

Theodicy and the Nature of God in Nahum and Jonah

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Within the twelve minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible are the books of Nahum and Jonah. The popularity of Jonah — the book from which movies, books, songs, and more have been inspired— stands in contrast to Nahum, a book rarely mentioned in churches, classrooms, or popular literature and media. Each book discusses the city of Nineveh and its fall (whether projected, past, or thwarted), and underlying each book is the question of God’s nature. The issue of theodicy, which is “the attempt to defend divine justice in the face of aberrant phenomena that appear to indicate the deity’s indifference or hostility toward virtuous people,”¹ becomes central to each book. For Nahum, the fall of Nineveh is vindication of God’s righteousness and justice: though the wicked nation was once used to carry out God’s punishment upon Judah, Assyria is now (finally) going to be judged for her sins by the just God. For Jonah, the issue of theodicy is a bit more complicated, since the book’s audience and the title character deal with this topic in different ways. From Jonah’s point of view, God is so merciful towards Nineveh that his² justice appears overthrown, yet God’s dealings with his prophet seem cruel and unkind. From the perspective of the audience, God’s mercy does not nullify his justice because the audience knows that God eventually destroys Nineveh. The nature of God in Jonah is, therefore, more complex than the nature of God in Nahum.

Contemporary theological critiques fail to take into account many of the questions and issues the books address, particularly concerning their approaches to the issue of theodicy; thus much of leading contemporary scholarship is misguided in its theological analyses of these prophetic texts. A proper understanding is possible only if scholars take into account the contexts and literary characteristics of the texts and distinguish the issues of theodicy in each.

¹ Crenshaw, James L. “Theodicy.” *ABD* 6: 444-447.

² Though God is not gendered in nature, I am following the biblical practice of referring to God in male language.

Preliminary issues

Both Nahum and Jonah were written for an Israelite audience. Although little is known about the prophet Nahum except his name, he was most likely a cult prophet and certainly a resident of Judah, though no one has successfully identified Nahum's hometown, Elkosh.³ Most scholars consider Nahum a seventh-century prophet and thus date the book after the fall of Thebes in 663 B. C. and before the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E.⁴ Jonah, on the other hand, was written in the post-exilic period,⁵ though it does try to situate itself in the eighth century by referring to a nationalistic prophet mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25.⁶

Nahum is an oracle against the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, and scholars debate the structure of this book.⁷ Blenkinsopp provides one of the best analyses of Nahum's structure: an introductory acrostic (1:2-8),⁸ three short sayings (1:9-14), an oracle against Nineveh (1:15-2:12, plus a prose statement in 2:13), and a woe oracle against Nineveh (3:1-19).⁹ Nevertheless, the compilation of Nahum is such that similar themes run through all the parts. The entire book is an oracle against Nineveh, and this oracle paints a picture of God. Thus, the book of Nahum will be treated as one literary unit. Similarly, scholars often divide the book of Jonah into two parts, chapters 1-2 and 3-4, divisions that could be labeled God's call and Jonah's response (ch. 1-2) and God's call and Nineveh's response (ch. 3-

³ Page 276 in Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

⁵ Cf. pages 76-78 in Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986). For discussion on the unity, composition, and genre of the book, as well as the date, see pages 13-24 in Julius A. Bewer, "Jonah," *ICC* 3-65; pages 463-474 in Phyllis Trible, "Jonah," *NIB* VII:463-529; Wolff, *Jonah*, 80-85; pages xiv-xxii, xxxiii-xxxv, xli-xlii in Uriel Simon, *Jonah* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999), and pages 7-25 in Andre Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *Jonah: A Psycho-Religious Approach to the Prophet* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1990).

⁶ The use of "Jonah son of Amittai" may be an attempt to give the book validity [page 126 in John F. A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets* (rev. ed; Oxford: Oxford, 1993); as did the author(s) of Jeremiah and Isaiah], or it may be a midrash on the Kings passage (cf. the long footnote on Bewer, "Jonah," 9), or it could be to emphasize the nationalism of the prophet [page 179 in Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976)].

⁷ For instance, some, like Newsome, simply divide the book into the acrostic poem and the long poem [page 89 in James D. Newsome, Jr., *The Hebrew Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984); cf. also page 595 in Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "The Book of Nahum," *NIB* VII:592-619]. Still others, such as Achtemeier, divide the book into more than two segments [page 6 in Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986)].

⁸ Others label 1:2-10 as the acrostic. See (*passim*) Duane L. Christensen, *Transformations of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), Cathcart, "Nahum," and Michael H. Floyd, "The Chimerical Acrostic of Nahum 1:2-10," *JBL* 113 (Fall 1994): 421-437, for more regarding the acrostic. Though challenged by Floyd, most scholars agree that 1:2-10 is an acrostic poem, albeit a corrupted one (Floyd, "Chimerical," 421).

⁹ Pages 122-123 in Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (rev. ed; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

4).¹⁰ Scholars often consider the psalm in 2:2-10 an interpolation. However, as with Nahum, because each section contains similar themes and addresses the issue of the nature of God, I will treat Jonah as a literary whole.¹¹

An analysis of each book as a distinct literary unit demonstrates that their concern about Nineveh's fate and the nature of God links these two little books. Nevertheless, the books differ in theology and in their attitude toward Nineveh and its destruction, thus offering different perspectives on the same fundamental questions: why and will Nineveh fall, and — more significantly — what is the nature of the God who will or will not destroy this city?

Nahum

Nahum¹² uses the prophetic oracle to condemn the nation of Assyria and to proclaim the justice and sovereignty of Israel's God. It is "an oracle concerning Nineveh" and "the vision of Nahum of Elkosh" (Nah 1:1).¹³ Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire.¹⁴ The Assyrians, known for their cruelty and violence, ruled the Ancient Near East from approximately the ninth century until the death of Ashurbanipal in 626 B.C.E., when their power began to wane.¹⁵ Enemies of the Israelites, the Assyrians had reduced Judah to vassalage in 734, destroyed Israel (Samaria) in 721, and demolished Judean cities, besieging Jerusalem, in 701 B.C.E. The Assyrians were hated for their methods of conquest, for they committed "atrocities against civilian populations and mass deportations as deliberate instruments of policy."¹⁶ They had no qualms about inflicting pain; in fact, archaeologists have discovered Assyrian reliefs that portray their brutal practices.¹⁷ The Assyrians also did not limit their cruelty to the king's court:

¹⁰ This is, of course, too simplistic a division.

¹² Although Nahum may not have written the entire book (as the literary analysis of the book's structure makes clear), or even any of it (for while most scholars attribute the book to the prophet after whom it is named, we know little or nothing about the truth of the prophet's existence or writing activity), I will refer to Nahum as the author of the entire book for simplicity of conversation. Similarly, though a woman could have written this, I'm using male language, because it is more likely that a man, not woman, possessed writing skills.

¹³ All Bible citations are from the *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (3rd ed; NRSV; ed. Michael Coogan et al; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ That said, Nineveh and Assyria will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

¹⁵ Page 126 in John S. Holladay, "Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel," in *Prophecy in Israel* (ed. David L. Petersen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

¹⁶ Blenkinsopp, *History*, 67-69, esp. 67.

