CHAPTER ONE

Going Down Under: Jonah 1

Jonah's Suicide

Rabbi Nathan says: "Jonah went to the sea only in order to commit suicide."

Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael[1]

There is only one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.

Albert Camus[2]

"He is a priest who has left the world to itself, truly."

John L'Heureux, "Departures"[3]

Camus' dictum on suicide and the proper pursuit of philosophy is best conceived not as an all-or-nothing affair, a kind of personal final solution, as it were, but rather as a question that gnaws at us daily and requires constant attention. Do I like my life, do I accept it as given? Why on earth am I here; by what cause and to what purpose? With what level of wakeful attention am I required to rivet myself to my existence as such?

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[1]Tractate *Pisha,* 4. Similarly, Ibn Ezra on Jonah 1:12: "He desired and sought to die."

[2]Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), 15.

[3]John L'Heureux, "Departures," in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories* (ed. Tobias Wolff; New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 308–19.

Or, to use Jonah's own words in the form of a question: Isn't my death better than my life (Jonah 4:3, 8)? Job, in an attempt to ground the question theologically and protect God, in fact may have had just the opposite effect, since his formulation sends the whole question upstairs, so to speak, by referring the problem to the Creator: why did God create us in the first place; and, by extension, why does God sustain us in being? Hardly embarrassed by such speculations, some midrashists even imagined previous creations that apparently weren't up to snuff and were consequently snuffed out (measure for measure?) by the Creator Himself.[4] Does ours merit the same fate? And, if so, maybe it is our privilege—even responsibility—to decline what is euphemistically called the gift of life, to withdraw and, at whatever level one deems appropriate, to "brown out" or "go dead" or even, literally, to die.

The question that plagued both Camus and the rabbis was also raised by key figures throughout Hebrew Scripture.[5]

Rebecca:

> If such [is to be my suffering], why then do I exist? (Gen 25:22)

Moses:

> But if not [i.e., if You will not forgive their sin], erase me from the book [of life] which You have written. (Exod 32:32)

Job:

> Why is light given to him that is in misery,
> and life to the bitter of soul? (Job 3:20; also Jer 20:14–18)

Elijah:

> [Elijah] came to a broom bush and sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. "Enough," he cried. "Now, O LORD, take my life. . . ." (1 Kgs 19:4)

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[4]George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim* (3 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966; repr. in 2 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 1.382.

[5]See especially David Daube, "Death as Release in the Bible," *NovT* 5 (1962): 82–104.

Such reactions to life's problems provide a compelling perspective for rereading Jonah, since the hero of this book, whatever his particular difficulties may be, wants out, he has had it with life, it is all just too much. Let us listen again to Jonah's theme-song:

> Please, Lord, take my life from me, for my death is better than my life. (4:3)
>
> He requested from his soul to die, saying: "My death is better than my life." (v. 8)
>
> "I am distressed unto death." (v. 9)

One might speak only of a "swan-song," positing that, since these explicit examples occur only in the final chapter, they may reflect less a permanent disposition than a change of attitude on Jonah's part. It is rather the case, however, that Jonah's suicidal wishes are fully operative from the very start.

Let us begin at the beginning, with Jonah's refusal to go to Nineveh at God's behest. Interpreted as a reluctance to prophesy, Jonah's refusal is not unique in the Hebrew Bible. What *is* unique is the peremptory nature of the rebuff, first in the absence of any argument or even reply whatever—a mutism stressed even further by the narrative's conniving delay of explanation until much later—and secondly in the seeming compliance followed by an abrupt about-face:

> God: "*Get up and go* to Nineveh!"
> *And Jonah got up* . . . and fled!

Although the reasons for his "wanting out" are unclear, the abruptness of his response points not only to a flight but also to what Uriel Simon has called a "rebellion."[6]

Jonah's flight is conveyed by the verb *yarad,* to "descend" or "go down," which, through insistent repetition, moves from being a mere geographical notation to a metaphoric suggestion of intent:

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[6]Uriel Simon, *Jonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 3.

