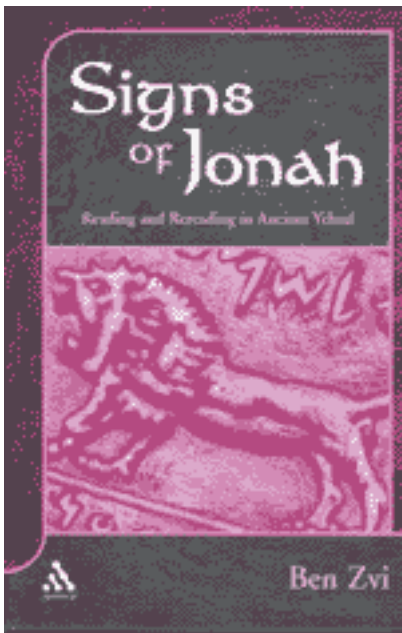


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**Ben Zvi, Ehud**

*The Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*

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This book comprises several studies on different aspects of Jonah. Originally written independently, the chapters all fit roughly under a reader-oriented approach that takes Jonah as a writing within the prophetic section of the Jewish canon.

In the introduction (ch. 1 [1–13]) Ben Zvi deals with the methodological questions involved. His goal is to reconstruct how historical reader communities conceived the final form of the book of Jonah (5). He concentrates on such communities he is familiar with, without assuming that those communities understand the text better than others.

Under the title “Nineveh’s Fates” (ch. 2 [14–33]) the author explores how the knowledge external to the world of the text that Nineveh was not only destroyed but totally annihilated in history affected the possible readers. Must it not have an effect that in the biblical text Nineveh is saved but in reality the ruins of Nineveh were demonstrable and well known from Greece to Egypt?

In “Jonah 1.2, Divine Foreknowledge and the Fates” (ch. 3 [34–39]) Ben Zvi explores an almost invisible difference between two similar passages within the writing of Jonah: in Jonah 1:2 and in 3:2 the same action is demanded from Jonah, namely, to preach to the

city of Nineveh. However, in the first instance the verb *qr'* "proclaim" is used with the preposition *ʿl*, yielding the sense "to cry out against" (NRSV), while in the second the same verb is used with the preposition *ʾl*, which lacks the aggressive tone of the first: "to proclaim to." Rereaders who want to expound the nuances of the text could possibly ask whether Jonah's flight has somehow changed God's original mission.

The Name "Jonah the son of Amittay" is also used in 2 Kgs 14:23–29. A reader must conclude that both names refer to the same prophet. How this interplay between different books affects the reading of Jonah is explored in the chapter "A Tale of Two Jonahs and Two Accounts" (ch. 4 [40–64]). The narrative about Jonah's mission toward Nineveh now must be conceived within the historical framework provided by 2 Kings. That implies that "this prophet was sent to a nation that had no contact with Israel" (52).

On the basis of 2 Kgs 14:25 the narrative character Jonah must be perceived as a "servant/slave of YHWH." In the essay "Jonah, the Runaway Servant/Slave" (ch. 5 [65–79]) Ben Zvi explores how it affects a possible reading of the writing of Jonah, when the interaction between YHWH and his slave Jonah is held against the moral and legal norms that regulate "master-slave" relations in Persian Yehud. One of several possible readings is that YHWH "may well be a master who incites a slave to run away so that a lesson may be learned" (79).

In the chapter "Atypicality and the Meta-prophetic Character of the Book of Jonah" (ch. 6 [80–98]) Ben Zvi argues that the book of Jonah is a metaphorical book because it is a narrative about a prophet and does not collect the utterances of the prophet himself. In addition, Jonah even parodies former prophets (e.g., Elijah, Jeremiah). This chapter is not as fruitful as the others, insofar as Ben Zvi ignores that Jonah is only a part of the Book of the Twelve. In addition, he cannot demonstrate what kind of new insights may follow from his concept of a "metaphorical character."

Against the widely held opinion that the writing of Jonah is a satire that is directed toward a specific group in Persian or Hellenistic Judah, the author argues, in "Jonah, the Jerusalemite Literati and Their Image of Themselves" (ch. 7 [99–115]), that this is not the case. Although the "text of Jonah clearly makes the case that a person who is well acquainted with authoritative texts may still fail" (109–10), this should not be perceived as an attack on someone else. Instead, Ben Zvi imagines a unified group of literati that criticizes itself, reminding itself not to be too certain that one has the right understanding of God simply if one knows the authoritative scriptures.