¹⁷ Holladay, "Assyrian," 127; cf. Newsome, *Prophets*, 87. Chisholm records comments by Assyrian kings concerning the destruction of the enemies [pages 180-1 in Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1990)].

women and children were victims as well. Thus, there was ample reason for the animosity Nahum and his audience felt for Assyria.¹⁸

By the time of Nahum, many Israelites must have doubted the supremacy and goodness of their God: not only had God allowed them to be conquered, but God had not acted to save his people or punish the Assyrians for their wickedness. Thus, questions about the nature of God — his righteousness and justice¹⁹ — were relevant to Nahum’s audience.²⁰ Accordingly, Nahum addresses these issues in his oracle against Nineveh as he declares to his audience that God does act against oppression and injustice.²¹

Since Nahum’s book reveals the nature of God, it fittingly begins with a passage describing God (ch. 1). In this passage, two visions of God’s nature are given. God is the jealous, avenging, wrathful God who rages in indignation and anger (1:2, 6, 8); he utterly destroys his enemies and causes all of creation to tremble and fear (1:8-10, 4-6). God is the divine warrior who rules the cosmos,²² and he is sovereign over the sea (chaos), land, and mountains (“pillars of the world”)²³ (1:3b-6). God appears, therefore, to be an angry, cruel God who causes destruction and terror. This vision, however, is tempered by Nahum’s affirmation of God’s nature as “good” (1:7). God is “a stronghold in a day of trouble” and “protects those who take refuge in him” (1:7). Furthermore, this God breaks the yoke of the oppressor and unbinds his people: God is sovereign (1:3b-6), which means that he is able to act for his people’s sake (1:12-13).²⁴ These two visions of God appear to contradict one another, but they are related because the God who rages against his enemies is also the God who protects his people.

This connection between the two images is most vividly explained in 1:3: “The Lord is slow to anger but great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.” For a people who have been oppressed for so many years by the wicked Assyrians, this is good news indeed! Nahum’s audience would be reminded that the God who is great in power [who can control nature (1:3b-6)] is certainly able to defeat the Assyrians. Nevertheless, Nahum’s audience probably

¹⁸ Other nations and people who had been conquered by the Assyrians would have shared this animosity.

¹⁹ The words justice and righteousness are actually not used in Nahum. However, in light of the prophetic tradition’s use of these words as well as the biblical importance given to them (cf., e.g., Job 37:23; Ps. 9:8; 11:7, 33:4-5; Is. 30:18), I think it appropriate to use them in this discussion.

²⁰ Also, God’s sovereignty was also problematic: if he was lord of all, then why did it appear that the Assyrian gods had conquered him and rendered him powerless? By informing his audience that God will destroy Nineveh, Nahum’s audience would know that God had not been overthrown by the other gods.

²¹ For if history is the arena in which God’s attributes are made known [as Elwell argues (“Nahum,” 1520)], then Nahum’s declaration of the fall of Nineveh divulges the attributes of God.

²² Leslie notes that this passage contains “‘historified’ elements from the myth of Creation” (page 498 in E. A. Leslie, “Nahum, Book of,” *IDB*, 498-499).

²³ Page 59 in J. H. Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (London: SCM, 1961).

²⁴ Therefore, his sovereignty over creation (1:3b-6) is actually a positive image, because it affirms that God is ruler of all and he has not been defeated by the gods of the Assyrians.

still questioned whether the Assyrian gods had defeated their God — after all, the Assyrians had ruled over God’s people for many years, and God appeared to be apathetic in his inactivity. Nahum reminds them, however, that their God is “slow to anger.” In other words, God neither quickly nor arbitrarily acts in vengeance and wrath; rather, he is merciful and patient, even with the Assyrians. Nonetheless, God’s slowness to anger does not mean that he does not get angry. After all, “the Lord will by no means clear the guilty” (1:3). Those who are God’s enemies and do evil will be held responsible and judged for their actions: God will act in justice to punish those who are guilty. Therefore, Nahum uses two visions of God — God as vengeful and God as good — to remind his audience that their good, sovereign God is just, righteous, and great in power and acts accordingly (with patience and as judge).

Nahum’s message in 1:3 is particularly effective because the expression that God is “slow to anger” is usually followed in the biblical tradition by an affirmation of God’s love and mercy before any mention of God’s judgment (cf. Exod 34:6, Num 14:8). Yet in Nahum, God’s power and judgment immediately follow God’s patience. Nevertheless, Nahum is not rejecting the biblical tradition regarding God’s merciful and loving nature. The difference is one of emphasis. For Nahum, God’s patience with the Assyrians has ended. God has shown mercy in his patience through his slowness to anger, but now God’s justice requires that he act. Nahum is not contradicting the affirmations about God found elsewhere (like Exod 34:6-7).²⁵ Instead, Nahum is stressing a particular aspect of God’s nature, his judgment. After years of Assyrian oppression and cruelty, Nahum’s audience would be reassured that their God had not forgotten them and that his patience with the wicked (which to the Israelites must have seemed never-ending) did have an end.

It is important to note the biblical understanding of this “jealous and avenging God” who “takes vengeance...and rages against his adversaries” (1:2). As Heschel’s discussion makes clear, divine anger is “conditioned by God’s will; it is aroused by man’s sins. It is an instrument rather than a force...It is a secondary emotion, never the ruling passion.”²⁶ God’s anger is justifiable because it is not God’s disposition; rather, divine anger is a “transient and reactive condition” in response to humanity’s wickedness.²⁷ In fact, God chooses to act in anger because he is merciful and loving toward his creation. God is not indifferent, so he will act

²⁵ These other descriptions, moreover, are not void of mention of God’s judgment. Exodus 34:6-7, for instance, says that the Lord is “slow to anger” (6) but also is “by no means clearing the guilty” (7). Similarly, Nahum is not the only prophet to stress God’s judgment over his loving mercy: Hosea, for example, declares that the time has come for God’s beloved Israel to be punished for her unfaithfulness (cf., e.g., Hos 13).

²⁶ Page 63 in Abraham Joseph Heschel, *Prophets* (vol. 2; New York: HarperCollins, 1971). Eaton remarks, “it must be noted that such attributes of God must not be interpreted too hastily in terms of human emotions” (*Obadiah*, 57).

²⁷ Heschel, *Prophets*, 69.

to save his creation from the evil the Assyrians have wrought.²⁸ God in his justice will deal with the guilty Assyrians, because “it is divine anger that gives strength to God’s truth and justice.”²⁹ Accordingly, as Nahum describes a God who is full of wrath, and as he proclaims the destruction of God’s enemies, the reader must remember that God’s actions mean freedom for the oppressed and just punishment for the wicked oppressor.

Nahum’s audience have reason to celebrate because God will defeat their enemies. Nahum instructs Judah to rejoice in the good news: “celebrate...for never again shall the wicked invade you” (1:15).³⁰ It is noticeable that Nahum, unlike the other prophets, does not prophesy against Judah. Instead, Nahum is optimistic (1:15),³¹ prompting much speculation about why he neglects to rebuke his fellow Judeans, since this was a typical role for an Israelite prophet. Scholars present many possibilities for this oddity.³² Those scholars who criticize Nahum for his optimism, fail to take into account the emphasis of Nahum’s book:³³ the sovereign God who will demonstrate his justice and righteousness through judgment against the wicked Assyrians. In short, other prophets will prophesy about the fall of Judah (cf. Hab 1:6-11), but Nahum will rejoice in the God who causes the fall of Nineveh.