He *went down* to Joppa. (1:3)

He *went down* into it [the ship] (v. 3)

When the sea storm, God's agent, starts to act up, Jonah descends even further into withdrawal:

Jonah *had gone down* into the hold[7] of the vessel. (v. 5)

As a further and fitting conclusion to Jonah's descent:

. . . he *lay down* and fell asleep. (v. 5)

The Hebrew for "fell asleep," *yeradam* (also v. 6), is a superb word-play or sound repetition of Jonah's successive descents (*yarad*), stressing "Jonah's flight from YHWH's presence as a descent into unconsciousness."[8] As Ackerman further observes, "our prophet is taking a path that leads to death as he seeks to avoid the road to Nineveh."

Jonah's "descent" has been frequently noticed by critics, but its full range and deep implications need to be grasped. In its intensity and pervasiveness, in its repetitive insistence that is literal as well as metaphorical, it means that Jonah *wants to die,* to be relieved of living, since he can no longer accept life on its present terms. No better proof of this than his own request to be thrown into the deep and thus disposed of:

[To the sailors:] "Pick me up and throw me overboard!" (1:12)

It should also be carefully noted that, had Jonah not wanted to die, he would instinctively have prayed, during the storm, to be saved. Even though requested to do so by the ship's captain, however (v. 6), his first uttered prayer occurs only from the belly of the fish (2:2).

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[7] *yarktei-*, usually rendered "hold" (NJPS, NRSV), "the farthest end" (Simon, *Jonah*), "inner part" (RSV) or, even better, "innards," as Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 166. It is equated with "She'ol, the depths of the pit" in Isa 14:15 (see also Ezek 32:23). In Amos 6:10 the image seems to be that of solitary confinement in the house of the dead.

[8] James A. Ackerman, "Jonah," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 235.

Thus, the death-wish does not need to be "read back" into Part One, since it is pervasively there from the very start. But we are further invited to consider Jonah's extended prayer in chapter 2 as part and parcel of that wish, as required by the culmination of the ongoing word-play that occurs in that very prayer:

> To the base of the mountains I descended [*yaradeti*],
> the underworld,
> its bars around me, forever. (2:7)

It is difficult to read this without recalling Jonah's death-wish, which now comes almost as a fulfillment. He asks to be relieved of living and the sailors, albeit reluctantly, oblige (see below). God does not acquiesce quietly in His servant's demise, however, but rather calls his bluff, as if to say: "You want to 'go down'; well, I'll really take you down":

> Now the Lord appointed a large fish to swallow up Jonah. (2:1)

The complementary process is thus symbolized in our text by the successive agents of descent: it is Jonah who initiates the process, by going down to his sea-death, where he is assisted by the sailors. Now God goes one better by appointing the fish, which takes His prophet to the point at which death becomes palpable (v. 7). The surprise is that the great fish, besides being the agent of death, is also the means of rescue,[9] and *both* functions come from the Lord. The dual valence of this great fish points to the dual argumentative burden of Jonah's prayers, to which we shall turn in chapter two after considering a most interesting variant of the suicide question.

Assisted Suicide: Jonah and the Sailors

The details of Jonah's flight—what we have termed a suicide, if only symbolic—can be rehearsed in a few sentences. Jonah goes

[9]So George M. Landes, "The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah: The Contextual Interpretation of the Jonah Psalm," *Int* 21 (1967): 13: "the fish has essentially a salvatory function."

down to the seaport of Jaffa and takes a place on a ship; in fact, according to a close reading of "he paid *its* price" rather than *his* price, some even conclude that he bought up all remaining places so that he could leave right away.[10] A violent storm comes up and the lots point the guilty finger at Jonah, who declares that he is fleeing from God and suggests that the storm will subside if the sailors throw him overboard.[11] The sailors are reluctant and make valiant efforts to row to safety, all to no avail. Believing there to be no alternative, they throw him overboard. To make the standard moral reading even more obvious, the rabbis came up with the following scenario:

> *So they took up Jonah and cast him into the sea.* (1:15)
>
> First they threw him in up to his knees and the storm let up, but when they took him back on board the storm started up again. So they lowered him into the sea up to his navel and the storm again let up, but when they again took him on board the storm resumed. They then lowered him into the water up to his neck, and again the storm abated. As soon as Jonah was brought back on board, however, the storm resumed in all its fury. They then threw him completely into the deep. (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer)[12]

The storm does abate—whether instantaneously, as such readings would favor, or at some later time—the sailors in great fright of the Lord offer sacrifices and make vows, and Jonah is swallowed up by a large fish.