What, if anything, has the writing of Jonah to say concerning the theological enterprise to understand the exile? This is the question in "The Book of Jonah, Israel and Jerusalem"

(ch. 8 [116–28]). At first glance one would suspect that the Jonah narrative with its monarchic setting has no answers to this question at all. However, after assuming that the readership may have accepted allegorical methods in reading, at least to a certain degree (127), Ben Zvi can find something: Jonah can survive and have interaction with his God far away from the land, even in the center of a dreadful foe of Israel. Jonah is with the non-Israelite sailors together in the same boat and makes the experience that they do honor YHWH. Jonah, those sailors, and the Ninevites, although long gone in the time of the readers, nevertheless serve as a model for Israelites in Yehud and in the Diaspora as well.

In the last chapter, “Infinite but Limited Diversity: A Heuristic, Theoretical Frame for Analyzing Different Interpretations of the Book of Jonah” (ch. 9 [129–54]) Ben Zvi draws together different readings of Jonah from all periods in the three monotheistic religions. The aim is to show how different and even mutually excluding the readings are. This is so because the readings are informed by a macrostructure that is, for example, specific for each of the three book-religions. Here may lay a hidden merit of Ben Zvi’s way of tolerating different readings. In the end he not only can tolerate Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readings as equal possible but can perceive them as mutually informing and enriching each other toward a better understanding of the basic text.

Ben Zvi provides several fresh and stimulating studies of certain aspects of the writing of Jonah. He explores possible and real readings of Jonah and is only partially concerned with form-critical or source-critical analysis. Since he adopts a reader-oriented approach, his findings are also relevant for the refinement of this approach. Only in the last chapter does he deal with readings that are actually documented, insofar as they are written down in commentaries and paraphrases. In the other chapters he explores possible readings that an informed exegete can reconstruct from gaps in the text. Several phenomena in the biblical text challenge the reader to develop an understanding that is not stated in the text itself and not intended by the original author of the writing. First, Ben Zvi is aware of gaps, fractions, and ambiguities in the text of the writing itself, as in the slight difference in meaning between Jonah 1:2 and 3:2 (ch. 2). Second, the book’s inclusion within the Book of the Twelve Prophets creates new tensions. It is this redactional decision that transforms Jonah into a part of a prophetic book. Unfortunately, Ben Zvi only once (85–87) comments on this fundamental shift in the transmission process. Some of his studies, most importantly the one on the atypical character of Jonah (ch. 6), would have gained further precision. Third, some studies exploit the fact that Jonah must be read in the context of *Nevi’im*, the second part of the Hebrew canon. Especially the identification of Jonah with the prophet with the same name in 2 Kgs 14:25 provides the reader with a fictive historical setting in which the mission to Nineveh must be perceived. The implications of this reading challenge are explored several times. Fourth, Ben Zvi asks

how it must inform the reading if the world of the text contradicts with the text-external world of knowledge of the reader. What overtones are created, for example, when one reads how Nineveh was saved from destruction but at the same time knows that in reality only some ruins were left (chs. 2, 6, 8)? Fifth, the inclusion of a book or set of books into the normative tradition of a religious community creates new challenges, such as the understanding of Jonah as part of the Christian Bible within Christian tradition or as forerunner of Muhammad in the Islamic community. If Ben Zvi had more clearly differentiated his readings along these redactional lines, a clearer picture would have emerged. For example, Ben Zvi often refers to “the primary and intended rereaders of the Book” (100) and identifies this community with “the few Jerusalemite literati” (101) of the Persian province Yehud. However, this group, which presumably was not as unified as Ben Zvi would have it, was only the audience of the independent writing of Jonah. As soon as this writing is reread as part of the Twelve we have to assume a reader community in Hellenistic times, which implies changes in text-external world knowledge, understanding of foreign nations, and so on.

In sum, Ben Zvi’s studies bring in new aspects into the reader-oriented approach to the writing of Jonah with numerous creative ideas and appealing reading possibilities. Because the author seems not to have a specific theological agenda, he is open to many possibilities and explores how far they reach. The rereader of his studies gains the more from them the more he or she has a clear understanding of the underlying redaction-critical processes in which the writing of Jonah was involved.