As the book of Nahum progresses, chapter 2 uses an oracle to further describe this fall of the Assyrians (2:1-12). In language reminiscent of Day of the Lord imagery,³⁴ Nahum describes God’s judgment against Nineveh. Nahum declares that “a shatterer has come up against you” (2:1). While “shatterer” could be referring to the nations who will defeat Nineveh, the “shatterer” also refers to

²⁸ After all, as Achtemeier remarks, “if God does not destroy the evil human beings have brought into God’s good creation, the world can never return to the wholeness he intended for it in the beginning” (*Nahum* 10).

²⁹ Heschel, *Prophets*, 77.

³⁰ This is a mark of the Zion ethos: the residents of Jerusalem believed that their city was invincible after Assyria failed to destroy the city in 701 B. C. E. (Judith Hadley, class notes, 2 Oct 2002). With the downfall of Assyria predicted, the residents were even more certain that Jerusalem would not fall. Of course, though it was true that Assyria would not invade again, others would (like the Babylonians in 586 B. C. E.).

³¹ Even if one reads the instructions for Judah to “celebrate your festivals...fulfill your vows” as suggesting the people are not doing so, Nahum does not rebuke the people in any way.

³² For instance, Blenkinsopp (*History*, 122) and Von Rad [pages 157-158 in Gerhard Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965)] argue that Nahum was written during Josiah’s reforms. The theory that Nahum was prophesying around Josiah’s reforms gains support when read in light of 1:9-11, which is a passage “taking issue with a group opposed to the anti-Assyrian policy of Josiah and his supporters...” (Blenkinsopp, *History*, 122). For those scholars who do not consider the Josian reforms a reality, this view is, of course, untenable. Von Rad suggests that the overall message of the book does not focus on judging Judah because of Nahum’s role as a cultic prophet (during Josiah’s reforms): “His message...can be seen as following the traditional threats against the enemies of God’s people used in a sacral ceremony” (*Message*, 158). Smith takes yet another approach, proposing that Nahum is speaking on behalf of all the nations that Assyria has oppressed, and, thus, Nahum does not condemn Judah because Judah is not the only audience to whom he is speaking [page 103 in George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1901)].

³³ Cf. Cathcart, “Nahum,” 999. They also do not consider the possible theories outlined in the previous footnote.

³⁴ Page 141 in Richard J. Sklba, *Pre-Exilic Prophecy* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1990).

the Lord, because the ancients understood the events of history as controlled by the gods or God.³⁵ What humans saw was not the whole picture; rather, the real meaning of the events of history was found in the relationship of God or gods to the world. Thus, ancient descriptions of events sought to describe what was behind the human experience. Accordingly, even though the “shatterer” is the nations who attack Nineveh, the one who is behind the attack — the true “shatterer” — is Nahum’s God. Those who carry out the attack are simply being used to fulfill God’s judgment, just as God used Assyria to fulfill his plans for Judah.³⁶

Therefore, in chapter 2, one can also read Nahum’s description of Nineveh’s fall at the hands of “the combined forces of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians”³⁷ as a description of God’s army conquering the city.³⁸ Nahum reminds the Ninevites that they will fall because “it is decreed” by God that the city will be destroyed (2:7; cf. 1:9). Nahum mocks the Ninevites in their futile attempts to defend themselves against God’s army: for instance, the Assyrian army may “collect all [their] strength” (2:1), but they will nevertheless “stumble” (2:5) against their swift and invincible opposition (2:3-4). The Ninevites will discover that they are powerless in the onslaught of God’s judgment: “hearts faint and knees tremble, all loins quake, all faces grow pale” because God has destroyed the lion (2:10, 11-13).³⁹ These lions of Assyria are being destroyed because of their wickedness: the lion “has filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh” (2:12). Nahum reminds his audience that the Assyrians’ actions have caused the “Lord of hosts”⁴⁰ to seek to destroy them.

The oracle against Nineveh in chapter 2 is followed by another oracle in chapter 3.⁴¹ This oracle begins by describing the fall of Nineveh: the “city of bloodshed” (3:1) is filled with chariots of war (3:2) and “heaps of corpses” (3:3). This attack occurs because Nineveh, as a “prostitute” who “enslaves nations...and

³⁵ Cf. Elwell, “Nahum,” 1521.

³⁶ Cf. Nahum 1:12. Similarly, when Nahum describes the fall of Thebes in chapter 3, he does not emphasize the Assyrian might that crushed Thebes, but the power of God (who was behind the event).

³⁷ Newsome, *Prophets*, 89.

³⁸ Page 75 in William P. Brown, *Obadiah Through Malachi* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

³⁹ This “lion” language in 2:11-13 clearly refers to the Assyrians. According to archaeological evidence, the lion was a symbol for the Assyrian king (*Ibid.*, 75). In addition, Ishtar, the goddess of the Assyrians, was portrayed either as a lioness herself or as a rider of a lion [page 114 in John D. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (New York: Cambridge, 1975)].

⁴⁰ The “Lord of Hosts” language would further remind Nahum’s readers that God is fighting for them, since “this is a military title which was familiar to the readers of the history of early Israel” (Watts, *Books*, 116).

⁴¹ Many scholars do not make a marked separation between these two chapters. However, although each oracle concerns the fall of Nineveh, they can be differentiated because God plays a much more explicit role in the oracle of chapter 3 (through language of “I” and direct address of Nineveh — “you”) and also because the prose in 2:13 effectively breaks the textual flow.

peoples,” has brought upon herself God’s judgment and wrath.⁴² Because of her sins, the “Lord of hosts” is against the prostitute Nineveh (3:5), and he will punish her in front of all the nations (3:5-7).⁴³ She will be humiliated and shamed as the Lord publicly exposes her nakedness, treats her with contempt, and makes her a spectacle (3:5-6).⁴⁴ She had treated others in such a manner; now it is Nineveh’s turn. Moreover, all the nations — nations whom Assyria oppressed — will “shrink from” Nineveh’s public humiliation, and she will find no friends to mourn her destruction (3:7). Her desolation is complete.

As the oracle continues, Nahum reminds Nineveh of the city of Thebes,⁴⁵ which fell in 663 to the Assyrians. Nahum notes that just as Thebes had felt secure (3:8-9), Nineveh thinks she is invincible — but just as Thebes had fallen (3:10), Nineveh too will fall (3:11-13).⁴⁶ Nahum mocks the strength of the Assyrians, who “will be drunken” and seek “a refuge” (3:11) because their fortresses and soldiers are weak (3:12-13); though Nineveh will prepare herself (3:14), she will be devoured by fire and cut off by sword (3:15). In other words, just as Thebes fell under Assyria’s assault, Nineveh will not be able to withstand God’s attack on her city. She will disappear like locusts and grasshoppers (3:16-17), and her people will be “scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them” (3:18). Nineveh’s “wound is mortal” (3:19); her power is gone.⁴⁷ Everyone will rejoice in her destruction: “all who hear the news about you clap their hands over you” (3:19), affirming the justice of Judah’s God. The fall of Nineveh means freedom for them and vindication for their God.

