpretive key for the entire chapter and bears significance on how the motif of life and death is applied in the psalm. The text simply states that “YHWH appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah” (v. 1), that he was “in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights” (v. 1), and afterward, the fish “vomited Jonah onto dry land” (v. 11); aside from these details, nothing is said of the fish's purpose. However, by looking at evidence elsewhere in the chapter, a more nuanced understanding of the fish as a vessel of salvation is possible.<sup>8</sup> What follows is the evidence for this argument and its contribution to the motif of life and death.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the verb conjugations used in the psalm are *perfect*, which typically denotes past tense, meaning that at the time the psalm is given in the belly of the fish, Jonah already understands himself to be saved.<sup>9</sup> Now, this alone is not conclusive, as it is well attested that verb conjugations in Hebrew poetry are less indicative of tense than in prose.<sup>10</sup> However, given that there are two occasions within the text where a

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<sup>7</sup> For more on understanding the distinctions and correlations between the two temples, see Anderson, “Jonah's Re-Creation,” 183; Kahn, “Analysis,” 91; Limburg, *Jonah*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> See Benckhuysen, “Revisiting the Psalm,” 10. In exploring the question of the psalm's placement in the original composition of Jonah, Amanda Benckhuysen argues that the interpretation of the fish's role in the narrative is dependent on the information gathered from the psalm and is in-line with the theme of the book that salvation comes from YHWH.

<sup>9</sup> Benckhuysen argues that “Jonah is voicing his thanksgiving for God's gracious and miraculous rescue from within the belly of the fish. The implication here is that the fish, rather than serving as a source of Jonah's distress or a punishment for his disobedience, is the vehicle of his salvation”; “Revisiting the Psalm,” 10. This view is shared also with Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 184–85; Landes, “Kerygma,” 12.

<sup>10</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 163.

previous prayer of lament is referenced and that the psalm is offering thanksgiving, it is well within reason to expect that the fish is instrumental in Jonah's rescue.<sup>11</sup>

Now, looking at the content of the psalm, there is also evidence that the visual imagery being employed suggest that the fish has salvific purposes. Jonah's description of his circumstances portrays drowning (vv. 4, 6, 7; HB), which is a metaphor used in the psalms to depict emotional, spiritual, and physical distress.<sup>12</sup> However, given the context in which this psalm is presented, it is appropriate also to understand the drowning as a literal description of Jonah's actual experience—in this way the visual imagery is not merely a figurative comparison, but a description of Jonah's physical experience.<sup>13</sup> While it is common for the concept of either dying or drowning to be used in other psalms metaphorically, it cannot be overlooked that the previous chapter of Jonah ended with the prophet being thrown overboard into the sea without any mention of his retrieval (1:15). With this being the case, the content of Jonah's distress is better suited to describe his circumstances outside of the fish rather than inside and the salvation he speaks of is one that he has experienced, not one he anticipates to experience.<sup>14</sup>

This imagery of the watery deep is also symbolic of chaos and lack of order—a “de-creation” of sorts. Dominic Rudman offers explanation of this with the following:

In the flood narrative, [the chaos waters] denote the reversal of creation. For the writers of the OT, who saw the formation of the individual as part of God's ongoing creative activity (Jer 1,5; 49,5; Zech 12,1), and who likewise saw death as a reversal of creation (Gen 2,7; 3,19; Qoh 12,7), the deep would be an appropriate image to denote the

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<sup>11</sup> Landes, “Kerygma,” 15. Jonah 2:3 states “I cried out to YHWH from my affliction and he answered me; I pleaded for help from the belly of Sheol and you heard me” and 2:8 says “when my very being was fading in front of me, YHWH remembered me, and my prayer came to you in your holy temple.” This would solve the issue regarding the lack of repentance or lament concerning YHWH and Jonah's quarrel in Jonah 1—in calling out to YHWH, an appeal has already been made and YHWH has accepted it.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 185; Landes, ““Kerygma,” 30.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 184–85; Benckhuysen, “Revisiting the Psalm,” 10.

<sup>14</sup> It would require a rather arrogant understanding of the prophet to assume that he thanks YHWH for saving him before he has actually been saved. Such a view would undermine the theme of YHWH's sovereignty that is being displayed throughout the rest of the narrative by having YHWH follow through with Jonah's expectation for salvation.

cessation of life. To be alive is to be part of the created world: to be dead is to be uncreated.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Jonah is not simply drowning, but reverting from life and being undone.<sup>16</sup> This is tremendously significant to how the motif of life and death is understood because it breaches the boundaries of the physical world and now deals with Jonah's life on a cosmic level.

The final piece of evidence that determines the salvific role of the great fish is to look at the phrase "three days and three nights."<sup>17</sup> Though it is possible to read this as a mere statement of linear time that Jonah spent dwelling inside the fish—and indeed, there is nothing in the narrative to suggest that the narrator is not meaning for the audience to understand this phrase in such a way—there is evidence that the fish is transporting Jonah from death to life.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have made compelling connections between "three days and three nights" in this narrative and its meaning in another ancient Near Eastern myth, *The Descent of Inanna to the Nether World* as the time it takes to commute between the overworld and the netherworld.<sup>19</sup> As the myth goes, the Sumerian goddess Inanna has a mission to go down to the underworld and she instructs her servant Ninshubur to call out a lament to the other gods after she had reached the underworld to ensure her return. Though the length of time she would need to arrive at the gates of the netherworld is not specified in her instructions, Ninshubur commences the lament after *three*

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<sup>15</sup> Rudman, "Water Imagery," 244. Nogalski makes a similar point by connecting the watery language of Sheol (v. 3), the deep, the heart of the sea, currents, breakers, waves (v. 4), sea, and primeval waters (v. 6) to images of death and chaos; Nogalski, *Book of the Twelve*, 427.

<sup>16</sup> This process of de-creation may be alluded to in 2:8, where Jonah says "when my very being was fading in front of me, YHWH remembered me..." Perhaps the author is intending to give off an image of Jonah actually fading away, though it cannot be made certain.

<sup>17</sup> The concept of three days as a measurement appears twice within the narrative: here in v. 1 in relation to Jonah's length of stay in the fish, and again in 3:3 when denoting the size of Nineveh. Any potential parallels between these two occurrences will be addressed in chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup> Uriel Simon understands "three days" as an idiom that denotes a length of time that is long, but not too long and that the inclusion of "and three nights" is used emphatically to highlight the slow passage of time in the consciousness of the prophet; Simon, *Jonah*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> See Landes, "Three Days and Three Nights," 446–50. See also, Tribble, "Jonah," 505; Sasson, 152–54; Ackerman, "Satire and Symbolism," 213–46.



*days and three nights.*<sup>20</sup> Such an interpretation of the phrase is convincing in Jonah 2:1 when considering the fact that language of the underworld such as שְׁאוֹל (“Sheol,” v. 3) and שְׁחַת (“The Pit,” v. 7) employed in the psalm that follows it. As such, the fish is appointed by YHWH to act as a vessel to transport Jonah from the land of the dead to the land of the living.

Using the information stated above, there is sufficient grounds to state that the fish is meant to be interpreted as a tool of salvation from death. While it is not explicitly stated in Jonah 1, the context of Jonah 2 determines that Jonah had drowned after having been hurled from the boat by the sailors. While sinking into the netherworld, Jonah cried out to YHWH in repentance and petitioned him to rescue him from death, to which YHWH mercifully assisted by appointing the fish to retrieve the prophet.<sup>21</sup> This fish then becomes a liminal abode between death and life for Jonah. Though the text does not explicitly mention life or death in these opening two verses of Jonah 2, the connection to the Sumerian myth and the references to the underworld in the psalm implies that the fish is dealing in matters of life and death.

### **Death Motif in Jonah’s Drowning and Ritual Burial**

From inside the great fish, Jonah offers up a psalm of thanksgiving to YHWH for rescuing him. In this first section of the psalm, the prophet outlines the suffering that he experienced from beneath the waves. As mentioned above, the motif of life and death is experienced through the dramatic imagery of drowning employed by Jonah. Throughout the psalm, there are four

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<sup>20</sup> Landes, “Three Days and Three Nights,” 448–49.

<sup>21</sup> The degree to which Jonah had died is up for debate. Present in some ancient Near Eastern cultures was the idea that resurrection was still possible within three days of a person’s passing. However, there is little support of such a concept in Old Testament literature. While this is worth consideration in connection to the current application of the “three days” phrase, Landes satisfactorily argues that this idea of resurrection within three days is not what is meant by the author’s use of the phrase; “Three Days and Three Nights,” 446–47; cf. Morris, “Resurrection,” 1010.

occasions where water takes action against Jonah (found in vv. 4 and 6; HB),<sup>22</sup> as well as four other instances where references are made that are adjacent to or are specifically associated with his drowning experience (found in vv. 5–8).<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the dramatic drowning imagery, there are four significant words/phrases that are implemented that work together to produce a situational motif of life and death. First, there are three references of the underworld, beginning with שאול (“Sheol,” v. 3), which appears 66 times throughout the Hebrew Bible.<sup>24</sup> In addition to שאול, the phrase הארץ ברחיה בעדי לעולם (“The land where bars are around me forever,” v. 7; HB) and the word שחת (“The Pit,” v. 7) appear, the latter of which appears 23 times throughout the Hebrew Bible and the former that has no direct equivalent.<sup>25</sup> Each of these words is referencing the same location but in different terms and while this could be used as grounds to argue for a word-motif, it is more helpful to understand that these three references contribute to the situational motif of Jonah’s descent by identifying the final destination of Jonah’s judgement and death. This is further strengthened by the two references to the temple (vv. 5 and 8, mentioned 80 times in the Hebrew Bible) in which is implied as the source of life and is illustrated as the polar opposite of the netherworld, as mentioned above.<sup>26</sup> Together, these four significant words/phrases provide the reader with a map of the playing field, where Jonah is sinking down to one in death, but looking to the other for life.

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<sup>22</sup> In v. 4, water is the subject of two verbs, “encircle” (סבב) and “pass over” (עבר). In v. 6, again water is the subject of two verbs, “engulf” (אפף) and “encircle” (סבב).

<sup>23</sup> The following statements are made throughout the psalm that contribute to the dramatic portrayal of Jonah’s drowning: “I have been expelled from your sight” (v. 5), “weeds twisted onto my head” (v. 6), “I went down to the base of the mountains” (v. 7), “When my very existence was fading in front of me” (v. 8). Each of these statements embodies some aspect of the drowning experience, be it the downward motion into the sea/away from YHWH’s presence, interaction with elements of the sea (the seaweed), or the result of death.

<sup>24</sup> Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 2:1220.

<sup>25</sup> Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 2:1253–54.

<sup>26</sup> Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 1:361.

In the opening verse of the psalm, Jonah says “I cried out to YHWH from my affliction and he answered me; I pleaded for help from the belly of Sheol and you heard me” (v. 3). That Jonah identifies the location from which he cries out as Sheol is significant. Within the Hebrew Bible, there is a lack of consistency on how Sheol is portrayed, but what is mainly evident is that it is the conception of an underworld where humans would go following their death.<sup>27</sup> Not only is Jonah in Sheol, but he is within its deepest recesses—its “belly.”<sup>28</sup> This connection to the land of the dead is perhaps one of the most potent illustrations of the motif of life and death—or more specifically, the motif of death—in the psalm because it is the location of Jonah’s suffering prior to his rescue and it is made synonymous with his affliction.<sup>29</sup>

To describe his death, Jonah says “You threw me into the deep, into the heart of the sea, and your currents encircled me; all of your breakers and waves passed over me” (v. 4). Progressing with his recollection of his time under the water, Jonah identifies YHWH as the one who threw him from the ship into the water (v. 4).<sup>30</sup> This shift from the sailors being the ones to throw him overboard to YHWH gives an inside perspective to Jonah’s mind where he

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<sup>27</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 170–71. Luis Stadelmann provides a complete overview of the Hebrew perspective of the world, which includes their conception of the afterlife. Due to the nature of the Israelite society, where the twelve tribes began as separate groups with their own traditions but were eventually merged together, there are some inconsistencies about what the underworld would look like. As Stadelmann says, “No doubt, after a study of all the pertinent texts, the most striking features which will emerge are their incohesiveness and inconsistencies”; Stadelmann, *The Hebrew World*, 165–76. For more resources on the concept of Sheol and the afterlife, see Harris, “שאול,” 891–93; Merrill, “שאול,” 6–7; Afonso, “Netherworld,” 996–98.

<sup>28</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 172. There is a deep sense of irony in this situation as Jonah’s journey in the previous chapter was an attempt to flee to Tarshish from the presence of YHWH, and now he has ended up in the absolute furthest place from YHWH that he could possibly get.

<sup>29</sup> A staple ingredient in Hebrew poetry is parallelism, which is a method of relaying information in poetry where the first segment of a verse makes a statement and a second (and sometimes third) line contribute further to it. The way in which the additional segments contribute varies (synonymously, antithetically, expansively, etc.). In the case of this verse, “from my affliction” (מצרה לי) is matched synonymously with “from the belly of Sheol” (מבטן שאול) in the second segment; Sasson, *Jonah*, 162; Blaiklock, “Poetry,” 938; Walsh, “Jonah,” 225.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that the vocabulary has changed from chapter 1—previously, Jonah was “hurled” (טול) from the boat, but now he states that he was “thrown” (שלך) into the deep. Though there is a change in vocabulary, both words are associated with YHWH’s judgement and are used in cases of rejection of an individual. See Chisholm, “שלך,” 127–28; Chisholm, “טול,” 359.

acknowledges that YHWH was in control of his fate even while on the boat. This also offers leniency to the sailors who were so hesitant of their decision, not wishing to anger YHWH further. This revelation of YHWH's active hand in Jonah's demise highlights YHWH's sovereignty over life and death, clarifying that the sailors were merely participants in the greater plans of the Creator. So, to clarify, Jonah is identifying YHWH as the one who brought about his death.