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[10]All citations in Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB 42B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 83. Alternatively, Jonah's motive, seldom imagined, could also be to reduce the number of lives about to be put at risk.

[11]According to the interpretation that Jonah bought up all the places on board, the sailors' plan to cast lots seems disengenuous at best, for on whom other than Jonah were the lots to fall? Surely not on the sailors themselves, who just returned *from* Tarshish (see below, "The Mediating Narrator" in chapter ten) unscathed.

[12]Quoted in M. Zlotowitz, *Jonah: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1980), 103.

Of the number of interesting and tough questions to be put to this text, let us focus on the sailors' participation. Here, at least, there is universal agreement with the rabbis' attempt to exonerate. Let Jerome's assessment stand for all the rest:

> The sailors refused to spill blood, choosing rather to die. . . . The sea is in turmoil, the storm is overwhelming, and here they are forgetting their own danger and only think of saving another.

Citing this text, Sasson also finds proof on the sailors' part of a "demonstration of their humanity beyond normal expectations."[13]

To be sure, the narrative voice supports such an evaluation of the sailors, who are made to sound not only decent but like downright righteous chaps. At one point, in fact, their idiom sounds like God's very own: "Get up and call" (1:6), harking back to the divine call in 1:2. And, to be sure, the sailors throw Jonah overboard only with great hesitation and after trying alternative measures. But—and this is the important point—they do throw him overboard! And to argue that committing murder under duress is not really murder is a bit like the claim, cited by William James, that adultery is not only mitigated but removed when the baby is only a small one! At least under Jewish law, if someone tells me that I must kill him or he will kill me, I am allowed to kill that person. But if someone tells me to kill another or I might die, I am under no obligation. On the contrary, if I do kill that person under the guise of saving my own life, then I am guilty of murder.[14]

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[13]Sasson, *Jonah,* 141. The sailors were not always so positively viewed however. As Yvonne Sherwood summarizes, "the sailors become variously the Apostles, steering the ship of the church (*and sleeping in Christ's hour of need*), *or* the Roman authorities who condemned Christ to death, *or* the Jews who opposed Christ, *or* Pontius Pilate, washing his hands of Jesus-Jonah's death." See her *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15; emphasis added.

[14]Scholars are wont to wax eloquent on this subject. James Limburg (*Jonah: A Commentary* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1993], 56) notes, quite gratuitously, that "the Israelites have had a history of taking innocent blood" and concludes that these non-Israelites are most concerned not to do such a thing. The critic has considered all pieces of evidence except the crucial one, since taking innocent life is precisely what the sailors do!

But why not state the matter in the sailors' own words of prayer:

Please, Lord, may we not perish because of this man's life.[15]
Do not put innocent blood upon our heads. (1:14)

Indeed, this is why the sailors are filled with such fear, because they know that it is not legitimate to take another's life to save one's own, and because they are indeed guilty of taking innocent blood.[16]

The very structure of the text brings subtle but firm confirmation of this point in the conclusion. Notice, first of all, that in their prayer the sailors express not one but two concerns:

Please, Lord,
may we not perish because of *this* man,
and
may *we* not be guilty of shedding innocent blood (1:14).

Despite the tease of semantic parallelism here, which would collapse the two segments into a single meaning, the matters are quite distinct: may we not perish either because of his guilt or because of ours. In perfect consonance with this dual concern, the sailors, upon being saved, make two distinct acknowledgements to the Lord:

They offered sacrifice to the Lord
and
they made vows. (v. 16)

Commentators typically conclude that both of these are but variant forms of thanksgiving, the one on the spot to be followed up, as per their vows, by others on land. And, to be sure, the form of sacrifice (*zebakh*) frequently refers either to peace offerings or offerings of thanksgiving. But another linguistic tradition points in a different direction. Here God is speaking to the budding prophet Samuel:

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[15]Rashi makes clear the sailors' perception of their own guilt: "because of the sin of having laid a hand upon his soul," *nfsh,* meaning life, as in 2:6: "The waters choked me to my very *nfsh*" = life.