Hence, Nahum’s book presents the nature of God as righteous, good, and just. As verse 1:3 so well summarizes, God is patient (slow to anger), yet there is a time for him to judge the guilty. God does not allow the oppressor to oppress his people forever; he is truly a God who is “a stronghold in a day of trouble” (1:7). His anger, wrath, and vengeance do not make him an evil, cruel God; rather, they

⁴² Some scholars believe this is a direct attack on Nineveh’s goddess, Ishtar, who was “the goddess of sex and war” (Watts, *Books*, 116); sacred prostitution was common for her cult, and “Ishtar herself was often represented by her own devotees as a harlot — sometimes indeed a savage and destructive one” (Eaton, *Obadiah*, 73).

⁴³ This image of violence against the female city is an issue particularly within feminist scholarship. Due to limited space, I will not address this critique here. For an introduction to feminist issues in this book, cf. Judith E. Sanderson, “Nahum,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 232-239.

⁴⁴ In the ancient world, not only was “public exposure... a typical punishment for a prostitute (cf. Jer. 13:26; Ezek. 16:37; 23:10; Hos. 2:10),” but it was also the highest form of humiliation (Chisholm, *Interpreting*, 177). In addition, Nineveh herself had treated female captives in this way (Smith, *Book*, 109).

⁴⁵ Page 280 in J. Van Doornik, “No Amon,” *CBQ* 11 (Jl 1949), 28-295. Doornik details the history of the interpretation of “No Amon,” concluding that Jerome’s choice of Alexandria is probably the most correct (*passim*). However, this paper follows most other scholars, who consider “No Amon” to be referring to Thebes.

⁴⁶ This whole passage ridicules the Assyrians because they *did* believe they were “better than Thebes” (3:8). After all, they had defeated Thebes!

⁴⁷ Like Thebes, Nineveh is guilty as it faces God’s judgment.

demonstrate God's justice as well as his love for his people and creation because God punishes the (guilty) wicked and thus brings freedom to the oppressed.

Many scholars agree with this analysis⁴⁸ (and presumably so would Nahum's audience, who with him are rejoicing in Assyria's fall). Other contemporary scholars have found this conclusion about God's nature inadequate. The two main objections, raised by scholars, like Garcia-Treto, are these: the destruction of Nineveh occurs through the hands of people who are also violent and oppressive (does that implicate God?), and there is no distinction between the guilty and the innocent Ninevites (wherein is the justice of God?).⁴⁹ These objections need to be taken seriously, yet they do not necessarily nullify the previous conclusion about the nature of the God of Nahum as good and just.

Garcia-Treto gives voice to the first objection by asking, "Can God's punishment of violence and oppression partake of that same violence and oppression?"⁵⁰ On the one hand, biblical accounts seem to say yes. For instance, Amos proclaims that God will send a nation (Assyria) to punish Israel for her sins (cf. 3:11, 6:14), yet Amos does not question God's use of such a cruel nation to punish his people.⁵¹ In the holy wars of the Old Testament, Israel herself employs violence to carry out God's judgments on the nations. The biblical text does not appear to find problematic the concept that a violent and/or wicked nation can serve as the instrument of God's divine judgment.

On the other hand, such a reading of the Old Testament is not fair to the text. The theology behind holy wars is never so simply explained, and other prophets do address God's choice of the wicked to punish the "less" wicked.⁵² Nevertheless, those biblical writers who question God's actions at the same time affirm God's goodness (cf., e.g., Hab 3:2, 17-19). In other words, in the biblical narrative, God remains just and righteous for those who proclaim his judgment (like Nahum and Habakkuk), even if that judgment occurs through another wicked nation and thus does not harmonize with human ideas of justice and righteousness. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that except in cases like the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah, the Hebrew Bible portrays God using people to carry out his will concerning other people. That is, God works through people — *regardless of their sinfulness* — to punish or save others (cf. the story of Rahab in Joshua 2). If God chooses to work through people in a sin-filled world, he must always work through

⁴⁸ Cf., *passim*, Newsome (*Prophets*), Eaton (*Obadiah*), Watts (*Books*), Achtemeier (*Nahum*), Chisholm (*Interpreting*), Brown (*Obadiah*), Smith (*Book*), Sklba (*Pre-Exilic*), Leslie ("Nahum").

⁴⁹ Cf. Garcia-Treto, "Nahum," 596.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 597.

⁵¹ Perhaps he did not find it problematic, or perhaps he omitted this question for other reasons unknown to us.

⁵² . For instance, Habakkuk, writing shortly after Nahum, protests God's use of the wicked to punish Judah: "why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?" (Hab. 1:13).

sinful people. The biblical writers do not seem to believe that God's working through sinful people makes God less than righteous, good, and just.

If we take seriously the biblical concept of God's use of sinful people to carry out the divine will, we might find that our objections about the nature of God in Nahum do an injustice to the prophet. It appears that Nahum accepts that God works in ways he could not understand, and Nahum does not question how the wicked can be the instruments of judgment without affecting God's goodness.⁵³ Instead, Nahum follows in the prophetic tradition of proclaiming God's righteousness and justice above all else. In addition, particularly because Nahum is addressing the question of whether God *will* — not *how* — fulfill his promises to judge the wicked, Nahum does not ask if using violence to end oppression makes God less righteous. Rather, Nahum celebrates the fact that God is finally showing himself to be righteous and just through the judgment of Assyria's cruelty and violence.⁵⁴ Perhaps, then, our question concerning how God's means affect God's nature should not be forced upon Nahum, because Nahum cannot answer a question he himself is not asking.⁵⁵

The second objection that Garcia-Treto raises is this: how can a righteous God condemn the innocent?⁵⁶ To counter this objection, we must first take into account the context in which Nahum was written. As Holladay argues, there was a shift between the ninth and eighth centuries in statecraft policies.⁵⁷ This change involved a “dramatic shift of the primary *object* of the prophetic address *away* from the ruling houses of the twin kingdoms and *to* the people of Israel as a whole.”⁵⁸ Treaties (and royal letters) from the time of Nahum and his eighth-century predecessors show that international agreements no longer concern *only* the royal household. Instead, “the treaty is consummated between the great king and the vassal king *and all of his people*.”⁵⁹ Therefore, it is no longer just the house of the vassal king that must be obedient to the superpower, but the people must also obey. Consequently, the entire nation is now “held responsible for the action of its rulers.”⁶⁰ When Assyria attacked Israel, the rulers *and* the people were killed or deported, because “the whole terror psychology of the Assyrian statecraft swung its focus of attention from master to slave, prince to peasant, king to citizen....Now

⁵³ Perhaps for Nahum this is not an issue.

⁵⁴ As Blenkinsopp remarks, “what was at stake for the poet and his audience was the reality of divine power and the possibility of justice in a world of international affairs” (*History*, 123), not how God carried out this justice

⁵⁵ Although we would certainly like him to do so! For this question, however, we may have to look elsewhere in the tradition, like Habakkuk and Job.

⁵⁶ Garcia-Treto, “Nahum,” 595.