Looking at the rest of the verse, Jonah's words intensify the visualization of his descent by using language that progressively moves the reader deeper into the depths of Sheol.<sup>31</sup> This sort of amplification feeds into the death motif by providing a rich vocabulary and description of the circumstances. As Jonah is in the water, he is not only sinking, but apparently met with hostility by the currents, breakers and waves leading him to the underworld—as Simon says, “The helpless feeling of someone who sinks in deep water is augmented by the dread of one who is surrounded by a hostile force.”<sup>32</sup> In the previous chapter, Jonah confesses YHWH to be the one who controls the seas, and here as well, the description of the descent to the underworld is specifically brought upon by YHWH's creation, which only intensifies the situation all the more.

This dramatic language of the water “encircling” (סבב) and “passing over” (עלי עברו) Jonah in v. 4 is not only drawing him further down into Sheol, it should also be recognized that the same words are intended to expand the gap between Jonah and YHWH's presence, symbolized by the temple.<sup>33</sup> Giving a glimpse of either his prayer that led to his rescue or his thoughts preceding the prayer, Jonah quotes himself as saying “I have been expelled from your

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<sup>31</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 20. Another example of Sheol pulling someone in with hostility occurs in Ps 18:5–6, “the cords of death encompassed me, the torrents of wickedness terrified me; the cords of Sheol encircled me, the snares of death surrounded me.

<sup>33</sup> Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 2–3.

sight; how can I look again upon your holy temple?” (v. 5). This psalm, as portrayed here, is plotted along a vertical map where YHWH and the temple are positioned above, and Sheol and the depths of the sea are positioned below.<sup>34</sup> The use of dramatic language is Jonah sinking so far down that the presence of the divine is no longer visible. This chasm created by polarizing the two locations amplifies the motif of life and death as Sheol and the temple—symbols of death and life, respectively—are juxtaposed as the extreme ends of creation.<sup>35</sup> While Jonah is faced with the reality of death through his inability to see the temple, he expresses a longing to be reconnected to YHWH’s temple, thus finding life. Just as being cut off from the presence of YHWH is to be cast from his sight in the first half of the verse, so too is redemption to return one’s gaze to YHWH (via the temple) in the second half.<sup>36</sup>

Continuing in the description of his descent through the chaotic waters and his experience of drowning, Jonah says, “The sea engulfed me as far as my neck, the primeval waters encircled me; weeds twisted onto my head” (v. 6).<sup>37</sup> In this second description of his descent, the intense language used emboldens the death motif even beyond what the first stanza had as two features make themselves prominent. First, the water currents (נהר, v. 4) from the first stanza are restated as the primeval waters (תהום, v. 5), the same word used to describe the waters in the creation

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<sup>34</sup> Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 4–5. Other scriptural references that map Sheol as an extremity of the cosmos, contrasting the heavenly abode include Isa 7:11, 14:12; Ps 139:8–12; Amos 9:2.

<sup>35</sup> Harkening back to the concept of dramatic language, this is a place where the word גדול would be relevant, though it is not used. Without a doubt, the distance between Jonah in Sheol and YHWH in the temple is *great*.

<sup>36</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 21. Though there are some who argue Jonah offers no repentance in his psalm (and by doing so, misunderstand the psalm’s purpose), this verse does provide the image of a repentant heart, for who would long to look once again upon the temple if they had not turned from their sin, or at least wished to do so? There is no doubt that Jonah’s plea in v.5 is the beginnings of an act of repentance.

<sup>37</sup> Sasson notes the fact that the aspects of creation in this verse are not directly attributed to YHWH. His explanation of this feature is that “because the poet has just admitted that God’s displeasure is the reason for Jonah’s predicament, the second inscription need no longer include the reference to divine management of the punishing instruments.” The previous verses were focused on Jonah’s God-directed punishment, but now the focus has shifted to being simply about the anguish Jonah is in; Sasson, *Jonah*, 182.

narrative in Gen 1:2. By using the verb סבב (“to encircle”) to describe the action of each of these entities, it is being emphasized that this is not just water that Jonah has been caught up in, but the waters of the pre-created earth—Jonah’s death is the reversal of his creation.<sup>38</sup> Second, YHWH becomes strikingly absent. While it was YHWH’s creation that was doing the work in the previous stanza, there is no longer any indication in the text that YHWH is connected to what is taking place. Jerome Walsh argues that this is an indication of Jonah’s complete separation from YHWH, which makes sense in light of the verses to follow where Jonah feels this separation.<sup>39</sup>

The focus on Jonah’s death is concluded with the following words: “I went down to the base of the mountains; the land where bars are around me forever” (v. 7).<sup>40</sup> There is a quality of finality in this statement that secures the reality that Jonah’s experience is one of death and separation from YHWH. The language of being at the “base of the mountains” suggests that Jonah has made it to the farthest place downward in the created world; Merrill defines Sheol as “the deepest depths, the antithesis of the highest heavens”<sup>41</sup> (cf. Job 11:8; Prov 9:18). Indeed, the ancient near Eastern symbol or image of the netherworld was, in fact, a mountain.<sup>42</sup> Not only is there a physical distance set, but it is also stated that Jonah is apparently trapped here by bars that

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<sup>38</sup> Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 321.

<sup>39</sup> Walsh, “Jonah 2,” 227.

<sup>40</sup> The translation for this verse is difficult to render due to the last segment being a verbless clause (הארץ ) בעדי לעולם). Sasson shares in the difficulty of working with this verse and addresses how one might engage with such a textual difficulty in translation. His solution is to use the Masoretic punctuations to fragment the text into three parts: “the land” (הארץ), “its bolts, about me” (ברחיה בעדי), and “eternally, for ever” (לעולם). While attempting to stay as true to the text as possible, Sasson inserts “are there” between the second and third segments to produce the following translation, “The netherworld, its bars, about me are there for ever.”; Sasson, *Jonah*, 160, 188. While this produces a very straightforward translation, it remains quite wooden and does not capture the poetic beauty of the text. Simon, on the other hand, rearranges the words in Hebrew to produce a construct chain “the bars of the land behind me forever,” thus altering the translation of the text in a way that doesn’t require a verb, though he notes that Ibn Ezra includes the verb “closed” to complete the phrase; Simon, *Jonah*, 22. This produces a translation that retains poetic beauty but does not stay true to the original text. The translation presented in this study works to incorporate the poetic beauty alongside the straightforward translation by placing the conjunction “where” between the first and second segments, and the verb “are” in the middle of the second.

<sup>41</sup> Merrill, “שאול,” 6.

<sup>42</sup> Paul, “Jonah 2,” 131–32. Interestingly, the ancient Sumerian sign for the netherworld is *kur*, which appears in pictographic texts as a mountain.

are eternally surrounding him. These bars may best be interpreted as the gates of the underworld (Job 7:9, 17:16, 38:16; Pss 9:13, 107:17–18; Isa 38:10), which signify that the only way out is shut.<sup>43</sup> Jonah’s description is quite clear that his experience was not only one of death, but also one that appears irreversible.

### Death Liturgy in Jonah’s Descent

Ekaterina Kozlova’s study on Jonah 2 provides further evidence of a heavy death motif in this section by interpreting the language used to describe Jonah’s descent as a death liturgy.<sup>44</sup>

Following her argument, there are three main actions that take place, each acting as a part of the process of this liturgy. First, YHWH casting the prophet into the sea is seen as burial, as is notable through the switching of the verb טול with שלך (also mentioned above).<sup>45</sup> In other biblical texts, this verb with humans as the object is used in texts dealing with the interment of dead bodies in places other than ancestral tombs.<sup>46</sup> Second, the waters that surround and encircle (“סבב,” vv. 4, 6) Jonah can be understood as funerary dances.<sup>47</sup> In Eccl 12:5, a scene of de-creation and death is being described whereby mourners are depicted as circling in the streets: “for each will go to their eternal home as the mourners *move in circles* in the streets.”

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<sup>43</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 116; Limburg, *Jonah*, 68; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 477. *The Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld* describes a process that Inanna must go through where she passes through multiple gates to enter the underworld, each time being stripped of more clothing and equipment. To further depict this concept, the myth refers to the underworld as “the land of no return”; Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 5.

<sup>44</sup> Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 1–21.

<sup>45</sup> Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 7–9. This verb is slightly more common than the previous טול, though is still not very common with only being found 125 times throughout the Hebrew Bible; Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 2:1276–77.

<sup>46</sup> Kozlova provides an extensive list as she states, “Thus, with or without nouns such as נבלה/‘corpse’ or פגור/‘dead body,’ it may stand for the dishonourable deposition of the dead into their final place of ‘rest’ (Josh 8:29, 10:27; 2 Sam 18:17; 2 Kgs 13:21; Jer 41:9), the execution of individuals without interment, or exhumation of bodies (2 Sam 20:21, 22; Amos 8:3; Isa 14:18ff, 34:3; Jer 14:16, 22:19, 36:30; 1 Kgs 13:24, 25, 28; 2 Kgs 9:25–26, 10:25); Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 7.

<sup>47</sup> Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 11–12. This verb is found 157 times throughout the Hebrew Bible; Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 2:865–66.

Furthermore, Isa 23:16 and Jer 31:22 both also use the root סבב when talking of funerary rites and death.<sup>48</sup> Third, the seaweed wrapping around (“חבש,” v. 6) Jonah’s head may be seen as a burial shroud.<sup>49</sup> Kozlova connects the use of the verb חבש with Job 40:13, a text depicting the descent of the wicked to the underworld. In her assessment, she sees the use of the verb to be in connection with dressing the bodies in their burial clothes, specifically the shroud that is put on the deceased’s face. Thus, by comparing the vocabulary used in the psalm to their usage elsewhere in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, it is determinable that Jonah’s psalm is meant to specifically depict the process of burying someone who has come to deserve a dishonorable death and burial.

At this point in the prophet’s psalm, the various applications of the motif of death has made one thing certain: according to the ancient Israelite conception of the afterlife, Jonah was properly transitioned into Sheol and death. What is more is that YHWH’s sovereignty is made evident through his active participation in this entire process. Such a statement is not one that can be taken lightly, nor can such an experiential reading of the text be glossed over. By taking so much time to delineate the process of his death, Jonah has drawn a clear emphasis to the weight of his sin and judgement. This is made abundantly clear through the presentation of his descent as a burial ritual depicted in YHWH casting Jonah into the sea, the waters dancing around him, and the seaweed wrapping around his head.

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<sup>48</sup> In a similar manner, the lament required for the mourning of Inanna in *Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld* involves beating a drum and circumambulating the house of the gods. Kozlova mentions this detail specifically on account of Jonah being in the belly of the fish for “three days and three nights,” which is a designation also given in the Sumerian myth, as stated above; Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 11–12.

<sup>49</sup> Kozlova, “Jonah 2,” 14–19. This verb is used 33 times throughout the Hebrew Bible; Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*.



### Jonah's Salvation from Death by YHWH

While the previous section investigated the presence and use of the death motif in the psalm, this section turns to examining its counterpart, the life motif. Following Jonah's detailed recollection of his death and descent to Sheol, he recounts his salvation: "Yet you brought my life up from the Pit, YHWH my God! When my very existence was fading in front of me, I remembered YHWH, and my prayer came to you in your holy temple" (vv.7b–8). In these verses, the motif of life is particularly present through two explicit mentions of the word "life," each time using a different key word (נפש/חי). Each of these occurrences point to YHWH as Jonah's Savior, but through different actions.

First, Jonah states that YHWH has "brought [his] *life* up from the Pit" ("חי," v. 7b).

Though this statement is only half a verse in length, it entirely shifts the trajectory of the story Jonah is telling; after the consistent downward and deadly motion of the prophet in the previous section, suddenly his life is brought upward by the very entity that was involved in his descent.<sup>50</sup> The use of the word חי here is connected to the key word נפש in the following verse, as both words portray the same object.<sup>51</sup> It is significant to note that Jonah's חי in this situation is the object of the verb עלה ("go up") and that YHWH is the subject. This is specifically YHWH's intervention on Jonah's death and not something done by any power of the prophet.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the verse to follow this one demonstrates the cause of the intervention—Jonah's petition reaching

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<sup>50</sup> Walsh, "Jonah 2:3–10," 226–27.

<sup>51</sup> This is a similar situation to the multiple words used to describe the netherworld. However, whereas the situation with the netherworld language was understood as contributing to a situational motif, this use of חי should be understood as connecting to the word-motif of נפש since both words are found in multiple places throughout the text and are used to portray very similar. The verb חי is found 503 times throughout the Hebrew Bible; Wigram, *Englishman's Concordance*, 1:418–21.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 116.

the temple. By designating Jonah's  $\text{ח}$  as the passive object of the "going up," it is made evident that Jonah understands life and death as something only controllable by YHWH (cf. 1 Sam 2:6).

To highlight the dramatic moment of his salvation, Jonah states that he remembers YHWH and his prayer reaches YHWH's holy temple "when [his] very *existence* was fading in front of [him]" ("נפש," v. 8a).<sup>53</sup> The key word נפש appears for the second time in the narrative, this time in conjunction with  $\text{עט}$  ("to faint/fade"), which may be intended as an image of Jonah giving up.<sup>54</sup> However, it is more likely that this is a statement of Jonah's phasing out of consciousness—his final thread of life is disappearing.<sup>55</sup> This highlights the fact that he is entirely at the mercy of YHWH, which prompts his prayer, demonstrating his acknowledgment of YHWH's ultimate control over life and death. Where the first statement draws attention to YHWH as the Savior through YHWH's own action of redemption, this second statement likewise draws attention through Jonah's inability to save himself.

It is argued above but should be restated here that Jonah is in the innermost parts of Sheol, placing him in the lowest part of creation and that the temple is used to mark the opposite end of the spectrum, sitting at the highest point.<sup>56</sup> This polarity made by marking the two extreme ends of creation is significant in presenting the motif of life and death because the two locations become symbols of life and death, themselves (as argued above).<sup>57</sup> As represented in

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<sup>53</sup> The term used here to describe Jonah's existence is נפש, which was also used by the sailors to speak of Jonah in 1:14, "Please, O YHWH, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's *life*..." The reason for using the term "existence" in this particular verse as opposed to "life," which would match 1:14 is twofold: first, to provide variety from the translation of  $\text{ח}$  in v. 7 in order to differentiate between the two words with similar meanings, and second, to capture the essence of Jonah's full "self" in a single word.

<sup>54</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 193.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 116.