[16]The objection that Jonah himself confessed his guilt is no objection, since self-accusation is without value in criminal cases (see *b. Sanhedrin* 9b): perhaps the defendant is crazy or depressed.

> I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house will not be *expiated with sacrifice* [*zebakh*] or offerings forever. (1 Sam 3:14)

The sacrifice thus has a role distinct from the vows, since, beyond their thanks for being saved, the sailors still had to atone for taking innocent blood.[17]

Another question that has received scant attention is the form of Jonah's suicidal flight, his decision to take a sea voyage, for, surely, suicide does not need such contrivance. One must at least ask the simple question: if, beyond the hypothesis of his suicide, Jonah was so persuaded of his own guilt,[18] then why didn't he throw himself overboard, if not to take his own life, at least to save the crew? Why involve presumably innocent sailors? And, indeed, the success of such a procedure is not guaranteed. For, surely, the sailors are under no obligation to assist Jonah. To his command: "throw me overboard" they might—indeed should—have responded (especially if, as Jerome would have us believe, the sailors did in fact refuse to spill innocent blood): "throw *yourself* overboard!" Why does Jonah put the sailors into a situation of human sacrifice?[19] Or, for that matter, why does God?

The question of Jonah's mysterious motivations for flight/suicide—this time in involving the sailors—must again be postponed until a fuller picture is painted, but we may here outline the matter from the perspective of the book's discussion concerning the moral status of Gentiles. The matter is complicated by the fact that God Himself changes course at the end. At the start, God plans to destroy Nineveh because of their Sodom-and-Gomorrah-like

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[17]When, later, Jonah also offers a similar sacrifice (*zebakh* 2:10), it thus seems also possible to extend the sense beyond that of simple thanks and to include also the notion of atonement, in this case for having attempted suicide.

[18]As Jonah's prayers in chapter 2 make perfectly clear, Jonah does not have any sense of having sinned by running away; see below, "Jonah?" in chapter seven; "A Modern Fantastical Reading," in chapter ten.

[19]One interesting theory (see discussion in Kenneth Craig, *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993], 132–33) is that, knowing that the ship's troubles are due only to his rebellion, Jonah commands the sailors to throw him overboard out of compassion for their lives. However, to upgrade the sailors' status from innocent victims to murderers hardly qualifies as an act of compassion.

wickedness. After their repentance, however, He is willing to let them off the hook because they are not really wicked but like innocent children or animals. What matters to God, in the long run, is whether their evil deeds are corrected or not. But this remarkable aspect of the book—that God Himself can change His mind—will be convincing only to those who have read ahead to the end and who, moreover, think that God necessarily has the last and convincing word, which is far from the case in the book of Jonah, as we shall see. Earlier in the book, Jonah knows this tendency of God (4:1–2)—is it mercy or mere divine credulity?—and therefore tries to convince Him that the book's Gentiles are much worse[20] than He might come to think. The scenario could be sketched as follows:

> [God to Jonah:] "Go preach to Nineveh!"
>
> [Jonah to God:] "But the Gentiles are wicked, as You Yourself admit, and I can prove it. They would, for example, have no hesitation to take an innocent life to save their own."
>
> And Jonah went down to Jaffa and found a boat. . . .

In brief, in pursuing his (still unexplained) suicide, Jonah chooses to involve Gentile sailors in order to conduct an experiment for God's sake—a test, really.[21] And, as we have seen, God in fact loses the argument, since the sailors do commit murder or at least assist a suicide! God's only way out, at this point, is to resort to the fish trickery, as if to claim:

> See, they didn't actually commit murder since you are still alive!

God thus appears to save Jonah principally in order to protect His own reputation. But God also saves Jonah for more responsive and altruistic reasons as well, as the so-called Psalm of Jonah now brings to our attention.

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[20]Or much better; see below, chapter eight.

[21]Alternatively, in asking to be thrown overboard, "Jonah offers his life to save the sailors." So Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (2 vols.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2000), 323. This of course does not explain why Jonah had to involve the sailors in his suicide in the first place.