⁵⁷ And the prophets (with the exception of Isaiah) demonstrate this shift (Holladay, “Assyrian,” 126).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

whole countries went into exile.”⁶¹ Similarly, when Nahum prophesies against Nineveh, he includes the entire population of the city and not just the royal household.⁶² The people were considered just as responsible for the nation’s actions as were the rulers and the military. Hence, for Nahum, there are no “innocent” in Nineveh.⁶³ When God — the true king of Judah — judges Assyria for her sins, the whole nation is affected.⁶⁴

Although contemporary questions about the nature of God are serious issues for readers of the Bible to address, Nahum does not necessarily answer the objections.⁶⁵ Nahum does not ask all our contemporary questions; like any ancient text, the book of Nahum must be read with regard to the time in it was written.⁶⁶ Nahum is an Israelite celebrating the victory of his God over the evil Assyrians. Nahum addresses whether or not God will ever punish the wicked —that is, whether God is truly just — because he and his audience lived in a time when the answer to that question was uncertain. Therefore, when Nahum rejoices in the fall of Nineveh, he does so because it is through this event that God proves himself to be faithful, just, righteous, and sovereign. As Nahum announces the fall of the enemy, he divulges the nature of his God, a God who is “slow to anger but great in power...[who] will by no means clear the guilty....[who] is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble;...[for] he will make a full end of his adversaries” (1:3, 7-8). Accordingly, contemporary scholarly critiques that do not distinguish between the theodicy-related questions Nahum addresses and those with which he is not concerned fail to provide a fair and thorough treatment of the nature of God in Nahum.

Jonah

The book of Jonah reveals the nature of God quite differently from Nahum. For instance, since Jonah is a story while Nahum is an extended oracle, the way in which Jonah “works” as a narrative text is different. The unclear purpose of Jonah, moreover, makes it difficult to determine what the author is trying to establish

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶² In other words, when he prophesies against Assyria, he includes all Assyrians.

⁶³ Though contemporary people may question the God who allows the “innocent” to die in Nahum, we must remember that at the time the book of Nahum was composed, this question would be irrelevant, because there would be no “innocent” people for God to save. God, then, remains good and just in Nahum — regardless of present-day critics’ objections — as God shows forth his justice by punishing all Assyrians for their nation’s sins.

⁶⁴ This is not to dismiss contemporary questions or criticisms. Rather, I am questioning whether it is appropriate and/or helpful to ask this particular question of Nahum, because it asks him to answer a question he did not ask.

⁶⁵ (This does not mean one should avoid reading Nahum!) To find answers for those questions, one must look at the entire biblical narrative. Yet even then some of the questions may not be satisfactorily answered, as the long history of discussion about the nature of God makes clear. See Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets: Part 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. 20-21.

⁶⁶ In order to appropriately interpret Nahum for today, we must have a clear understanding of the text, its time period, and what questions it is or is not answering.

about God.⁶⁷ Was the purpose to address the issue of unfulfilled prophecy, to counter Jewish nationalism,⁶⁸ to widen views about God's mercy,⁶⁹ to elaborate on the Jeremian concept of repentance.⁷⁰ As Berger points out, the issue of God's nature is complicated in Jonah due to the many focalizations within the story. Because Jonah's narrator is neutral and detached, "the ideological focalization of the text might be focalized from YHWH's perspective, from Jonah's stance, or it might be bifurcated between the two."⁷¹ In other words, the author does not make clear what (or whose) ideology he is promoting because of his neutral stance. Accordingly, if we wish to formulate some idea about the nature of the God of Jonah, then we must address the complexity of the book from its various viewpoints (that is, through its "embedded focalization[s]"⁷²). Because the complicated relationship between God and Jonah — the main characters in the story — is central to the book, we must explore the book's theology from both God's point of view and the prophet's point of view. In addition, because the author is addressing a post-exilic audience, we must also consider how they might have interpreted the story.⁷³ Though we may never distinguish a clear purpose in Jonah, we may use some of the possible ideologies — which we learn from the various focalizations — to formulate some idea about God's nature in this book.

It is clear that the author wishes his audience to understand this book as a story about a prophet (hence the reference to Jonah son of Amittai in Jonah 1:1-2). Jonah, however, is anything but the model prophet. From the beginning, Jonah does precisely what the readers would not expect.⁷⁴ When God calls Jonah, Jonah runs away: in fact, instead of setting off across the land to Nineveh, he goes in the opposite direction over the sea (1:3).⁷⁵ Though there are biblical precedents for a

⁶⁷ Nahum's is more apparent: to celebrate Nineveh's fall and, consequently, proclaim the nature of his God.

⁶⁸ Blenkinsopp, *History*, 242-245, and Bewer, "Jonah," 7, respectively.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Obadiah*, 17-28, Brockington, [page 627 in Leonard H. Brockington, "Jonah," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (ed. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley; Routledge: London, 1990), 627-629], and Anthony J. Ceresko, "Jonah," in *NJBC*, 580-584, *passim*.

⁷⁰ Found in Jeremiah 18:7-8 [Cf. page 227 in Marsha C. White, "Jonah," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992)]. Although White recognizes that Jonah is similar to Job in that it "probes the nature of God's justice" (*Ibid.*, 226), she fails to recognize that like Job, Jonah raises issues of theodicy. See Allen, *Books*, 189-191 and Simon, *Jonah*, vii-xiv for various interpretations of the book's purpose.

⁷¹ Page 64 in Benjamin Lyle Berger, "Picturing the Prophet: Focalization in the Book of Jonah," *SR* 29:1 (2000), 55-66. See Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), *passim*, for an in-depth analysis of Jonah as narrative.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷³ While we can never be certain of how they would have reacted, we can know, at least, something about their knowledge (in this case, that Nineveh had fallen).

⁷⁴ Cf. page 211 in Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). Although Craigie points out that the southern audience would expect a northern prophet to be disobedient, it is still likely that they would be surprised at Jonah's blatant rejection of God's commands.

⁷⁵ Ceresko notes that Jonah's flight is, in fact, a constant descent ("Jonah," 582).

prophet protesting God's call — Moses, Jeremiah, and Elijah⁷⁶ — Jonah transcends these other prophets in disobedience.⁷⁷ For instance, Moses objects that he is not capable of fulfilling God's call (Exod 4:10), and Jeremiah tells God that he does "not know how to speak, for [he is] only a boy" (Jer 1:6). Similarly, Elijah laments that it is better to die than to live after running to the wilderness (1 Kgs 19:4). Nevertheless, these prophets eventually fulfill God's commands without further protest. In contrast, Jonah does not articulate his objections but simply runs away⁷⁸ and remains stubborn to the end (cf. 4:9). Because Jonah so blatantly refused God's call, the general attitude of modern scholars toward Jonah has been negative.⁷⁹

When discussing these biblical precedents, most authors fail to mention the difference in the role God plays in his relationship with Jonah as compared to the other prophets.⁸⁰ For instance, although God is upset with Moses, God provides him with help via Aaron (Exod 4:14-17). Similarly, God gives strength to Jeremiah by putting his hand to Jeremiah's mouth and giving him the words of God (Jer 1:9), and God feeds Elijah and appears to him (1 Kgs 19:4-18). In Jonah, God does not seem so gracious. When Jonah flees to a ship bound for Tarshish, God sends a storm. When the sailors throw Jonah overboard (at his request), God sends a big fish to swallow him. This fish, often seen as Jonah's salvation,⁸¹ can also be seen as God's punishment.⁸² Although Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, instead of kindly strengthening his prophet as he did for the others, God sends a storm and casts Jonah into a slimy fish whence he is vomited onto dry land (1:4-2:10). Once Jonah is back on land, God again commands him to go to Nineveh but offers no further assistance (3:1-2). While we must keep in mind that Jonah's extreme reaction to God's call may help explain God's strange treatment of him, we can conclude that the nature of God — at least from Jonah's focalization — is not necessarily positive thus far in the story.