<sup>56</sup> Barré, "Jonah 2," 245. The distance between these two locations is cleverly displayed by the psalmist by placing the cry for help in the early verses of the psalm (vv. 3, 5) and only having the prayer reach the temple at the last moment in v. 8, after all the full description of Jonah's death has been relayed. In this way, the initial mention of a cry out to YHWH and the commencement of Jonah's salvation work as bookends to the recollection of Jonah's experience.

<sup>57</sup> Barré, "Jonah 2," 246.

this section of the text, the Pit/Sheol is where Jonah's death is being completed through the fading of his נפש. Likewise, the action of his חי being raised up out of the Pit/Sheol is specifically sourced from the temple as Jonah's prayer reaches YHWH.

This section as a whole, though being quite brief, utilizes the motif of life and death with as much emphasis as the entire previous section. The mention of the temple is positioned in such a way in the psalm as to juxtapose the chaotic waters of de-creation that were instrumental in Jonah's death. As mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, the temple is used as a symbol of the entire ordered cosmos, which contrasts the chaotic primeval waters.<sup>58</sup> The act of YHWH lifting Jonah from Sheol must thus be recognized as the reversal of his de-creation. All of that which presented the motif of death in vv. 3–7a is undone and replaced with the motif of life as Jonah's life is brought up in vv. 7b–8.

### **Conclusions on Motif of Life and Death in Jonah 2**

Just as the chapter opens with the prose account of Jonah's salvation through the salvific fish, so too does it resolve with the account of his re-entry into the world of the living by being expelled from the very same fish. With the focus of Jonah 2 being on the death and re-birth of the prophet, the motif of life and death is abundantly present. First and foremost, this chapter provides ample evidence that the author intends to portray Jonah as actually dying and being resurrected through Jonah's numerous references to the underworld, imagery depicting drowning and death, and the use of perfect verb conjugations. Thus, the great fish that swallows Jonah is meant to be understood as a salvific vessel of God's mercy, as demonstrated through the fact that the psalm is one of thanksgiving, the two references to a previous prayer concerning his distressed state (vv. 3

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<sup>58</sup> Anderson, "Jonah's Re-Creation," 183.

and 7), and the indication that Jonah's "three days and three nights" in the fish references the distance between the underworld and the land of the living. Second, the motif is present in the depiction of Jonah's death by drowning through the use of hostile imagery when describing the water's involvement in his death and the death liturgy that the non-human characters of the narrative enact. Third, and finally, the life motif is presented as YHWH mercifully saves Jonah by retrieving him from the depths and preventing his life from fading away. This final motif is highlighted through the use of the key words *חַי* and *נַפְשׁוֹ*, which are both references to the object of Jonah's life.

Jonah 2 provides the reader with an intense scenario in which YHWH demonstrates his sovereignty over the whole of creation through controlling Jonah's death and re-birth. It is YHWH who is credited with Jonah's descent to death and Sheol and by YHWH's will that the waters continue to drive Jonah downward (v. 4). Then, it is YHWH who is called upon to save Jonah from his fate (vv. 3 and 8), and YHWH who enacts the salvation (v. 7b). In the third stanza, Jonah offers an oath of commitment to YHWH and proclaims that "Salvation belongs to YHWH" (v. 10) in response to the deliverance he had just experienced. By doing this, YHWH is not only being framed as the personal Savior of Jonah, but is also being confirmed as the Creator God whom Jonah had declared YHWH to be in 1:9: "the God of heaven...who made the sea and the dry land." Furthermore, when YHWH rescued Jonah, he did so against the forces of the chaotic waters that ushered Jonah down and towards the land of the living. Interestingly enough, the sea and the dry land become associated with death and life through the presentation of this psalm because the waters participate in Jonah's descent (vv. 3, 5) and the temple (which is representative of the land of the living) is set as the destination Jonah long to return to (vv. 5, 8). Ultimately, this oath and declaration in v. 10—which is dependent on the rest of the preceding

psalm—explicates the main theme of these first two chapters of the narrative: YHWH is sovereign over all matters of life and death. Not only that, but it is only by YHWH's mercy that Jonah returns to the land of the living, and it was by YHWH's judgment that he was sent to the land of the dead. In this, it is once again demonstrated that life and death are the results of YHWH's decisive actions of mercy or judgement.

## CHAPTER 4: MOTIFS IN JONAH 3:1–10

### Introduction and Overview of Jonah 3

Jonah 3 presents the reader with the fulfillment of Jonah's prophetic mission that was originally initiated in Jonah 1. What this chapter accomplishes is outlining how the motif of life and death is central to the presentation of this mission fulfillment through three primary events: Jonah's acceptance and deliverance of YHWH's divine message (vv. 1–4), the repentance of the Ninevites at the reception of that message (vv. 5–9), and YHWH's response to Nineveh's repentance (v. 10). In the first event, an ambiguous message is delivered that is initially understood by the Ninevites as a proclamation of certain death, yet is transformed into a proclamation of life by the end of the scene. The second event portrays the Ninevites' reactions to hearing the divine word, which sparks immediate mourning and penitent actions from both the people and the king. Finally, at the sight of the city's moral reform, YHWH relents of his anger, which is the fulfillment of the proclamation, thus transforming the motif of death to a motif of life.

Before investigating the individual events, it is worth mentioning that the dramatic language picks up again in this chapter as it was in the first through the repetition of the word גדול. Nineveh is described twice as being a "great city" (vv. 2, 3), with the second instance specifically stating that it is "a great city to God" (עיר גדולה לאלהים). This second occurrence of the word is an interesting phrase that can essentially be interpreted as "an exceedingly great city," which is to understand לאלהים as a superlative, emphasizing the *greatness* of Nineveh even

further.<sup>1</sup> Simon states that the term in Hebrew is a way of measuring the large proportions of the city “on a godly scale,” suggesting that even a deity would consider the settlement to be sizeable.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the description of Nineveh being גדול, the people of the city are referred to as “everyone, great and small” (v. 5), and the king of Nineveh has subordinates called גדליו (v. 7), which is to say “his *great* ones.” All four of these occurrences of the root גדל amplify the scene by raising the stakes: the conversion of everyone in this *exceedingly great* city, from the *greatest* to the smallest, fulfilled through the decree of the king and his *great* ones displays an astonishingly *great* deliverance from the impending doom found in Jonah’s prophetic message. As has been stated in previous chapters, this dramatic language is not a presentation of the life and death motif, in itself. Rather, it is an element of the text that provides an environment where the motif can be properly presented.

Just as גדול resumes its repetition in chapter 3, so too does the appearance of the key word “to perish” (אבד, v. 9). While there are only four repetitions of the verb throughout the entire narrative,<sup>3</sup> אבד plays a significant role in the presentation of the motif of life and death. In this specific instance, the king of Nineveh cries out in a fashion very similar to the captain of the ship in 1:6, saying “Who knows, the god may turn and relent; he may turn from the burning of his anger and we may not *perish*” (v. 9). Similar to 1:6, the function of the word within its context is to acknowledge that YHWH ultimately holds the fates of all in his hands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 221–22; Echols, *Reading Jonah*, 57; Marcus, “Three Days’ Walk,” 42; Simon, *Jonah*, 28; Thomas, “Superlative in Hebrew,” 210–16; Wiseman, “Jonah’s Nineveh,” 36.

<sup>2</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 28.

<sup>3</sup> The root אבד is found twice in the first chapter in connection with the sailors’ distress (1:6, 14), once in chapter 3, with a similar use in the king’s decree (3:9), and once in chapter 4 to describe the death of the plant (4:10). For more on the use of this word throughout Jonah, see “Composition and Paronomasia,” 82; Person, *In Conversation with Jonah*, 71–72; Robson, “Undercurrents” 197–99.

<sup>4</sup> Halpern and Friedman, “Composition and Paronomasia,” 82; Person, *In Conversation with Jonah*, 71–72.

### Motif in Jonah's Fulfilment of Duty

Following a very similar structure as in Jonah 1, the title prophet is recommissioned by YHWH to deliver a message to the Ninevites in 3:1–2, though this second attempt proves more successful as the prophet is obedient in his fulfillment of his duty in 3:3–4. There are differences in the wording of the commission in 3:1–2 from the initial commission in 1:1–2 that shift the emphasis of the prophetic message, delaying the presentation of the life and death motif. The delay of the motif is ended in the proclamation of YHWH's message via Jonah in vv. 3–4, which is a message that could be read as either an indication of pending death or new life.<sup>5</sup> In this section, these two events are investigated together for the purpose of highlighting the motif of life and death that they produce.

#### The Recommission as Reinitiating the Motif of Death

Crucial to the understanding of this recommissioning is the awareness the reader has of the original commission given to Jonah in 1:1–2. To recapitulate 1:1–2, the word of YHWH came to Jonah, commanding him to “arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and *cry out against it*, for *its evil has come up before me*” (emphasis added); the message has clear tones of judgement and disaster for the receiving city. Now, what YHWH says is, “Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city and *proclaim to it the proclamation which I tell you*” (3:2, emphasis added). Two differences in wording are immediately noticeable: (1) Jonah is no longer called to “cry out against” (וקרא ועליה), but rather to “proclaim to” (וקרא אליה) Nineveh, and (2) the mention of Nineveh's evil is replaced with a specification that Jonah is to give the proclamation that YHWH gives him. Both

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<sup>5</sup> The recognition of this fact is widespread among scholars. A selection of scholars who mention the dual understanding of this word are Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 121; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 222; Kahn, “Analysis of Jonah” 92–93; Kaplan, “Jonah and Moral Agency,” 157; Limburg, *Jonah*, 79.



of these changes must be evaluated in order to understand the significance they play in producing the motif.

Though the same verb is used for both “cry out against” (וקרא עליה) and “proclaim to” (וקרא אליה), the difference in interpretation hinges on the change of the clause’s preposition from על to אל.<sup>6</sup> While this may be a minor change, it is still significant to the understanding of the message YHWH is sending Jonah with because of its relationship to the verb that precedes it.<sup>7</sup> By changing to the phrase וקרא אליה, the message shifts from having to explain why Nineveh must be cried out *against* and instead is able to emphasize that YHWH has a specific message for the city to hear.<sup>8</sup>

The second difference in the two commissions rests not in the swapping of a single letter, but rather, a change in content, altogether. While the first commission used its second clause to highlight the reason for the prophetic message being sent (“for its evil has come up before me”), this second commission emphasizes that the proclamation he is to give is provided to him directly from YHWH. Looking quite literally at the translation, YHWH is telling Jonah to “*proclaim the proclamation* which I tell you” (3:2, emphasis added)—the redundancy in this statement is used emphatically to transition the understanding of the message from a general and vague death warrant, such as in 1:2 to a more specific and personal message to Nineveh, stamped

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 118; Simon, *Jonah*, 26; Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 175–76.

<sup>7</sup> The LXX translates the two prepositions with little regard for their distinction which would suggest that the switch has no value to the narrative. Sasson makes an extensive argument for viewing this switch as intentional. Though he recognizes that אל and על have a degree of interchangeability within the Hebrew Bible, there is a much stronger case for their distinction specifically within the book of Jonah; Sasson, “Two Missions” 23–29; cf. Landes, “Linguistic Criteria,” 158. For more on the use of the verb קרא in Jonah, see Halpern and Friedman, “Composition and Paronomasia,” 82f.

<sup>8</sup> Sasson, “Two Missions,” 27. The ambiguity this alteration in the text puts on the commission ironically matches the ambiguity of the actual message Jonah delivers in v. 4. Whether this is intentional, no scholar comments, but it is intriguing, regardless.

with the divine authority of YHWH.<sup>9</sup> This word translated as “proclamation” (הַקְרִיאָה) is found only here in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, this language carries neither negative nor positive tones to it, and is thus a neutral statement.

This change in content shifts how the motif of death is present in this second assignment since the motif’s presence was partly dependent on the negative impression of the explanation for judgement—without the reason for judgement, this statement leaves a less remarkable impact on the reader and provides a less potent presentation of the motif—to the point where one could argue that it is *not* present. However, it is in this absence of potency that the motif of life and death is set up for the following verses, where Jonah completes the act he was sent for and the *words which YHWH provided* are themselves where the motif shines. Therefore, while 3:1–2 provides an implicit motif of death based on its connection to its counterpart in 1:1–2, it must be read in conjunction with verse 4 which provides the content of the proclamation YHWH gave Jonah to proclaim.

### The Dual Message of Death or Life

Despite being the moment that the audience has been anticipating since the very beginning of the narrative, Jonah’s proclamation to the Ninevites is but a mere five words in the Hebrew text:

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<sup>9</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 72–75, 226; Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 175–76.

<sup>10</sup> Kittel et al., eds., “Κήρυγμα,” 715; Sasson, *Jonah*, 226–27; Simon, *Jonah*, 26. Limburg makes specific note of this occurrence of the word as being significant to the development of its use in the New Testament to describe the proclamation of the Good News; Limburg, *Jonah*, 75. It has also been used frequently in rabbinic literature; Jastrow, “הַקְרִיאָה,” 1419; Sasson, *Jonah*, 226. The Greek counterpart is found here and in 2 Chr 30:5 within the LXX, which testifies to the retention of the peculiarity of this word; Kittel et al., eds., “Κήρυγμα,” 715. It would sidetrack this study to explore the connections between the use of this word in Jonah and in New Testament literature, but it would be worthwhile for another study to be conducted on this topic. In particular, Jesus’ reference to the “sign of Jonah” (Matt 12:41; cf. Luke 11:32) where this same use of “proclamation” is used in conjunction with the idea of repentance and forgiveness.

“עוד ארבעים יום וגינה נהפכת” (3:4).<sup>11</sup> However, these five words are perhaps one of the most sophisticated demonstrations of the motif of life and death because the final word of this proclamation (root הפך) can be interpreted either as “overthrown,” which would imply death, or “turned/changed,” which could imply repentance.<sup>12</sup> Not only that, but the use of the number “forty days” also contributes to the motif in this prophetic word. A detailed look at these two features of the proclamation will yield a strong case for the centrality of the motif in this passage.

The number forty holds symbolic significance throughout the Hebrew Bible, and has been particularly noted as an indicator of an afflictive and transformative experience in many instances—such would be fitting for the life and death motif.<sup>13</sup> While there are instances where

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<sup>11</sup> Commentators have remarked that the terse nature of Jonah’s prophetic message is only a half-hearted attempt at delivering the message of YHWH or that he was in some way still reluctant. For example, see Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 222; Fretheim, “Jonah, Book Of,” 1479; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 107–8; Hauser, “Jonah,” 32. That fact that his message was only five words in length, combined with the fact that he only went a day’s journey into the city before beginning his proclamation is used as evidence to support this perspective. However, this interpretation fails to recognize two key components of the larger narrative. First, Jonah expresses devote commitment to YHWH in 1:9 (as discussed in chapter 2 of this study) and in 2:9 (discussed in chapter 3). In order to arrive at this conclusion of an uncommitted prophet, one must ignore the two explicit declarations from Jonah that confess his fidelity to YHWH. Second, an observation of Jonah’s speech throughout the rest of the prose sections of the narrative yield the conclusion that the prophet’s words are few when he is not making a declaration of YHWH’s sovereignty. Six times the prophet speaks in the prose sections of the text, and of these, three are declarations of YHWH’s sovereignty: 1:9 (14 words), 1:12 (16 words), and 4:2–3 (39 words). The other three instances are short-winded and focused on other things: Jonah’s proclamation (3:4, 5 words), and two expressions of frustration (4:8, 3 words; 4:9, 5 words). Perhaps the narrator is intending to keep the narrative moving during these shorter speech segments, highlighting action over speech. Whatever the case may be, it is unnecessary to assume that Jonah is somehow lacking commitment to his task. Simon offers a similar explanation of the brevity of Jonah’s proclamation. He states that “there is no divergence between what was told and what [Jonah] actually says; nor is there a subsequent divine rebuke of Jonah for saying too little. Hence it is likely that the extreme brevity of his proclamation, rather than being the sign of a grudging compliance, reflects the fact that he was not sent to reprove Nineveh for its sins, but only to inform it of the sentence passed upon it”; Simon, *Jonah*, 28–29.

<sup>12</sup> This verb is found a total of 94 times throughout the Hebrew Bible, and its translation varies. For use of this verb as meaning “overthrown,” see Gen 19:35; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11. For use of the verb as meaning “transformed/turned around” see 1 Kgs 22:34; Jer 13:23; Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 121; Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 222; Kahn, “Analysis of Jonah,” 92–93; Kaplan, “Jonah and Moral Agency,” 157; Limburg, *Jonah*, 79; Wigram, *Englishman’s Concordance*, 1:370.

<sup>13</sup> Ryken et al., “Forty,” 305–6; Sasson, *Jonah*, 233. Ryken et al. define the biblical use of “forty” as a symbol of “hardship, affliction and punishment,” in accordance with the early church fathers. While there is justification for the inclusion of punishment in a number of situations where “forty” is implemented—such as the flood in Gen 7:12, or the Israelites wandering of the desert in Num 14:34—this is not the case for all instances—such as Moses (Exod 24:14; 34:28) and Elijah’s (1 Kgs 19:8) times of fasting. Therefore, only the concepts of hardship and affliction, which do not necessitate a punitive quality, should be recognized here.

this is not the case—such as the length of David and Solomon’s reigns (2 Sam 5:4; 1 Kgs 11:42) or determining the length of a generation (e.g., Num 32:13)—examples of the number forty appearing across the Hebrew Bible bearing this significance include Moses’ time spent on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:18; 34:28; Deut 9:9, 11, 18, 25), the amount of time the spies were in the land of Canaan (Num 13:25), and the length of Elijah’s journey to Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps most noteworthy is the time of forty years Israel spent dwelling in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land (Num 14:34). Looking at these various uses of the symbolic “forty,” each one results in some form of transformation as the result of enduring the full duration of hardship. This same symbolism is visible, then, in the prophetic statement from Jonah that “forty days” will bring about the transformation of Nineveh, be it destruction or reform.

Kahn connects the “forty days” in this prophecy to the judgment of the flood in Gen 7:12.<sup>15</sup> His connection is not only to the identical timeframe of forty days, but also to the language employed to talk about the sin that caused the judgement in the first place. To compare, Kahn gives translations of the two texts that highlight the similarities. Concerning the flood’s cause: “the earth was filled with *violence*... for all flesh had corrupted their *way* upon the earth” (Gen 7:11–12). Compare this to the king’s decree in Jonah 3:8: “Let everyone turn from his evil *way*, and from the *violence* that is in their hands.”<sup>16</sup> This idea is ardently rejected by Simon on the grounds of the flood’s forty days being the duration of the judgement upon the earth whereas the time outlined in Jonah’s proclamation refers to the grace period before punishment would

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 121; Limburg, *Jonah*, 79. The idea of forty being a signal of transformation is supported by scholars such as Sasson, *Jonah*, 233.

<sup>15</sup> Kahn, “Analysis of Jonah,” 92.

<sup>16</sup> Kahn, “Analysis of Jonah,” 92. Limburg shows how the phrase “turn from their evil ways” is also well-connected to the other Hebrew prophets (Jer 15:7; 18:11; 23:22; 25:5; 26:3; 35:15; 36:3, 7; Ezek 3:19; 13:22; 18:23; 20:44; 33:9, 11; Zech 1:4), the Deuteronomistic history (1 Kgs 13:33; 2 Kgs 17:13), and prophetic literature (Prov 2:12; 8:13; 28:10; cf. 2 Chr 7:14); Limburg, *Jonah*, 83.

ensue.<sup>17</sup> However, what Simon fails to acknowledge in his interpretation of the flood narrative is that at the end of the forty days, there is the transformative event of the waters receding and new life emerging, thus remaining consistent with the expectation of Jonah's proclamation—the importance of this symbolism is not found in its relationship to the judgement, but rather in the transformation that is to occur. Thus, just as the flood brought about transformation in a forty-day period, so too, is Nineveh to experience transformation in forty days, for better or for worse.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding Jonah's proclamation through the connections to the flood leads the reader to assume that הפך should be read primarily negatively as “overthrown,” highlighting a death motif. Indeed, this would be the favored interpretation of the word already, since there has been the expectation of judgement from the start.<sup>19</sup> Looking forward at the Ninevites' reaction to the prophetic word in vv. 5–9 confirms that the word is received as bad news, prompting widespread repentance, as well as YHWH's decision to relent of the calamity (רעה, v.10) that he had planned to bring upon the city. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the word is intentionally utilized to set up the opposite outcome to take place later on. This clever bait-and-switch tactic used by the narrator frames the narrative in such a way that the “overthrown” death motif carries through right until the last line, and then suddenly flips to reveal a “changed” life motif, instead. In this

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<sup>17</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Drawing the connection to the flood narrative is also consistent with Jonah's psalm in Jonah 2 where imagery was implemented to depict Jonah's death. As discussed in the previous chapter, the language employed to describe the prophet's drowning—particularly in 2:3 and 5—connects Jonah's death to the de-creative forces of the chaotic waters that are subdued in Gen 1:2. In the flood narrative, the very same deep that is subdued in creation is described as rising up to cover the earth in an act of de-creation (תהום, Gen 6:11). This connection between the flood and Jonah's proclamation would make sense, then, as the same model that is used to describe Jonah's judgement is also applied to Nineveh's. Anderson draws a vast number of connections between the early chapters of Genesis and the book of Jonah, including the inclusion of animals in the process of repentance in vv. 6–9; Anderson, “Jonah's Re-Creation,” esp. 184–85.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, “Jonah's Re-Creation,” 185.

way, **דָּפַךְ** is a very significant word (though not a key word, for its lack of repetition) to the presentation of the situational motif of Nineveh’s foretold judgement.

To summarize this section, the life and death motif is presented primarily through Jonah’s proclamation in v. 4. In YHWH’s recommission of the prophet, the presence of the **אֲנִי** preposition and the change in content for the second clause of v. 2 build an anticipation that leaves the reader uncertain about whether the message is good or bad. Once Jonah delivers the message, the ambiguity continues, though with a leaning toward the idea that YHWH will overthrow Nineveh in forty days based on the connection to the flood in Gen 7:12, the expectation that was originally presented in 1:2, and the reception by the Ninevites in the verses to follow. Altogether, the motif presented in Jonah’s proclamation is heavily tipped towards a focus on death to the great city.

### **Fear of Death and Hope for Life in Nineveh’s Response**

The short proclamation Jonah offers creates a shockwave of response throughout the entire city of Nineveh. Jonah had only made it a day’s journey into the city when he started delivering his message and it very quickly made its way to the king’s ears, who immediately begins to act and orders a decree that prompts everyone else to follow.<sup>20</sup> Of the actions that the collective Nineveh

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<sup>20</sup> The city is described as being a “journey of three days” to traverse, which has been concluded is far from a historical representation of the city, since the entire perimeter of the city walls was less than eight miles long, and the furthest point between any two parts of the walls was less than three miles; Limburg, *Jonah*, 78; Simon, *Jonah*, 28. This measurement of “three days” that is provided by the narrator must then be understood as figurative or hyperbolic in some way. While it is possible to read this language as simply being an exaggeration to aide in the dramatic greatness of the narrative (see Limburg, *Jonah*, 78; Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 148), the reference to three days specifically should be compared to the three days and nights that Jonah spends in the belly of the great fish. Simon argues that the fact that the Ninevites repent after only one day of Jonah’s proclamation highlights their willingness to submit to YHWH, where Jonah required three days inside the fish to repent; Simon, *Jonah*, 28. This thesis does not view the fish as a vehicle of punishment until Jonah repents—as argued in chapter 3—yet, Simon makes a valid connection between the two instances where transformation is achieved for Jonah after a three day period of experiencing YHWH’s mercy, whereas the Ninevites immediately experience transformation after only a

takes, there are two apparent motives: first, they mourn at the reception of the prophetic message, and second, they repent with the hope of appeasing YHWH's anger against them.<sup>21</sup> Together, these two motives capture either side of the life and death motif. In the first, they present themselves as mourning and showing anguish for their foretold death, which leads to the second, where they act with the intention of perhaps avoiding the outcome that has been given to them and finding life. These two responses are the focal point of the chapter and their presentations of the death and life motifs, respectively, play a crucial role in the development of the rest of the narrative, going forward. As such, both responses must be addressed in detail.

#### Death Motif in Ninevites' Mourning

The mourning aspects of the king's decree are often lumped together with the actions of repentance in v. 8b, but it is important to distinguish between them because the movement from acknowledgement of death to hope for life is significant to the unfolding of the narrative and the presentation of the life and death motif. This separation is supported by Arthur Ackerman's argument that the motions of donning sackcloth, fasting, and sitting in ashes in vv. 5, 7–8a are not actions of repentance, but of mourning and acknowledgement of YHWH's power as a deity.<sup>22</sup> The distinguishing factor, according to his study, is that there lacks an explicit mention of turning from idolatry or disloyalty to YHWH and that Nineveh was acting out of a desire to remain alive, not out of any legitimate turn of the heart towards YHWH. While Ackerman is

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single day of Jonah's mission. The hastening of the Ninevites transformation through repentance emphasizes the very issue that will cause Jonah to become so frustrated in Jonah 4: YHWH's sovereign grace. For more on the study of Nineveh's size, see Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 221–22; Marcus, "Three Days' Walk," 42–53; Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," 29–51.

<sup>21</sup> The prophets make it quite clear that those who wish to have their mourning taken seriously by YHWH must also engage in proper conduct and repentance, or else their mourning is in vain (Isa 58:5–12; Jer 14:11–12; Zech 7); Belben, "Fasting," 364.

<sup>22</sup> Ackerman, "Purpose of Jonah's Mission," 192.

certainly right that there is a lack of explicit devotion to YHWH, the Ninevites are called by the king to *turn from their evil ways and violence*, which should be recognized as a basic formula for repentance; while there may be a lack of explicit devotion or cultic practices mentioned to mark their repentance, the general submission to YHWH highlights this point. By recognizing the mourning rituals as separate from the acts of repentance, the motif of death is established in a way that allows for the motif of life to be expected through repentance, which, in turn, prompts a response from YHWH. A brief look at the mourning components mentioned in vv. 5–8 will demonstrate the significance this plays in developing the motif.

Fasting as a practice is a time where one intentionally refrains from the life-giving sustenance of food for the religious purpose of humbling oneself.<sup>23</sup> The practice of fasting is connected both to bereavement<sup>24</sup> and to the acknowledgement of one's own guilt in the process of repentance. The Day of Atonement is the primary instance of fasting in the Israelite cultic tradition (Lev 16:19, 31; 23:27; 32: Num 9:7), though other public fasts were brought into practice in the postexilic period (see Ezra 8:21–23; Neh 9:1; Zech 8:19; Esth 4:16). While it is not an act of repentance, there is a connection between fasting and the removal of sin and guilt in the Day of Atonement. When the instruction on fasting, or more literally, “denying oneself” (Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27, 32) is provided, the purpose stated is that it is the day in which atonement will be made on behalf of all Israel to YHWH (Lev 16:30; 23:28). In this way the denying of oneself is meant as a preparatory action in order that the atoning sacrifices made for Israel would cover

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<sup>23</sup> Belben, “Fasting,” 364; Limburg, *Jonah*, 81. John Muddiman distinguishes fasting from other food-related abstentions on the following bases: “[Fasting] is total abstention, and is thus to be distinguished both from permanent food restrictions, like those against unclean animals, and also from occasional abstention from certain foods, like meat on Fridays, a practice adopted by the later Christian Church.” Muddiman, “Fast, Fasting,” 773.

<sup>24</sup> Some examples of fasting as an act of personal bereavement are 2 Sam 3:35; 12:16–23; 1 Kgs 21:27; Neh 1:4; Ps 35:13. Examples of corporate acts of fasting for bereavement include 1 Sam 30:13; 2 Sam 1:12; Esth 4:3.



one's sins—it is an acknowledgement of guilt and the precursor to repentance (cf. 1 Sam 7:6; Neh 9:1–2; Dan 9:3–19).<sup>25</sup>

In a similar fashion to fasting, donning sackcloth is a symbolic motion of letting go of earthly comforts and embracing utter humility in times of grief and guilt acknowledgement.<sup>26</sup> There is a biblical precedent that acts of mourning are used as attempts to petition YHWH to change their circumstances or provide answers. Such a goal is modelled in 2 Sam 12:16–23, where David fasts while his son is struck with grave illness by YHWH. In 2 Sam 12:22–23, David states “While the child was alive, I fasted and wept, for I thought, ‘Who knows, YHWH may be gracious to me and let the child live. But now, he is dead. Why, then, should I fast? Am I able to bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.’” The assumption, then, is that David was fasting as a means of petition to YHWH to perhaps change the judgement that he had been given.<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, at the receiving of Jonah's proclamation, the Ninevites immediately demonstrate that they have accepted the words as legitimate and they mourn the judgement pronounced upon them, thus fostering the motif of death.