Jonah's own beliefs about God are confusing. Jonah tries to flee via ship "away from the presence of the Lord" (1:3). The pre-exilic mindset would have considered this a reasonable action, since God's presence was associated with the land.⁸³ However, for the post-exilic author and his audience, Jonah's action was clearly foolish — they had learned during exile that God is not confined to the land

⁷⁶ Where "the main theme of the book is the close, almost impertinent relationship between the lonely man of God and his heavenly Master. (Sawyer, *Prophecy*, 127).

⁷⁷ Tribble's argument is very similar to mine "Jonah," 480.

⁷⁸ Allen remarks, "Jonah's blunt refusal goes far beyond [Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah's] hesitations" (*Books*, 176).

⁷⁹ Cf. page 87 in Serge Frolov, "Returning the Ticket: God and His Prophet in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 86 (1999), 85-105.

⁸⁰ Though Frolov hints at this (*ibid.*, 92-95).

⁸¹ Cf. Allen, *Books*, 184-185.

⁸² Cf. Frolov, "Returning," 93.

⁸³ Page 95 in Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Dallas: Word, 1989).

(cf. Ezekiel). One cannot escape God's presence: while Jonah is on the ship, God sends a terrible storm (1:4). The sailors are afraid, while Jonah (a Hebrew who should know nothing about the sea)⁸⁴ sleeps soundly (1:5).⁸⁵ Jonah cares little for his life⁸⁶ and/or is content with his decision to flee; the captain has to wake Jonah so that Jonah can call upon his god (1:6).

When the sailors discover by lot that Jonah is responsible for this calamity, they question him (1:7-8). In an ironic statement, Jonah professes: "I am a Hebrew...I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9). Jonah, the prophet who tried to flee from God's presence, acknowledges that the God he serves is creator of the sea and the land. How then can Jonah flee from his presence? Not only do Jonah's actions in this episode appear strange, but God's actions are also unusual. Although God uses natural forces to rebuke or judge people in the biblical tradition, usually those people are considered guilty (e.g., the flood for the wicked in Gen 6-7; the sea for the Egyptians in Ex 14:26-28). Here, however, the sailors who have not offended God are the ones tormented by the storm, while the guilty Jonah sleeps peacefully (1:5). This seems to paint quite an odd picture of God: he uses creation to make his point, but he does so almost cruelly.⁸⁷ Hence, "issues of theodicy flood these chapters."⁸⁸

As the story continues, Jonah instructs the other sailors to throw him overboard to appease his god (1:11-13). The sailors are reluctant. When they finally concede to Jonah's wishes, they pray to the Lord that they may not be "guilty of innocent blood" (1:14). The men then offer sacrifices to the Lord, making vows and fearing God (1:15). This scene contradicts typical Israelite theology. First, Jonah believes that God wants a human sacrifice, and this appears to be what God requires, since God is appeased once Jonah is thrown overboard. Yet not only does the idea of human sacrifice go against biblical understandings of worship (e.g., Lev 18:21, 27:2-8),⁸⁹ but it is also something that the Lord has explicitly declared abominable (Deut 12:34).⁹⁰ In this scene, the Hebrew who believes in the God of heaven is not the one who fears God. Instead, the Gentile sailors fear God and are scared to perform a human sacrifice.⁹¹ Since Gentiles were often portrayed as practicing human sacrifice (cf. Deut 12:34), the sailors'

⁸⁴ Cf. page 593 in Peter J. M. Southwell, "Jonah," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Barton and John Muddiman; New York: Oxford, 2001), 593-595.

⁸⁵ One wonders if perhaps the author is suggesting that the Gentiles have offended God by being Gentiles or, instead, that the Gentiles are the only ones who truly fear God (unlike Jonah).

⁸⁶ Simon, *Jonah*, 9.

⁸⁷ Cf. Frolov, "Returning," 92-95.

⁸⁸ Tribble, "Jonah," 485.

⁸⁹ Of course, there is the notable and controversial exception of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11.

⁹⁰ These passages explicitly mention the sacrifice of children. I am assuming, however, that adult sacrifice is also prohibited.

⁹¹ Cf. Chisholm, *Interpreting*, 124.

reluctance (especially as opposed to Jonah's willingness) would certainly surprise the Israelite audience. In addition, the Gentiles' actions of worship, particularly in light of Jonah's apparent lack of obedience, would have also contradicted the audience's expectations. Perhaps the author, who just reminded his audience that their God is "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9), is reminding his audience that their God is also Lord of all people, not just the Israelites. Still, the text raises the question, does God, whom Jonah and his audience serve, desire human sacrifice?

The text answers this question by telling us that God saves his prophet. Thus the sacrifice in the end is a narrative trick, since God prevents the sacrifice (in the fullest sense of the word) from occurring.⁹² Jonah does not die: he enters into the belly of a fish. While the grotesque elements of this episode make this part comical,⁹³ what is most important is the "salvation" of traditional views of God — as a God whose nature abhors human sacrifice — through the salvation of Jonah.⁹⁴ While in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays to "the Lord his God" (2:1).

This psalm initially appears to present a more positive view of the prophet than the rest of the book.⁹⁵ Jonah is explicitly addressing God and rejoicing in God's mercy (cf. 2:1, 7, 9), whereas in the rest of the book Jonah rails against God's mercy. Also, Jonah portrays himself as the righteous one — praying (2:7), making vows (2:8), and worshipping God even though God has cast him into the deep (2:3). Jonah delights in God's deliverance, saying, "you brought up my life from the Pit" (2:7) and "Deliverance belongs to the Lord" (2:9). However, Jonah never repents, and, as Bewer points out, nowhere in the rest of the narrative does the author suggest that Jonah thought the fish was his savior.⁹⁶ This raises the questions of whether God really is a deliverer and whether Jonah is being serious or sarcastic in this psalm. Henceforth, the psalm's characterizations of God and Jonah are not clear: God is both gracious (delivers) and cruel (casts into sea) and Jonah is both pious (vows, prays) and stubborn (does not repent). The psalm only adds to the confusion and complexity of the nature of God in this book; it does not resolve any theodicy issues.

After the psalm, the fish "spewed Jonah out upon the dry land" (2:10),⁹⁷ and God calls Jonah a second time (3:1-2). Jonah responds by traveling to Nineveh. As

⁹² Of course, from the point of view of the sailors, the sacrifice is total, and Jonah is dead.

⁹³ Wolff, *Jonah*, 84.

⁹⁴ Furthermore, through Jonah's sacrifice, God saves the Gentiles. Ceresko remarks, "The irony of the situation is unmistakable: in his very flight from God's service, Jonah unwittingly serves God as the one through whom the pagan sailors come to know and fear Yahweh" ("Jonah," 582).

⁹⁵ For this reason, 2:1-9 often considered an interpolation.

⁹⁶ Bewer, "Jonah," 21. Rather, as Frolov argues, Jonah considers the fish a punishment because it keeps him alive ("Returning, 21).