In addition to the mourning that the citizens of Nineveh partake in, the king of Nineveh is described as carrying out his own personal version of “changing/overturning” in chiasmic motion where he “arose from his throne, removed his mantle, clothed himself with sackcloth, and sat down in ashes” (v. 6). Tribble states that “these inverted movements provide a striking picture of a monarch. He has ‘overturned’ in dwelling, dress, and dignity.”<sup>28</sup> By specifying the king's personal actions in response to the proclamation, the narrator is presenting the reader with a

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<sup>25</sup> For more on fasting and the Day of Atonement, see Muddiman, “Fast, Fasting,” 773–74; Pfeiffer, “Atonement, Day Of,” 103–5.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 122; Limburg, *Jonah*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> See Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 164; Barron and Reno, *2 Samuel*, 116–18; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 301.

<sup>28</sup> Tribble, “Jonah,” 513–14.

potent example of the mourning that is taken up individually throughout the entire city population. In addition to the commands which he gave his citizens, the king sits in ashes, which is a common symbol of death and mourning, and is associated with repentance in a similar fashion to sackcloth and fasting.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, the concept of ashes being used as a symbol for death originates in the ancient military practice of burning cities to the ground, which further amplifies the motif of death in this particular demonstration by the king. What is important from this information is that the king is humbling himself in the face of the divine death sentence the city has received, demonstrating his concern for or fear of death.

#### Life Motif in Nineveh's Repentance

With the sombre mourning and death motif properly established in vv. 5–8a, the commands of the king now transition from mourning to petition, as the Ninevites are commanded to “cry out to God with force and all must turn from their way of evil and from the violence in their hands” (v. 8b). The first of these actions draws a connection to Jonah 1:6 where the captain of the ship commands Jonah to “cry out to your God” and to 1:4 where the sailors are described as crying out to theirs.<sup>30</sup> Just as the sailors were entirely focused on preserving their own lives by attempting to communicate with a deity, so the king is urging the citizens to do the same—with the added emphasis “with force” to express the dire circumstances. As such, these two actions of crying out and turning from evil and violence make up the attempt at preserving life, thus creating the life motif.

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<sup>29</sup> Ryken et al., “Ashes,” 50. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, there are two primary ways in which ashes are implemented in mourning: they are either put on one’s head (see 2 Sam 13:19; and similarly with dust, Job 2:12; Josh 7:6; Lam 2:10) or sat or lain in (see Esth 4:3; Isa 58:5; Jer 6:26; Ezek 27:30); Osborne, “Ashes,” 92.

<sup>30</sup> Tribble, “Jonah,” 514. Simon also offers a comparison of these two scenes and emphasizes the cry to YHWH that the captain and the king share; Simon, *Jonah*, 26–27, 32.

Of the two commands to repent, “all must turn from their way of evil and from the violence in their hands” requires more attention to understand the depth of its connection to the life motif. As stated above in the argument for the connection to the flood narrative language, Kahn draws similarities between the Ninevite king’s decree to turn from *evil* and *violence* with the *evil* and *violence* that prompted the flood in Gen 7.<sup>31</sup> By identifying this connection to actions that lead to death in Genesis, reading the command to turn from these very same actions is then a reversal of the expected outcome, and life is now hoped for. Indeed, this is reflected in the next verse, where the king exclaims “Who knows, the God may turn and relent; he may turn from the burning of his anger and we may not perish” (v. 9). There is no ambiguity in this final statement—the purpose of these actions are to hope for mercy that will lead to life.

So, in looking carefully at the response of the Ninevites to Jonah’s proclamation, it is evident that their actions present a dual-response that encapsulates both a death and life motif. First, a motif of death appears as they mourn the words they have heard, which is demonstrated in the collective actions of the Ninevites, the personal actions of the king, and his decree. Second, a motif of life emerges as they do what they can to make amends in the hope that it will appease YHWH’s anger against them. Together, these two responses set up for YHWH’s decision on his judgement over the city and this decision is later identified as a point of tension between YHWH and Jonah.

### **Life Motif in YHWH’s Relenting**

The final instance of the motif of life and death in Jonah 3 is found in the response of YHWH to the Ninevite’s mourning and repentance. Verse 10 explains that YHWH chooses to relent of his

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<sup>31</sup> Kahn, “Analysis of Jonah,” 92; cf. Limburg, *Jonah*, 79.

punishment on account of their turning from evil. This brings the dilemma of the chapter to a close as the prophetic word spoken by Jonah is seen as fulfilled through YHWH's decisive abstention from taking action against the great city—an ironic twist from the original interpretation of the proclamation, which would involve YHWH actively bringing about their doom. This twist is set up in vv. 8–9 and brought to completion in v. 10 using a repetition of the key words שׁוּב (“to turn”) and נָחַם (“to relent”). In this way, the motif of life and death in this verse is connected to the previous two verses in that it completes the progression from death to life, and it is also the capstone to the larger motif that began in v. 4, when Jonah first made his announcement.

The repetition of the key words שׁוּב and נָחַם play a significant role in framing vv. 8b–10, as they both relate to the word הִפְךָ (“to overturn”) in the proclamation from Jonah in v. 4 as verbs that denote some form of change, which may result in Nineveh being “changed” rather than “overthrown.”<sup>32</sup> By using these words, the author is developing the motif of life specifically through the formulating of the alternate understanding of Jonah's proclamation where the city is “changed” instead of “overthrown.” In the text, שׁוּב (appearing once each in vv. 8 and 10, twice in v. 9) and נָחַם (once each in vv. 9 and 10) present a progression that begins with the king doing what he can to subvert the doom that has been foretold to the city and ends with YHWH relenting of his wrath.<sup>33</sup> To look more specifically at the word usage within this progression, see the following translation of vv. 8b–10: “[A]ll must *turn* (שׁוּב) from their way of evil and from the violence in their hands. Who knows, the God may *turn* (שׁוּב) and *relent* (נָחַם); he may *turn*

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<sup>32</sup> Tribble, “Jonah,” 514.

<sup>33</sup> שׁוּב is a common verb throughout the Hebrew Bible, appearing 1056 times. However, its heavy repetition in this particular section of the text merits recognition as a key word. נָחַם is far less common than שׁוּב, appearing only 108 times throughout the Hebrew Bible; Wigram, *Englishman's Concordance*, 2:808, 1238–45.

(שוב) from the burning of his anger and we may not perish.’ Then God saw their deeds, how they *turned* (שוב) from their way of evil and God *relented* (נחם) of the calamity he had said he would bring to them and he did not do it.” This progression not only confirms that YHWH’s intentions of the proclamation were to destroy Nineveh, but it more importantly reverses that decision.<sup>34</sup>

That Nineveh’s repentance is centered on moral reform is significant to the development of the rest of the narrative, going forward into Jonah 4. What is demonstrated in this chapter is largely similar to what is modelled in Jer 18:1–11.<sup>35</sup> Looking specifically in Jer 18:7–8, YHWH states that “[i]n a moment I may speak against a nation or against a kingdom to pluck it up and break it and cause it to perish. But if that nation which I have spoken against *turns* (root שוב) from its evil, then I will *relent* (root נחם) of the calamity I had considered doing to it.”

Comparing this to the translations of Jonah 3 above, it is evident that a number of parallels exists between the two passages. In the Jeremiah passage, the focal point of repentance for both Israel and the nations is specifically to turn from doing evil and has no mention of cultic reform or conversion. If cultic reform is not the focal point of this repentance, then the purpose of Nineveh’s repentance is not to demonstrate some whole-hearted devotion to YHWH, but rather, a more general willingness to submit to YHWH as the one who controls life and death.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> That the Ninevites’ actions play some role in the change of fate in this narrative is by no means an issue for YHWH’s sovereignty. The Ninevites did not change their fate, YHWH did. As Stuart argues, YHWH provides the opportunity for nations to be obedient or not, and so a level on contingency is required for such a relationship. However, “this hardly makes God dependent on the nations; it rather makes them dependent on him, as is the point of the lesson at the potter’s house in Jer 18:1–11, and the point of the mourning decree in Jonah 3:5–9. God holds all the right, all the power, and all the authority”; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 496.

<sup>35</sup> Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 496; Timmer, “Jonah’s Theology of the Nations,” 17.

<sup>36</sup> A similar theme is notable in Jonah 1 where the pagan sailors who sacrifice and make vows to YHWH are not reported as becoming wholistic Yahwistic worshippers. Of course, there is a cultic aspect to their response to YHWH, but as is argued in chapter 2 of this thesis, there is nothing to suggest that the sailors converted fully to the Israelite religion.

### **Conclusions on Motif of Life and Death in Jonah 3**

The mission that was originally instigated at the beginning of the book is now completed: YHWH's message has been delivered to the Ninevites and they have responded to it. As this chapter argues, the motif of life and death is instrumental in the deliverance of and response to the proclamation Jonah gives to the great city. In proclaiming the message, there is a certain ambiguity concerning whether life or death is on the horizon, though, as the narrative progresses, there is a leaning towards death as the Ninevites respond under the assumption that they are in harm's way. However, as they respond with mourning (which acknowledges their pending death) and petition (which hopes for a second chance at life), there is a sudden twist in the trajectory of their collective fate as YHWH has compassion on the city because of its moral reform. This twist in the narrative is guided by the use of the key words **שוב** and **גחם**, which both depict the turning from **רעה** by the Ninevites and YHWH. Thus, the prophetic word which was originally perceived as presenting a death motif quickly becomes a presentation of a life motif.

At this point in the narrative, the reader may have assumed that what they had just read was the climax of the story. However, it becomes quickly evident in the first few verses of Jonah 4 that this entire chapter was actually the set-up for the final scene of the book where Jonah expresses his true emotions and YHWH makes his definitive statement of sovereignty over life and death. The narrative's climax is found in YHWH's interactions with Jonah over YHWH's exercise of grace over the Ninevites.

## CHAPTER 5: MOTIFS IN JONAH 4:1–11

### **Introduction and Overview of Jonah 4**

While the Ninevites have repented and YHWH has relented of his punishment against them, the narrative continues as Jonah has a dramatically negative reaction to the whole affair. Jonah 4 focuses on the interactions of YHWH and Jonah as the two of them approach mercy and justice from differing perspectives. Jonah calls out YHWH's character and judgement, while YHWH works at correcting Jonah and bringing him around to understanding the divine perspective of justice. Throughout the entirety of this scene, life and death is not only the main motif driving the narrative forward, but it is also the central point of argument through the discussion of YHWH's demonstration of mercy and judgement. Most blatantly, Jonah desires death on two separate occasions (v. 3, 8–9), both times in relation to the giving or taking of life. YHWH causes a plant to grow in order to save Jonah from the heat of the sun (and his anger), then causes it to perish in an elaborate attempt to communicate with Jonah (v. 7). Finally, the entire argument that the prophet and YHWH have is centered around whether Nineveh should be destroyed or saved. Each situational motif of life and death is concluded by a question posed by YHWH concerning Jonah's complaints, thus creating three main sections of text to assess: Jonah's death wish concerning Nineveh being spared (vv. 1–4), Jonah's death wish concerning the bush dying (vv. 5–9), and YHWH's rebuke of Jonah (vv. 10–11). In each of these, the motif of life and death is focused on through the question of whether YHWH should exact mercy or judgment upon Nineveh.

### Jonah's Death Wish Concerning Nineveh Being Spared

Immediately following YHWH's decision to relent from his actions against Nineveh, Jonah expresses a wave of negative emotions with the following prayer: "O YHWH, is this not what I had said while I was still in my own country. Thus, I fled in the beginning to Tarshish; for I knew you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in love, and one who relents of calamity. So now, YHWH, seize my life force from me, for my death is better than my life." Found in this prayer are two separate instances of the motif of life and death. Most obviously, there is Jonah's death wish that concludes the prayer. However, the other is more implicit—Jonah's confession of YHWH's merciful character is a reference both to the act YHWH just accomplished in relenting against Nineveh, but also to Exod 34, where YHWH spoke a similar statement to Moses amidst a narrative confronting Israel's near-destruction. In both of these situations, YHWH's mercy is the key element that brings life when death is deserved. Both of these motifs work together to create Jonah's argument against YHWH and are discussed below.

#### Nineveh's Life Compared to Israel's Life

The phrase "for I knew that..." (v. 2) is a signal that the words to follow are climactic to the narrative, and so it is as Jonah recites a portion of Exod 34:6–7.<sup>1</sup> That Jonah's confession of YHWH is pulled from here is not uncommon as there are a number of similar references throughout the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> This abundance of references to the same text suggests that Jonah's description is very much in line with an orthodox understanding of YHWH.<sup>3</sup> What is

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<sup>1</sup> Tribble, "Jonah," 517. This phrase as a signal of climax is found also in Gen 22:12b; Exod 18:11; 1 Kgs 17:24.

<sup>2</sup> See Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; 2 Chron 30:9.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 126–27; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 119.



particularly important to note of this quotation is that the context from which it is drawn is at the creation of the second set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments, a time when Israel was on the verge of being destroyed by YHWH due to their unfaithfulness. In this narrative, YHWH is reassuring Moses of his faithfulness to Israel after he had threatened to let “[his] anger burn against them and consume them” (Exod 32:10) after they had cast a god from gold (see Exod 32—34). Had it not been for Moses interceding on behalf of Israel (Exod 32:11–13), the nation would not have made it beyond Sinai. Jonah’s quotation of these verses suggests that he is not unaware of Israel’s dependency on YHWH’s mercy, even from its conception as the nation made its way from Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the first instance of the motif of life and death is in this recitation of Exod 34:6–7 as an acknowledgement that Israel was once in the same situation of being near destruction by YHWH that Nineveh has found itself in presently. It is this very comparison that Jonah draws between his home nation and the great evil city that his distress arises.

#### Death Motif in Jonah’s Reaction to YHWH’s Mercy

The surprising element of this confession is not in the content, but rather in the prophet’s disdain for it—he knows YHWH is a merciful God, but he cannot bear to see it. The phrase “and now” (וְעַתָּה, v. 3) is often used in speech to lead to a practical conclusion that is drawn from the previous statement (see Ps 39:7; Gen 3:22; Isa 5:3, 5). It would seem natural, then, that what would follow a declaration of YHWH’s mercy would be some celebratory conclusion. Yet, there is an ironic twist here where Jonah’s conclusion is that YHWH should take his נַפְשׁוֹ (“lifeforce,” v. 3) because he found that his מוֹת (“death,” vv. 3, 8, 9) is better than his חַי (“life,” 3, 8).<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” 329.

<sup>5</sup> Limburg, *Jonah*, 92. By quoting Exod 34:6–7, Jonah is acknowledging the fact that Israel’s existence is owed to YHWH and his merciful and compassionate tendencies. Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 127; Watts, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 92.

use of these three key words strung together identify the focal point of the argument that consumes this entire chapter of the text. However, there is ambiguity in this statement that causes the reader to wonder what it is about YHWH's mercy that causes Jonah this much anguish—the answer to this question is not fully revealed until the next section.<sup>6</sup> Presently, the information being given is that Jonah is negatively affected by YHWH's merciful and compassionate nature, as displayed in his recitation of the Exod 34:6–7 tradition. From this, scholars have attempted to understand some basic understanding of Jonah's frustration.

Cohen argues that Jonah is not actually in disagreement with YHWH's character specifically on the grounds of there being no explicit statement of discrepancy.<sup>7</sup> According to his interpretation, Jonah demonstrates disappointment—even to the point of death—but this does not necessitate that he disagrees with the notion of divine mercy. However, Cohen fails to explain how Jonah comes to the point of desiring death, if not for his disagreement with some aspect of YHWH's mercy. Hauser makes the assertion that Jonah is upset for having to face the judgement for his sin of running from YHWH, but that the Ninevites did not face judgment for their great evil, though this cannot be since Jonah specifically states that YHWH's expected compassion is why he initially fled.<sup>8</sup> Jenson, then, argues that Jonah is not frustrated by YHWH's general practice of justice and compassion, but by this specific case of how compassion is given—that is,

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the ambiguities Jonah's request present, there are some scholars who use this single reaction by the prophet to interpret the rest of the narrative, rather than have the rest of the narrative help to interpret the reaction. Sasson and Turner both argue that Jonah is upset that his prophetic word did not come to pass (at least, in the way he hoped it might) and was therefore framed as a false prophet; Sasson, *Jonah*, 295–97; Turner, "Jonah 3:10–4:11," 413. Similarly, Devorah Wohlgelernter states that "he is angry that the repentance was effective and that his power as a prophet was not illustrated in a more dramatic fashion, that is, by Nineveh's destruction"; Wohlgelernter, "Death Wish," 132. For these scholars, the primary concern of the prophet is upholding his personal brand and self-image. However, this is simply not supported throughout the rest of the narrative, nor does it connect to the driving message of the narrative, as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, "The Tragedy of Jonah," 165.

<sup>8</sup> Hauser, "Jonah," 27.

to the evil city of Nineveh.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Fretheim argues that his issue is not with YHWH's "indiscriminate *extension*" of mercy, but his "*indiscriminate extension*" of mercy.<sup>10</sup> Jonah has demonstrated in his interactions with the sailors that he is in agreement with YHWH's general practice of mercy to non-Israelites; amidst the storm, Jonah helps to identify its cause and how to resolve it, all for the sake of preserving the sailors' lives.<sup>11</sup>

In his evaluation of the prophet's dilemma, Fretheim describes the situation with the following: "Nineveh, at whose very hand Jonah's Israel had suffered so mercilessly, was to be offered the chance to escape the guillotine. Israel, God's covenant people, had been destroyed, and now the destroyer was being offered life!"<sup>12</sup> While this perspective wrongly imports the influence of the Assyrian invasion into Jonah's words, it rightly highlights the thoughts of the audience receiving the narrative—Jonah's motivation must be held to the pre-exilic context, even if the postexilic audience of the book has additional knowledge to the situation. Nevertheless, understanding that the audience of the book is knowledgeable about the rise and fall of the Assyrian empire (ending in the late 7th century) following Jonah's historical office is worth noting as it helps to understand the presentation of mercy in this situation.<sup>13</sup> The reader, knowing that Assyria does one day fall to the Babylonian Empire, would be able to recognize within this narrative the fact that YHWH's mercy does not safeguard oneself indefinitely, emphasizing the relationship between repentance and mercy.

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<sup>9</sup> Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 83; Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 329.

<sup>10</sup> Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 329.

<sup>11</sup> Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 329.

<sup>12</sup> Fretheim, "Jonah and Theodicy," 328.

<sup>13</sup> The implications of having an audience that is knowledgeable about the history of the Assyrian empire would be an interesting study to undertake. For the current study, it need only be mentioned that the post-exilic audience is aware of and influenced by this history, as it relates to their reception of Jonah's commission and reaction to YHWH's grace.

Keeping the above in mind, the pre-exilic context does allow for the probability that Jonah is aware of the threat Nineveh/Assyria poses to Israel and surrounding nations, thus his distress may be rooted in the fact that YHWH's judgement could have eliminated the threat but instead, his mercy has allowed the potential for the evil city to rise up against Israel.<sup>14</sup> This is supported by recalling that Jonah's prophetic mission in 2 Kgs 14:25–26 was aimed specifically at bringing hope to Israel through the expansion of its borders, so mercy being extended to a nation that stands in the way of expansion would be seen as troublesome to the prophet.<sup>15</sup> The Israelites, who were promised a glorious future are constantly left in the hands of oppressors and are thus a community shaped by despair and disappointment, so it would be rather emotionally taxing on Jonah to have to witness grace being given, not only to someone other than Israel, but to the wicked city of Nineveh.<sup>16</sup>

It was outlined in chapter 2 of this thesis, but it is imperative to restate here that Cohen opts to translate the key word חרה as “despondency/depression” rather than the more ubiquitous “anger,”<sup>17</sup> and that this thesis agrees.<sup>18</sup> Translating חרה as “depression” highlights the connection

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<sup>14</sup> Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 328. Arthur Ackerman makes a similar argument in his reading of the narrative; he asserts that Israel had become a threat to Nineveh and had thus caught the evil city's attention on the geopolitical map. Had it not been for the repentance brought on by the prophetic word from God, Israel would have been wiped out sooner than it was. In this way, Ackerman understands the final chapter of Jonah to be an explanation for why Jonah should be appreciative of YHWH's actions, rather than critical. Ackerman, “Purpose of Jonah's Mission,” 192–94. While this is an entertaining idea, it has no grounding in the biblical text and is therefore not able to be supported.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen argues that Jonah's mission to the Ninevites is actually the signal that YHWH has begun the process of considering Israel's destruction, which is specified in 2 Kgs 14:27 as not yet being the case. In this way, the Jonah narrative would be a work designed to aid in the processing of the exilic experience; Cohen, “The Tragedy of Jonah,” 174; cf. Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 131.

<sup>16</sup> Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 120–21.

<sup>17</sup> To reiterate the reason for this translation, Cohen looks to Gen 4:6 where YHWH speaks with Cain, saying “why are you distressed (למה חרה לך) and why is your face fallen?” (Cohen's translation). He turns also to a synonym of חרה, which is כעס, which has been used to denote despondency (see Ps 31:10; Eccl 1:18; 7:3). For his full argument, see Cohen, “The Tragedy of Jonah,” 170–72.

<sup>18</sup> The word חרה is only used 90 times throughout the Hebrew Bible, so its threefold appearance in Jonah 4 (vv. 1, 4, 9) is rather significant. As is argued throughout this chapter, the relationship Jonah's חרה has to the rest of the motif of life and death is central to the chapter's interpretation—thus it is considered a key word; Wigram, *Englishman's Concordance*, 1:462–63.

between Jonah and the prophet Elijah. For both prophets, there is a death wish that begins with the phrase “Now, YHWH, seize my life from me” (1 Kgs 19:4; Jonah 4:3) that expresses their personal anguish.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Elijah’s reason for his request is because he thinks he will fail at his mission, whereas Jonah’s request follows the utmost success of his. For both characters, divine justice appears to be of utmost importance to them and their ministry; Elijah’s sense of hopelessness comes from his inability to call Israel back to faithfulness, and Jonah’s seems to come from his inability to influence YHWH to divine justice over divine mercy. Some consider this comparison to be a parody, highlighting the disconnect between the prophet and his God.<sup>20</sup> However, Simon reads it as a dignifying comparison where Jonah has reached a similar point to Elijah in his ministry where he is pushed to the brink of death.<sup>21</sup> This second interpretation holds more weight when read within the greater context of the implications of Nineveh’s preservation, discussed above.

There is one more significant piece of evidence that suggests Jonah has an issue with YHWH’s specific act of mercy toward Nineveh, and that is in the particular wording of his death wish. Many scholars translate his justification for YHWH taking his life as “it is better for me to die than to live” (v. 3), which translates the key words מוֹת (“death”) and חַי (“life”) as verbal forms, despite being nouns. More accurately, Jonah says “So now, YHWH, seize my lifeforce from me, for my *death* is better than my *life*.” This difference is crucial because Jonah *has*

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<sup>19</sup> Jonah’s statement is nearly identical to Elijah’s, with the only difference being that Jonah’s statement adds an extra emphasis on the immediacy of his request by literally saying “And now, YHWH, seize *now* my life” (ויעתה יהוה קחנא את־נפשי; v. 3). This exaggeration simply adds to the dramatic element of his request. Other biblical characters to express death wishes include Moses (Exod 32:32; Num 11:15), Job (Job 6:8–9), and Jeremiah (Jer 20:14–18).

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 229–30; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 121; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 85–86; Limburg, *Jonah*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 38.

already experienced both death and life in this narrative.<sup>22</sup> As argued in chapter 3 of this thesis, Jonah 2 recounts the prophet's experience of salvation from death and Sheol; his subsequent second chance at life is then recognizable as an act of YHWH's mercy. So, given the arguments above concerning Jonah's motive for death, it is evident that Jonah wishes to experience his own judgement in death rather than mercy in life, presumably to see Nineveh experience the same.

A new development of the use of the key word מוֹת is worth recognizing at this point. Until now, the only word used to directly denote death has been אָבַד, which bears a punitive connotation. However, now Jonah speaks more generically of his previous state of being as simply מוֹת. The transition from the former to latter is simply based on the use of מוֹת as a noun, denoting a state of being, matching its counterpart חַי rather than an action, as is the case with אָבַד. This more general word usage is recognizable as a key word by its high concentration of repetition within the chapter (vv. 3, 8b, 8c, 9), especially with the word only appearing 155 times throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Limburg recognizes that the Masoretic text places a *setumah* at the end of v. 3, which signals a significant pause or break in the narrative.<sup>23</sup> For story-telling purposes, this is a good place to stop, for as Limburg says, "It is effective for the reader or hearer to stop and to ponder Jonah's statement in silence."<sup>24</sup> In addition to this, this *setumah* could be seen as a recognition of the life and death motif in Jonah's statement. While he knows YHWH to be one who is gracious and merciful—which is directly connected to the life motif in the particular instance of this story and the Exodus story—Jonah desires death as a result. By signaling an intentional pause to

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<sup>22</sup> In speculating the nature of Jonah's request to die, Watts mentions how astounding it is that the prophet would wish for death, especially since he described it so awfully in Jonah 2. This emphasizes just how desperate Jonah is to see justice done upon Nineveh, especially for the sake of his own people; Watts, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 92–93.

<sup>23</sup> Limburg, *Jonah*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Limburg, *Jonah*, 93.

contemplate this statement, the text itself recognizes the implementation of the motif to produce the shocking effect it has on the readers.

While it is very helpful to recognize this *setumah* in the text, v. 4 offers YHWH's response to Jonah before transitioning to the next scene and contributes to this first situational motif. Interestingly enough, Jonah is not condemned for his prayer to YHWH. Rather, YHWH responds by asking "Is it good for you to be depressed?" (v. 4) which initiates YHWH's goal of getting Jonah to realize the folly of his thinking and expresses a deep concern for the preservation of his life.<sup>25</sup> This question is not aimed at criticizing the legitimacy of Jonah's depression, but is meant to cause him (and the reader) to reflect on if it will do him any good to foster the despondent state.<sup>26</sup> Wohlgelernter opposes this perspective by interpreting YHWH's statement as a critical remark that highlights Jonah as moody, rather than being legitimately depressed, and that his state of mind is due to his discomfort and embarrassment.<sup>27</sup> While there is significance to acknowledging his desperate and surprising attitude, Wohlgelernter's treatment of the situation reduces the prophet to a mere whiny and temperamental child, which does not fit the rest of the narrative up until this point. Instead, reading YHWH's question as an expression of concern for Jonah's well-being remains consistent with the level of compassion that is expressed through Jonah's recitation of Exod 34:6–7 and displayed in his relenting towards Nineveh, thus fostering a life motif.

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<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 231.

<sup>26</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 38–39; Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, 329. Sweeney's interpretation rests in the translation of *ההיטב*, which is often translated as "is it *right* [for you to be this angry]?" However, Sweeney argues that a more reasonable translation is to follow the verb's root (which is *טוב*), which renders "is it *good* [for you to be this angry]?" In such a case, YHWH does not state that his motives for anger are illegitimate, but that remaining in his anger will not produce any good.

<sup>27</sup> Wohlgelernter, "Death Wish," 132–33.