⁹⁷ Again, elements of the grotesque make this episode comically absurd (Wolff, *Jonah*, 84).

the author describes this “great city” of Nineveh (3:1-2), it becomes clear that he is using the Hellenistic picture of Nineveh, not the traditional biblical image.⁹⁸ In other biblical books, Nineveh is a despised, evil city wherein heinous crimes are committed.⁹⁹ The author here, however, does not emphasize the wickedness of the city.¹⁰⁰ Instead, he uses the Hellenistic model of Nineveh as a city known for its opulence and excess as well as its destruction (3:2-3).¹⁰¹

When Jonah comes to the city, he proclaims, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:4). Jonah appears to be the typical Israelite delighting in the fact that Nineveh will be destroyed (as did Nahum). However, Jonah’s words belie such a simple reading. As Brown discusses, the meaning of the word “overthrow” in Hebrew is quite nuanced: “it can mean to destroy...yet it can also mean to turn or change something.”¹⁰² Thus, though Jonah appears to be predicting Nineveh’s fall, his language allows room for other events — such as repentance or “turning” from evil — to occur without falsifying his prophecy.¹⁰³

When the people hear Jonah’s message, their response is immediate: “And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth” (3:5). As with the sailors, the Gentile Ninevites’ response to God contrasts with that of Jonah, the Hebrew. While God had to call Jonah twice (and resort to the fish), the Ninevites hear the message once and act immediately. The king of Nineveh tears his robe, covers himself with sackcloth, and sits in ashes (3:6) — all typical Israelite methods of mourning and repentance (cf. Esth 4:1, I Kgs 21:27). The king also calls all the people and animals of the city to repent (3:7-8). Though the inclusion of even the animals makes this scene ridiculous,¹⁰⁴ the author makes his point quite clear: the Ninevites repent so thoroughly that even the animals join in!¹⁰⁵ Once again, the Gentiles are acting like followers of the Israelite God and are portrayed in a positive light. They not only know how to repent (by following Israelite customs), but they also do it wholeheartedly.

⁹⁸ Cf. pages 129-140 in Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined* (JSTOPSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

⁹⁹ Cf. Nahum and Zephaniah.

¹⁰⁰ In addition, only 1:2 calls Nineveh wicked, and that wickedness is not detailed (as it is, e.g., in Nahum 2:12).

¹⁰¹ Bolin, *Freedom*, 139. As will be discussed more later, the significance of the latter point is crucial to understanding the nature of God portrayed in this book.

¹⁰² Brown, *Obadiah*, 25.

¹⁰³ Perhaps the author is addressing unfulfilled prophecy (cf. Blenkinsopp, *History*, 242-245): the author suggests that the prophecy does not go unfulfilled because Jonah’s prophecy does come true — just not in the way Jonah expected. Or perhaps the author is simply trying to set up a situation where once again his readers will have their expectations and assumptions shattered: Nineveh is not overthrown as in “destroyed” because these Gentiles choose to “turn” to God in repentance!

¹⁰⁴ (Wolff, *Jonah*, 84).

¹⁰⁵ In addition, because the king’s edict comes after the people’s immediate response of fasting and sackcloth (3:5), it appears that all of Nineveh willingly repents (not simply because they were ordered to do so by the king).

After the king's edict is proclaimed, the motivation behind the Ninevites' repentance is revealed: "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (3:9). Clearly, there was a belief that God (or a god) could turn from his plans.¹⁰⁶ This idea certainly had biblical precedents. For instance, Jeremiah proclaims that a nation's repentance may lead to God's repentance (18:8). Similarly, at the intercession of a prophet, God sometimes changes his mind (cf. Gen 32:9-14). Biblical examples of God's willingness to be merciful abound, perhaps most explicitly in the story of Sodom: God promises Abraham that for the sake of ten righteous men, the city will not perish (Gen 18:32). In the case of Sodom, no righteous men are found (though Lot is saved), and God destroys the city (19:24). In the story of Jonah, however, the city *is* saved, for "when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (3:10). In this passage, prophetic intercession does not persuade God, for Jonah does not intercede for the people of Nineveh.¹⁰⁷ Instead, God changes his mind due to the Gentiles' intercession on their own behalf.¹⁰⁸

At one level, therefore, the mercy and forgiveness of God are apparent in this story, because God does not destroy Nineveh after the people repent. On another level, since the audience knows that the city of Nineveh is eventually demolished, the Ninevites only appear to be saved. God's mercy may have prolonged their fate, but ultimately, they cannot avoid his judgment. Hence, by using the city known for its destruction, the author suggests that ultimately, God does not "change his mind" if justice must be served against the wicked.¹⁰⁹ The author is not reversing the Israelite view that God will judge the wicked. Rather, the author is emphasizing the merciful side of God by demonstrating God's mercy and love toward all his creation, even those whom the Israelites thought God's mercy could not encompass. Although the audience would not have expected Nineveh to repent, they would realize that this repentance only extended God's mercy; it did not eliminate his judgment and justice because one day the city is

¹⁰⁶ As Tribble points out, "turn" is a better translation than "change his mind" ("Jonah," 514). Cf. also page 187 in Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Content, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) and Bolin, *Freedom*, 143-145.

¹⁰⁷ Again, Jonah is not your typical prophet. Perhaps one could argue that Jonah's running away is an intercession, because by running away and not delivering the message about destruction, Jonah might save Nineveh from her ill fate. However, Jonah's confession in 4:2 makes this suggestion untenable. Similarly, though Brockington remarks Jonah is willing to die for the Gentile sailors, thus proving that God's prophet has understood the book's theme about God's wide mercy ("Jonah," 628), Jonah's attitude at the end of the book, as well as his earlier lack of concern for their sailors (1:6), suggests otherwise.

¹⁰⁸ Which would, as with other parts of this story, shock the audience.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Bolin, *Freedom*, 141-147

overthrown. God's mercy does not completely override his justice,¹¹⁰ even though his mercy is more evident.

Jonah, however, as a character confined to the text, does not know that God will eventually destroy the city. He sees only that God has changed his mind and decided not to "overthrow" the city.¹¹¹ Thus, Jonah becomes angry with God (4:1): God's justice appears to have been silenced by his mercy. Jonah is angry that God is being true to his nature, for in one of the most significant passages of the book,¹¹² Jonah attests, "That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (4:2). Other biblical passages must be analyzed to try to unravel the complexities of Jonah's statement. In Deuteronomy 18:21-22, for example, the standard for recognizing a false prophet depends on whether his words are fulfilled. Perhaps, it is because Jonah knows his prophecy to Nineveh will not come true that he runs away from his commission. After all, if Jonah goes to the city and predicts that it will fall — only to have God save the city — Jonah is nothing more than a false prophet whose career is ruined.¹¹³ In this case, his reluctance is understandable. Alternatively, this passage could be understood in light of the entire Exodus 34:6-7 tradition, where God's mercy and justice go hand-in-hand, though at different times one aspect is stressed more than the other.¹¹⁴ In this case, Jonah, like Nahum, affirms both God's slowness to anger and his justice, yet, unlike Nahum, Jonah's emphasis is not clear. From the focalization of the audience and author, God's justice appears most evident, for he destroys the wicked city. From the focalization

¹¹⁰ Against White, "Jonah," 214.

¹¹¹ At least as far as overthrow meant destroy.

¹¹² At least regarding the nature of God.