### Summary of Jonah's First Death Wish

Gathering all of this information together, the reader is presented with a complex, yet incomplete understanding of Jonah's inner state. The prophet offers a recitation of Exod 34:6–7, which acknowledges that YHWH has a tendency of mercy and compassion towards the repentant. This recital displays Jonah's understanding of Nineveh's situation being akin to Israel's when they faced death and judgement for their faithlessness at Mount Sinai. Despite his general acceptance of this claim of YHWH's mercy, Jonah becomes depressed because he knows of Nineveh's power and their wickedness, so he expresses his wish to die. His death wish is not simply to remove himself from the situation, but more specifically, to experience judgement through death again, perhaps hoping to incur judgement upon Nineveh. For Jonah, it is better to see justice done upon the city than to see it spared, especially considering the power it holds as an enemy of Israel. Despite Jonah's attempt at subverting YHWH's mercy, YHWH responds with a deep concern for Jonah's well-being by asking if it is beneficial for him to remain in this state of despondency.

### **Jonah's Death Wish Concerning the Plant Dying**

In similar fashion to Jonah 1, Jonah offers no verbal response to YHWH's question about Jonah's well-being and instead turns and leaves the city. There is a switch in scenery that signals the beginning of a new scene where a second, but connected argument will ensue between YHWH and his prophet. In an attempt to draw out the true cause of Jonah's disagreement about YHWH's distribution of justice and mercy, YHWH causes a plant to sprout up over Jonah's head, giving him comfort and then causes its removal, bringing Jonah anguish. This section demonstrates the motif of life and death through both the giving and taking of life as displayed in



the sudden growth and death of the plant (v. 6–7), and the subsequent threat on Jonah’s life as the sun beats down on him (v. 8). These two events set up the second petition for death from the prophet (v. 9), which sparks the final statement by YHWH in the final section.

#### Life and Death in the Creation and Destruction of the Plant (vv. 6–8a)

As Jonah sits to the East of Nineveh, apparently awaiting its destruction, YHWH causes a plant to sprout up and cover him, in order to “save him from his discomfort” (v. 6). This demonstration comes as a response to Jonah’s lack of response to YHWH’s question of whether it is beneficial for him to remain despondent in v. 4.<sup>28</sup> There is a level of irony in YHWH’s motive for shading Jonah that is recognizable only in the Hebrew language, but helps to draw out the significance behind the life motif present in this verse. The word “discomfort” in this particular instance is the word רעה, which has been used in the previous chapters to define evil matters and calamity.

Trible notes this irony with the following statement: “For all the other characters—the sailors (cf. 1:7), the Ninevites (3:10), and God (3:10)—evil has already been dispelled. Now the appointed plant aims to remove it from Jonah as well.”<sup>29</sup> To further this irony, the words “shade” (צל) and “to deliver” (נצל) are derived from the same root.<sup>30</sup> Thus, as YHWH is *shading* Jonah from his *discomfort* while he sulks over the great city, he is also *delivering* him from his *evil* that comes as a result of his desire to see the Ninevites punished. This action highlights the sinfulness of Jonah’s actions, yet also reflects the compassion YHWH is showing Jonah, rather than the judgement that was doled out upon the prophet in Jonah 1.

<sup>28</sup> Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 87; Tribble, “Jonah,” 519.

<sup>29</sup> Tribble, “Jonah,” 521.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 128; Robson, “Undercurrents,” 202–3; Simon, *Jonah*, 40; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 505.

Looking beyond the clever wording of the action that takes place, the sudden creation and destruction of a plant should by no means be seen as anything less than one of the most clear examples of the motif of life and death throughout this entire narrative. The language used to describe the first half of this phenomenon is simply that YHWH “appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah...” (v. 6), in the span of only a day. The following day, YHWH appoints a worm to not simply *eat* the plant, but to “attack it” (נכה), which causes it to wither (יבש, v. 7).<sup>31</sup> The appointed worm parallels the worm appointed in Deut 28:39 to eat the vineyards of Israel in its disobedience, working as a symbol of destruction.<sup>32</sup> In this text, Moses is outlining the curses that result from disobedience to YHWH’s covenant, which includes the curse: “You will plant and dress vineyards, but you will not drink the wine nor will you gather [the grapes] for the worm will consume them” (Deut 28:39).<sup>33</sup> By comparison, Jonah’s conflict with YHWH has resulted in a similar experience.

The combined use of the image of the worm and of it attacking the plant give clear signals of death, and more specifically judgement. These two actions unmistakably identify YHWH as the one who wields the power over life and death as he performs the acts of creation and destruction right before Jonah’s eyes. The narrator takes the situation a step further and describes how “YHWH then appointed a sweltering East wind and the sun attacked Jonah’s head so that he grew faint” (v. 8a). In this action, YHWH is intensifying the effect of the plant’s death by bringing Jonah to the ultimate place of discomfort—the opposite state that he was in as he received shade from the plant.

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<sup>31</sup> Translating בעלות as “attack” is a gloss of the more literal translation “rise up against.” Nahum 3:3 offers a similar situation where the verb עלה (“to go up”) is used to outline an context involving death.

<sup>32</sup> Tribble, “Jonah,” 521.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this passage and the purpose of the worm and curses, see Christensen et al., *Deuteronomy 21–34*, 6b:686; Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 346–47; Harstad, *Deuteronomy*, 739–745 (esp. 742); Woods, *Deuteronomy*, 279–80.

### Death Motif in Jonah's Second Death Wish

As the near-instantaneous event concerning the plant takes place, the emotions which Jonah displays reiterate the motif of death that the prophet initiated in v. 3 with his first death wish. With the shade over his head, "Jonah rejoiced over the plant with great joy," (v. 7), yet when the sun beat down on his head in the heat of the wind after the plant withered, "he wished for himself to die, and he said 'My death is better than my life'" (v. 8). The dramatic shift in emotion from great joy back into deep depression produces this startling picture of volatility in the prophet and addresses a deeper issue than just distain for the mercy that was given to the Ninevites—it reveals a self-centered and self-righteous attitude that is being fostered by Jonah's depression. Allen recognizes that "[b]y exposing him to a series of overwhelming experiences, YHWH conditions the prophet to a point where he can hear the question [concerning his depression] afresh, and is given the opportunity to use his own self-centeredness as a window upon the very heart of God."<sup>34</sup> This information is quite crucial to the motif of life and death, as the source of the problem which has been brewing since the beginning of the narrative is now identified and able to be resolved.

At this point, a response from YHWH draws an important contrast between Jonah's first death wish and his second. He repeats his initial question to the prophet with one slight addition: "Is it good for you to be depressed *over the plant*?" (v. 9), to which the prophet replies "It is best for me to be depressed, even unto death" (v. 9). While Jonah's motives have already been revealed, YHWH continues in his patience and pressures Jonah to confess his self-righteousness through an enquiry to the benefit his depression provides, rather than directly indict him.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 230.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 231; Simon, *Jonah*, 38–39. In his initial enquiry, YHWH was concerned for the depressive state brought on by Jonah's perspective of YHWH's mercy, but now Jonah has shown

However, with the specification of Jonah's feelings about the plant, YHWH's words are received with a greater sense of criticism; a comparison is drawn between Jonah's suicidality as a result of the Ninevites' receiving mercy and the same reaction over the plant's death. The first response is offered with some degree of legitimacy—that being that Jonah took issue with YHWH's freedom to practice mercy—this second response offers no such justification. In fact, the second time around, Jonah is critiquing the opposite divine characteristic as was presented originally; first he was upset with YHWH's freedom of mercy, now he is upset over YHWH's freedom of judgement.<sup>36</sup>

At the beginning of this section of the text, an important detail is mentioned that appears redundant but becomes clear if understood in light of the argument made above. Following YHWH's initial enquiry about Jonah's emotional state, the prophet "went out of the city, and sat down East of the city and made a shelter for himself there. Then he sat under it in its shade to see what would become of the city" (v. 5). Immediately following this verse, YHWH causes the plant to sprout up as shade, which appears redundant if Jonah has already made for himself a shelter. However, if the shelter and the plant are both recognized for their figurative potential, then they each become a powerful symbol of either character's argument concerning the life or death of Nineveh. Jonah builds a shelter as a final stand against YHWH's decision of divine mercy.<sup>37</sup> In this way, Jonah's shelter is made a symbol of his stance of defiance; he shows his

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that his depression is rooted in his own comfort, not in any legitimate question of divine justice. In her assessment of v. 4, Wohlgelernter wrongfully interpreted YHWH's question to Jonah as a snide remark that discredited Jonah's depression (this issue is addressed above; also, see Wohlgelernter, "Death Wish," 132–33). While this was a misinterpretation of the first event, it is closer to what is taking place in this second event; YHWH is not delegitimizing Jonah's depression, yet his use of the plant, wind, and sun causes Jonah to reveal on his own that his depression, though real, is poorly sourced.

<sup>36</sup> Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 129–30; Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> The relationship between this verse and the previous one has caused debate amongst scholars as to how one should read the two together, as two different readings can produce different understandings about Jonah's action of setting up camp outside of Nineveh; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 81–82. The first interpretation is to

persistence in demonstrating that his demand for death for himself or death to the Ninevites is legitimate. Ironically, YHWH then doubles down on this symbol by also providing a form of shelter for Jonah with a plant to demonstrate that his decision of mercy does not waiver to Jonah's argument. Both shelters are utilized as points of argument to determine the legitimacy of Jonah's complaint concerning Nineveh, and YHWH's plant draws out the fault in Jonah's argument, namely that his dissatisfaction is rooted in nothing but self-righteousness.

### Summary of Jonah's Second Death Wish

The narrator utilizes the motif of life and death advantageously in this second section of the text to flesh out the real reason for Jonah's despondency. First, Jonah leaves the city and makes a final stand against YHWH's decision of divine mercy by building a shelter and waiting expectantly outside of the city for its destruction; in doing this, Jonah uses his shelter as a symbol for his argument that either he or Nineveh must die. YHWH counters this symbolic act by causing a plant to sprout up and offer shade to the prophet, then causing its death through an attack by a worm of judgement. This prompts Jonah to respond in a similar fashion as before by offering up another death wish. The plant's life and death is, in itself, a powerful presentation of the life and death motif and highlights YHWH's sovereignty over existence. However, it also

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read the story as being relayed in chronological order, which is to say Jonah offers his complaint to YHWH prior to leaving the city. This view would assume that either YHWH had made his decision regarding the city prior to the forty days lapsing or Jonah saw the Ninevites' response to his proclamation and "knew" YHWH would be gracious towards them. It would also assume that Jonah's waiting period outside of the city is done with the hope that YHWH would still bring judgement. Stuart specifically argues for this perspective; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 504. The second interpretation is to read v. 5 in a pluperfect tense, which would mean that Jonah had left the city and waited forty days to see if Nineveh would be destroyed before offering up his initial complaint. This would assume any number of stylistic changes or techniques that could help to explain the flashback to Jonah's actions. Jenson argues for the first perspective on the grounds of the second perspective lacking evidence in manuscripts of edits to suggest a change in the text, as well as an inconsistency to how the narrator indicates disruptions to the chronological flow of the narrative; Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 81–82. Robson also addresses this issue at length, resulting in the same verdict as Jenson; see Robson, "Undercurrents," 203–5. This study follows suite with Jenson and Robson's conclusions.

provides the counterpart to Jonah's symbolic shelter and itself symbolizes the legitimacy of YHWH's original decision to be merciful to Nineveh. Therefore, while Jonah's actions continue the perpetuation of the motif of death and judgement, YHWH's actions remain steadfast in providing a motif of life and mercy.

### **YHWH's Rebuke of Jonah as Final Word on Life and Death**

These final two verses not only mark the end of the chapter and scene of this narrative, but also the end of the narrative, itself. As such, these closing sentences bring resolution to the entire adventure that Jonah has come on and are the final word on the issue of YHWH's sovereignty over life and death. Following Jonah's second cry for death, YHWH's focus shifts from drawing out the fault in his prophet to formulating an argument for his own actions of mercy towards Nineveh, which provided them life. YHWH's argument compares the prophet's emotions concerning the plant and his own emotions concerning the population of Nineveh. By drawing this comparison, YHWH demonstrates that he is permitted to show mercy towards the city through the implication that he has watched it grow over time into the great city that it has become, unlike Jonah who passively experienced the single plant's life and death in a matter of a day, yet is still moved by its death.

This final presentation of the motif of life and death allows the reader a perspective of the motif that has remained previously unexplored: YHWH's perspective of authoring life and death. Recognizing this unique quality to the motif in this situation is what resolves the conflict that has persisted throughout the narrative because, up to this point, every statement regarding life and death has been spoken by a human; now the chance is given to understand the mind of the Creator. Looking closely at the comparison that YHWH makes, Simon points out that he is not

evaluating the compassion Jonah and YHWH have on their respective objects in their sufferings, but rather, their understanding of the value their lives hold, in general.<sup>38</sup> Put into perspective of the characters, it would be incorrect to say that Jonah had *compassion* on the plant because that would assume he shared in the suffering of the plant's death. Rather, as Simon argues, he *cared* about the plant and recognized its worth as a bringer of shade. In a similar fashion, YHWH's statement about Nineveh is that he has sympathy or pity for the city because the people "do not know their right hand from their left" (v. 11).<sup>39</sup> From YHWH's divine perspective, life is sustained in the Ninevites specifically because they are unaware of the gravity of their sins and are therefore in need of mercy—the value of their lives extends beyond the wickedness they previously had displayed, which Jonah is not able to understand.

Interestingly, the use of the word גדל to describe the city of Nineveh takes on new meaning in this argument. While 1:2 saw Nineveh's greatness in conjunction with its wickedness and 3:2 emphasized its overwhelming physical size, here it expresses the vast number of lives that make up its population.<sup>40</sup> Here, more than ever, is גדל used to foster an environment for the motif of life and death to flourish. As YHWH refers to Nineveh as "the great city" for the third and final time (v. 11), the reader (and perhaps Jonah) is led to the realization that perhaps the meaning גדל was meant to be in reference to the numerous lives held within city—indeed, the repetition of the phrase "Nineveh, the great city" from 1:2 and 3:2 may suggest this to be the

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<sup>38</sup> Simon, *Jonah*, 44–45.

<sup>39</sup> This is not a statement about the Ninevites being generally unintelligent, but rather that they do not know any better in regards to their sins because they have not had the advantage of being YHWH's chosen people, as Israel has. As Allen states, "The Ninevites deserve compassion not only as creatures for whom God cares but also as virtual children compared to Israel, and so it is necessary to make allowances for the"; <sup>39</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 234; Martin, *The Prophet Jonah*, 87. Wiseman understands this statement as designating those who specifically lack moral perception (or the ability to make sound moral judgement); Wiseman, "Jonah's Nineveh," 39–40; Alexander et al., *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 130.

<sup>40</sup> Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 234; Simon, *Jonah*, 46.

case. If so, then this final reference becomes the key to understanding that, since the beginning and before any human action was taken, YHWH has been of the mind to preserve the city.

When speaking of events concerning the plant, there are three significant verbs that contribute to the motif of life and death. YHWH says that Jonah “did not make [the plant] great” (גדל, v. 10) and that the plant had “come into being” (היה, v. 10) in a night and had “perished” (אבד, v. 10) in a night.<sup>41</sup> Following the logic of YHWH’s argument, the inverse of each of these actions holds true about Nineveh by implication. YHWH states that, while Jonah had no reason to be invested in the plant since he had not been the one to make it great, YHWH has all the reason he needs to be invested in Nineveh because he *was* the one that made it great. Furthermore, Nineveh neither came into existence overnight, nor will it perish overnight, which is specifically the result of the sympathy YHWH is claiming over it.

Tzvi Abusch argues that YHWH’s use of the plant to make his point is due to the fact that Jonah lacks the ability to connect emotionally with humans.<sup>42</sup> By using the plant to draw out Jonah’s sympathy, YHWH is helping to bridge the gap between his utmost sovereignty and how that relates to humans for the prophet. This leads Abusch to the conclusion that YHWH’s final words are meant to present the reader with the following argument: “If Jonah cares for (חוט) non-humans (v. 10 קיקיון) as God cares for (חוט) both humans (v. 11 אדם . . . נינוה) and non-humans (v. 11 בהמה), and since God cares for humans as God cares for non-humans, then should not Jonah also care for humans as Jonah cares for non-humans?”<sup>43</sup> Abusch’s understanding of the purpose for YHWH’s statement, then, is not to justify his mercy, but to compel Jonah to have compassion

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<sup>41</sup> Note that the key word “perished” (אבד) is used rather than “withered” (יבש), as it is described in v. 7. This switch in terminology emphasizes YHWH’s influence in the plant’s death and sharpens the contrast between its fate and Nineveh’s; Simon, *Jonah*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Abusch, “Jonah and God,” 148–52.

<sup>43</sup> Abusch, “Jonah and God,” 151.



for others. However, it is not stated anywhere in YHWH's argument that Jonah ought to have greater sympathy—that is left up to implication. The question that is left open as the narrative ends is “may I not have sympathy for Nineveh...?” (v. 11).<sup>44</sup> The book as a whole has aimed at understanding that human action does not dictate divine response and so to deviate from that task in this final argument is to undermine the entire purpose of the book. However, Abusch's conclusion is helpful in reflecting upon the implications of the Jonah narrative for the reader, for if YHWH in his sovereignty lends himself to acting mercifully, should not humans likewise emulate their Creator and Sovereign?

#### **Conclusions on Motif of Life and Death in Jonah 4**

The motif of life and death, as has been argued throughout this chapter, is central to Jonah 4. At the outset of the chapter, Jonah's complaint through the recitation of Exod 34:6–7 demonstrates his knowledge of YHWH's merciful tendencies, displaying a motif of life and death by referencing a story that involves Israel's near-death experience at Sinai. This is followed by Jonah's rejection of the passage and his first death wish, which is rooted in his anxiety that YHWH's mercy allows the possibility for Nineveh to destroy Israel as an enemy later on. YHWH attempts to communicate with Jonah concerning the lack of benefit his despondent state had, but Jonah persists in stubbornness and sets up camp outside the city to await its destruction.

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<sup>44</sup> Note that חַסָּד is translated as “May I not have sympathy...” Fretheim argues that the verb should not be translated as “Should I not have sympathy...” but rather “May I not have sympathy...” The difference between these two statements is the question of whether YHWH is confined to act in mercy when humanity acts in repentance. To say “should I not have sympathy” assumes that it is expected of YHWH to respond positively to Nineveh's repentance, which undermines the message throughout the rest of the book that places all authority in YHWH's hands, despite human action (consider 1:6, 14; 3:9). On the other hand, “may I not have sympathy” fully embodies a sovereignty in YHWH that permits him to do as he pleases. While the confession in 4:2 clarifies that YHWH's will is to save creation, 4:11 asserts that YHWH is able to act as he wants; Fretheim, “Jonah and Theodicy,” esp. 331–337. Similarly, Landes argues that there is no “mechanical relationship” between humanity's efforts to please YHWH and YHWH's decision to bring deliverance. Human petition certainly motivates his salvific acts, but YHWH remains free to act as he sees fit; Landes, “Kerygma,” 28; Tribble, “Jonah,” 516.

Persistence is also demonstrated by YHWH who then creates and destroys a plant over Jonah in order to break through the façade the prophet had constructed to justify his self-righteous attitude. As Jonah takes the bait and begs for death over the inconvenience of the loss of the plant, YHWH uses the opportunity to call Jonah out and establish that he is free to have mercy on Nineveh because he has actually invested in its growth and sees the inherent value the lives of the Ninevites has.

Understanding Jonah 4 with the emphasis on the motif of life and death sheds light on the rest of the narrative, especially as YHWH reveals his rationale for extending mercy to the Ninevites. By presenting a God who considers the individual lives within a large city that is branded as “evil” when making decisions concerning its fate, the narrator highlights a sympathy in YHWH that is otherwise absent in Jonah from the outset of the narrative. Not only this, but YHWH’s sovereignty is highlighted through the fact that Jonah was unsuccessful in changing YHWH’s verdict and that while the Ninevites’ demonstration of repentance was a prerequisite for mercy, his decision to relent is firmly rooted in his own merciful tendencies.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

### **Thesis Summary**

By carefully employing a rhetorical-critical methodology, this thesis has provided an in-depth study of the book of Jonah. It has been the goal of this thesis to outline the recurring motif of life and death and recognize its contribution to the narrative whole. The conclusion of this investigation is that this motif permeates the entire narrative and is integral to the author's argument for YHWH's utmost sovereignty over life and death. What follows is a summary of the arguments made in each of the chapters and their contribution to defending this thesis.

Jonah exhibits the motif of life and death through four central situations. First, Jonah's commission and flight (1:1–3) present two dilemmas that both anticipate some form of death or life—Nineveh's judgement and Jonah's fear for Nineveh receiving mercy. Second, YHWH initiates judgement on Jonah at sea through the great storm, which threatens death upon all the sailors and Jonah; the characters react according to the value they place on life and death (1:4–6). Third, Jonah confesses that he is a worshipper of YHWH, the Creator and Sovereign of the world, designating him as having power over life and death by designating him as the one to control the land and seas (1:7–10). Fourth, and finally, Jonah's judgement ends as he is hurled overboard by the sailors who were forced to decide between losing all their lives or just Jonah's (1:11–16). Each of these situations builds upon the previous one and collectively produces a complex motif of life and death.

The third chapter of the thesis addressed the motif of life and death in Jonah 2. The chronological approach to the narrative was less helpful in this chapter as there was a mixture of prose (2:1–2, 11) and poetry (2:3–10) and only one event was being depicted in two parts: Jonah’s descent to Sheol and subsequent rescue by YHWH. In the small prose section, the motif is present in the depiction of Jonah being in the belly of the fish for “three days and three nights” (2:2), which is a reference to the travel time between the land of the living and the land of the dead, as found in *The Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld*. In this way, the three day journey Jonah experiences is one of salvation from death, since his final destination was onto dry land, not the underworld (2:11). The depiction of Jonah’s descent presented the non-human creation around the prophet acting in a hostile manner against him, pushing him downward into the depths of Sheol (2:3–7). Furthermore, the actions of YHWH casting Jonah into the sea (2:4), the waters encircling him (2:4, 6), and the seaweed wrapping around him (2:6) all work together to perform a ritual burial for the prophet. Contrasting the motif of death in the first part of the psalm, YHWH’s salvation comes forth from the temple—a symbol of life—and rescues Jonah from the furthest depths of Sheol—a symbol of death—as his life was fading away (2:8). The motifs in this chapter guide and prepare the reader for the final verses of the psalm, where the prophet confesses that “salvation belongs to YHWH” (2:9–10), a statement that conveys the message of the book about YHWH’s sovereignty.

In chapter 4, the motif of life and death is recognized as instrumental in the deliverance of and response to the proclamation Jonah gives to the great city. As YHWH recommissions Jonah, the death motif from Jonah 1 is reinitiated, though with even more ambiguity with the change of YHWH’s commission (3:1–2). In delivering the message, there is ambiguity concerning whether life or death is proclaimed (3:4), though death is anticipated as the narrative

progresses when the Ninevites respond under the assumption that they are in harm's way (3:5–9). However, as they acknowledge their forthcoming death through mourning (3:6–8a) and hope for a second chance at life through petition (3:8b–9), the trajectory of Nineveh's fate turns as YHWH has compassion on the city because of its moral reform (3:10). Thus, the prophetic word which was originally perceived as presenting a death motif is now re-understood as a life motif.

The fifth chapter of this thesis brings the narrative to a close by presenting the motif of life and death through a conversation between Jonah and YHWH. First, Jonah offers up a complaint to YHWH by harkening back to his initial flight in Jonah 1 (4:1–2). In his complaint, he recites Exod 34:6–7, demonstrating his knowledge of YHWH's merciful tendencies and displaying a motif of life and death by referencing a story that involves Israel's near-death experience at Sinai. This is followed by Jonah's first death wish, which is apparently rooted in an anxiety that YHWH's mercy will allow the possibility for Nineveh pose a threat to Israel in the future (3:3). All of this brings clarity to the dilemma of Jonah's flight, which has been left without answers for the duration of the narrative. Following this complaint, YHWH establishes his sovereignty over life and death through a demonstration of producing a plant to shade Jonah and then killing it (3:5–8a). This act not only demonstrates YHWH power, but it draws out the reality behind Jonah's complaint as the prophet reacts poorly to this inconvenience and begs for death once more (3:8b). It is made clear through this action that Jonah does not have a legitimate complaint to offer, but rather, is absorbed in selfishness. YHWH uses this as an opportunity to rebuke Jonah and assert his freedom to mercy on the grounds of being the one to watch Nineveh's growth and sees the inherent value each citizen's life holds (3:9–11).

In addition to the situational motifs that string together to form the narrative, there are a number of key words that have likewise made their contribution. Primarily, references to life

through the words נפש (“lifeforce,” 1:14; 2:8; 3:3) and חי (“life,” 2:7; 3:3, 8), and references to death through אבד (“perish,” 1:6, 14; 3:9; 4:9) and מות (“death,” 4:3, 8b, 8c, 9) have tied together the narrative and drawn the focus of the reader to the concepts of life and death. אבד and טול (“to hurl,” 1:4, 5, 12, 15) are also both used to highlight divine judgement as the primary cause of death and near-death experiences. Similarly, שוב (“to turn,” 3:8, 9a, 9b, 10) and נחם (“to relent,” 3:9, 10) are both used to highlight divine mercy as the cause of avoiding death. In this way, YHWH is made entirely and exclusively central in the conversation of giving and taking life within the narrative—neither judgement nor mercy is given independent of YHWH’s will.

The motif of life and death could be traced throughout the book of Jonah with the following: Jonah condemns himself by refusing YHWH’s commission (1:1–3); YHWH pursues and judges Jonah, resulting in his death (1:4–16); Jonah experiences death and salvation by YHWH’s hand (2:1–11); Jonah obediently prophesies to Nineveh, prompting repentance from death (3:1–9); Nineveh experiences salvation by YHWH’s hand (3:10); Jonah wishes to remain in his punishment of death rather than see Nineveh receive merciful life (4:1–5); YHWH demonstrates his sovereignty to Jonah through the growing and killing of a plant (4:6–9); YHWH rebukes Jonah for questioning his sovereignty and reveals his cause for mercy (4:10–11). By tracing the motif in this way, it is made evident that each instance of the motif builds upon one another to form the argument of YHWH’s sovereignty. In every instance of a situational or word-motif, it is YHWH who is in control of every individual’s fate: Jonah’s judgement and salvation from death were YHWH’s will; the sailors were saved through obedience to YHWH; Nineveh avoided YHWH’s pronounced judgement by YHWH’s merciful nature; and as the object lesson that confirms all of this, the plant that gave Jonah shade lived and died according to YHWH’s command.

### Thesis Conclusion

In conclusion, a strong case has been made for both the presence and prominence of the motif of life and death throughout the book of Jonah. Furthermore, this motif identifies the purpose of the book to be a declaration of YHWH's sovereignty over life and death in that he has the final determining action in matters of life and death, unhindered by interference from humanity. No life or death occurs without YHWH's consent. Furthermore, this sovereignty is depicted particularly through the demonstrations of mercy and judgement. It is by YHWH's mercy that each character in the narrative finds life, and it is by YHWH's judgement that each character is drawn near to or experiences death.

Using the conclusions of this thesis as a starting point, there are two further studies that could be conducted in this field: First, study could be done into a motif adjacent to that of life and death: the motif of good and evil. The terms טוב ("good") and רעה ("evil/calamity") appear frequently throughout the text, and often in similar places where discussions of life and death appear.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the relationship this motif has to the motif of life and death and to the argument being made by the author could enhance the conclusions of this thesis, revealing even further how YHWH remains sovereign over all things, regardless of how good and evil are perceived and engaged with in the created world. Second, a study could be done that explores the connection between the message of this book and its cultural context. More specifically, one could analyze how, if at all, the author meant to use Jonah as a means to explain the rise of Assyria over Israel. The story taking place during the reign of Jeroboam II sets Assyria at one of its weakest points in the history of its kingdom, but it was not long afterwards that Assyria rose

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this is in Jonah 4:1–5 where Jonah's reaction to YHWH's relenting from his רעה is to understand it as a great רעה, himself. In conversing about this perception, Jonah and YHWH both use the root טוב to address Jonah's death wish and despondency.

up and conquered the northern kingdom. Chapter 5 of this thesis briefly mentions a connection between the audience and the history of the Assyrians, but more can be done. Without a doubt, there is more to be understood about YHWH's sovereignty than what is addressed in this study.



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