¹¹³ Frolov, "Returning," 90-91. For Frolov, Jonah then becomes an atonement sacrifice, saving Israel's enemies (97). Although other authors may have viewed Jonah as Deutero-Isaiah's righteous servant who dies for others (103, fn. 73), Frolov adamantly rejects this position. He instead argues that the author of Jonah intends to "counter the official ideology [taken from Deutero-Is] by showing that Israel's misery should not be understood as atonement for sins of other people, for salvation of the wicked at the expense of the righteous is nonsensical" (104). Hence, Jonah's actions are not ridiculous, because Jonah does not want to submit to a God who is willing to sacrifice one of his own people for the sake of the wicked (97). On the one hand, Frolov's theory makes sense. After all, Jonah's career, if understood in light of Deuteronomy 18, is ruined by his journey to Nineveh, and thus trying to avoid the trip would make sense. However, on the other hand, Frolov's theory does not seem to fit well with Jeremiah's understanding of repentance (18:8), and it is questionable why Jonah would be so cherished by Jewish communities as a call to repentance if the message of the book were instead the absurdity of God's actions toward his people.¹¹³ Furthermore, the audience knows that Jonah is justified and not proved false in the end since Nineveh is destroyed. Hence, while Frolov's reading of Jonah offers new insights and possibilities for wrestling with the book, his should not be accepted as the only true understanding. [It is noteworthy that at the end of Frolov's argument he mentions that as a post-WWII former Soviet national, he has a personal interest in rejecting any understanding of Jonah as an atonement for the wicked (104).]

¹¹⁵ Although, as discussed earlier, there are many passages affirming these statements about God's nature, Brockington ("Jonah," 628) and Ceresko ("Jonah," 583) note that only Joel 2:13b echoes Jonah's "relent from punishing" phrase.

of Jonah, however, God’s gracious mercy overwhelms his justice, since Nineveh is spared, for God is “ready to relent from punishing” (4:2).¹¹⁵

Jonah himself does not want to accept this view of God’s nature. As the story continues, Jonah asks to die (4:3). When God rebukes Jonah (4:4), Jonah goes out of the city, makes a booth, and sits under it, “waiting to see what would become of the city” (4:5).¹¹⁶ The picture of Jonah painted here is that of a stubborn, miserable prophet who fears that his career is ruined and is angry¹¹⁷ that God has extended his mercy to Jonah’s enemies.¹¹⁸ Instead of fulfilling his prophet’s hopes to see the city destroyed,¹¹⁹ God uses nature to teach Jonah a lesson. God sends a bush to grow over Jonah “to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort” (4:6). Jonah is extremely happy about this shade, but the next day, his happiness is crushed because “God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered” (4:7). Furthermore, God sends a “sultry east wind” that, combined with the sun, makes Jonah faint (4:8). Uncomfortable, Jonah again asks if he could die, because “it is better for me to die than to live” (4:8). Ironically, the Jonah who seemed to care little for the sailors in the storm or the Ninevites who were sentenced to destruction cares greatly for this little bush (4:8-9). Not surprisingly, God informs Jonah that his priorities are wrong.¹²⁰

God, whom Jonah has professed as Creator (1:9), reminds Jonah that he cares for all of his creation.¹²¹ Jonah cares deeply about “the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow” (4:10). Would not the creator of Nineveh rightly be concerned about “that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals” (4:11)?¹²² The answer should be “yes,” but the book ends with no answer. It remains a mystery whether or not Jonah concedes God’s point, or if he ever changes his attitude. What is clear is that God cares for all of his creation, including the rebellious prophet and the people and animals of

¹¹⁶ It looks as if Jonah is sitting to see the fireworks as the city is destroyed (Chisholm, *Interpreting*, 128)!

¹¹⁷ Jonah’s anger contrasts him with God, who is slow to anger (Lacocque and Lacocque, *Jonah*, 137). Jonah is angry that God is slow to anger!

¹¹⁸ (Jonah assumes his enemies are God’s enemies.) In Jonah’s defense, if Assyria is saved, they are free to oppress his nation, Israel (Sawyer, *Prophecy*, 126).

¹¹⁹ Destroying the city would affirm God’s justice.

¹²⁰ As Stuart outlines, the ancient world saw the world as divided into three areas: humans, animals, and plants (*Hosea*, 98). Although all three areas were important, humans were most valuable and plants least. Thus, in God’s comment to Jonah, it is clear that Jonah’s priorities are wrong because he cares for the bottom category (his plant), but he does not care for the humans and animals of the city, who are more valuable than the plant.

¹²¹ Cf. Tribble, “Jonah,” 42-43.

¹²² It is worthwhile to note that the author portrays the people of Nineveh as ignorant, not wicked (4:11). Perhaps this is another example of the fact that the author has in mind the Hellenistic portrait of the city as opposed to the traditional biblical view. Or perhaps the author is simply trying to teach his audience a lesson about their “enemies,” whom they considered evil and wicked. The author could be trying to temper this harsh view, suggesting instead that the Israelites should remember that nations who do not know God’s laws are ignorant, not simply or only evil.

Nineveh.¹²³ God's mercy — at least from his focalization and, perhaps, from that of the audience — is obvious.

In Jonah, then, the Exodus 34 theology (cf. Jonah 4:2) is evident as the author stresses the mercy of God, God's patience, and his forgiveness without neglecting the concept of God's justice. However, because the narrator uses various embedded focalizations to tell his story, the nature of God is complex. Jonah's point of view brings to light the frustration of Israel with God's seemingly never-ending patience and mercy toward their enemies. The audience's perspective reveals that God does act in justice, since they know the city eventually is destroyed. From God's point of view, his care for creation is expressed, and thus even though many of his actions appear cruel (particularly to Jonah), God's nature is never without mercy and love. Hence, a picture of God as a merciful, just, all-loving God of creation does appear in the book of Jonah, particularly when read from the point of view of God or the post-exilic audience. However, because of the neutral focalization of the narrator, it is also possible to read the story through Jonah's eyes, where God's mercy is confusing and God's actions often harsh. Issues of theodicy remain unsettled in the book of Jonah. Since contemporary scholarship often does not recognize the different focalizations, Jonah's questions of theodicy are mistreated or go unnoticed.

Both Nahum and Jonah, therefore, seek to answer questions about the nature of God. The fall of Nineveh is used as context, and in each, the concept that God is a God who is merciful and just is evident. Nahum emphasizes God's justice as God acts against his enemies, whereas in Jonah, God's mercy appears to be the focus. Though the two books appear similar, they differ, particularly due to the position of the narrator. In Nahum, the narrator portrays the prophet's message as cause for rejoicing, and thus the narrator affirms the nature of God portrayed in the book. Jonah's narrator is neutral, and thus a more complex picture of God emerges: God's nature is disclosed differently according to the different possible focalizations of the book. Hence, Nahum and Jonah both address the same basic question — the nature of God as it relates to the fall of Nineveh — but their answers are not the same. Though they do not contradict one another, since both Nahum and Jonah portray the mercy, justice, patience, and anger of God, their different emphases on the nature of God suggest that a proper vision of the God of the Bible requires a reading of the entire biblical narrative.

¹²³ Cf. Brown, *Obadiah*, 28, and page 35 in James Limburg, *Jonah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

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