

## Jonah, God's Objectionable Mercy, and the Way Of Wisdom<sup>[i]</sup>

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### Introduction: Wisdom and biblical interpretation

We have been invited to consider the relationship between Scripture and Theology with special reference to wisdom. The significance of wisdom in relation to biblical study can be conceived in at least two quite different ways. On the one hand, there is the familiar agenda of wisdom as an aspect of biblical religion, to be studied like any aspect of biblical religion. Familiar issues here include: the history and development of wisdom within Israel; the nature and extent of wisdom literature; the relationship between wisdom in Israel and wisdom in the ancient Near East; Jewish and early Christian developments and reworkings of wisdom, especially, in a Christian context, in relation to Christ; and so on.

On the other hand, there is wisdom as an existential reality, less the object which one studies than that light and enablement whereby one's study is (one hopes) carried out. Here, of course, the familiar debates are those about the relationship between *faith* and biblical study, where the context is set by the fact that it was only by disentangling the Bible from certain kinds of faith-defined contexts and assumptions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that biblical study could become a subject in its own right. Thankfully, the intense hermeneutical debates of recent decades have put an end (at least in principle) to the kinds of implicit positivism that could sometimes characterize biblical study in formal detachment from faith and theology. I hope that an emphasis on wisdom, rather than faith as such, may be one way of helping us to rethink what is, and is not, appropriate to our continuing responsibility to relate Scripture and Theology in imaginative, faithful, searching, and life-enhancing ways.

Although all these issues could usefully be discussed as issues of principle, my preference is to work with the text of Scripture itself. For I take it that one element in the renewal of interaction between Scripture and theology is to show how theological thinking can be enhanced by attention to scriptural exegesis and interpretation; and if that is so, then it is more fruitful not just to talk about it but to try to do it.

## Introduction to Jonah

My chosen text is the book of Jonah (which, remarkably, has become one of the most intensively studied books of the Old Testament in recent years). I propose a perspective, or interpretative strategy, whose justification lies in its ability to make good sense of the book in terms of its explicit concerns and its scriptural preservation. This perspective is compatible with, and construable in terms of, a number of possible historical scenarios, but is not dependent upon any one such scenario (such as the post-exilic self-definition of Judah as a religious community, or the demise of prophecy in its classical form; additionally there are possible scenarios to do with canonical reception and compilation within the Book of the Twelve). This strategy is not, however, ahistorical, and could be invalidated if one could show either that it were not compatible with what may plausibly be surmised about the nature and function of religious texts in Jewish antiquity, or that it did not do justice to what the book of Jonah actually says.

My proposal – which, as far as I can tell from the history of interpretation, <sup>[ii]</sup> has, for better or worse, not previously been expressed in quite this form <sup>[iii]</sup> – is that the book of Jonah revolves around a basic, perennial problem: How is revelation (or fundamental theological confession) rightly to be understood and appropriated? For it is a recurrent phenomenon in both Jewish and Christian faiths that religious language which on one level appears simple and straightforward is in fact harder to understand and appropriate than initially appears. Numerous major movements in Christian history can be read as attempts genuinely to penetrate and grasp the meaning of certain fundamental biblical terms and categories, and to propose remedies for failures in so doing. It is therefore *prima facie* plausible to look heuristically for comparable engagement with the nature and meaning of theological confessions already within a biblical context.

The book of Jonah revolves around Jonah's memorable complaint to YHWH (4.2).<sup>[iv]</sup> What is going on here? The storyline to this point is a drily humorous and larger-than-life portrayal (one should note the repeated use of the adjective *gādōl*: things in this story are 'big'). Jonah is given the hardest conceivable assignment, to go to the capital of Assyria, the greatest earthly power in his world, a power that has no reason to heed Hebrew prophets. Jonah is the most unlikely prophet; although it is

common for prophets to respond to God's call with an expression of inadequacy and diffidence, Jonah excels them all by saying nothing but acting – when told to go East he catches a boat to the West. When Jonah's flight proves futile he receives God's mercy in a most remarkable way. When Jonah finally does reach Nineveh he has only to preach a short and half-hearted message<sup>[v]</sup> in order to achieve the most complete success imaginable – *everyone* in Nineveh turns to God, so much so that even their cattle are to be included in the acts of repentance, and in response to this God relents of executing judgment upon the Ninevites. At this point the storyline turns from its narrative exposition to a parley between Jonah and God about the meaning of what has happened, and such further narrative developments as there are are in furtherance of this parley. This larger-than-life storyline, presenting an extreme scenario, has a 'Let's imagine; what would it be like if...?' feel to it.<sup>[vi]</sup> It is a story of grace that is amazing. So what follows from amazing grace? When Jonah has achieved a response that should be the heart's desire of any prophet, how does he respond? Is he pleased? Is he grateful? He is neither, but rather complains to God that He is too merciful and sparing (4.2b). Indeed he infers (*w<sup>e</sup>attô*, 4.3a) from this merciful and sparing nature of God that God should now kill him. Since the consistent OT association of YHWH's mercy is with life, not death, Jonah's inference is clearly as mistaken as it could be. So what is happening? And what is to be done about it?

### What is Jonah's problem?

First, we need to establish the precise nature of Jonah's complaint, that to which he appeals in justification of his initial flight: 'for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and rich in steadfast love, and one who relents of inflicting disaster'. When this is read as part of the OT as a canonical collection, it constitutes an appeal to two of the most fundamental theological axioms of the whole OT.<sup>[vii]</sup> First comes part of those words in which God speaks His name, YHWH,<sup>[viii]</sup> and thereby reveals His gracious and steadfastly loving nature, in what is the fullest depiction of the nature of God in the whole biblical canon - Exodus 34.6-7 (whose language is, unsurprisingly, regularly used elsewhere in the OT, especially the psalms, where the gracious and merciful nature of YHWH is a regular warrant for Israel's prayers to YHWH).<sup>[ix]</sup> This is conjoined, however, with another fundamental axiom about the nature of YHWH, an axiom formally set out in Jeremiah 18.7-10 which sums up a basic and

recurrent characteristic of God in the Old Testament, that is divine responsiveness (*niham*) to human attitude and action (especially repentance, *îššîlîšb*): a characteristic which is intrinsically complementary to the affirmation of YHWH's merciful nature, for the sparing of the repentant is a prime outworking of mercy.<sup>[x]</sup>

But *why* does Jonah have a problem with God's mercy and responsiveness? It is here that our problems begin. For while there is no doubt that Jonah is complaining, the precise nature of his complaint can be read in more than one way, as the history of interpretation readily shows. Broadly speaking, there are two main directions in which Jonah's problem can be understood to lie. The first (and in my judgment less likely) is to do with some aspect of Jonah's prophecy as an apparently unfulfilled prophecy (an issue which can take many forms).<sup>[xi]</sup> Probably the most sophisticated recent exposition is an influential essay by Elias Bickerman,<sup>[xii]</sup> which I will take as representative of this kind of construal.

According to Bickerman, Jonah knows of Jeremiah's axiom about divine responsiveness but objects to the 'almost mechanical reciprocity between man's repentance and God's changing His mind' (p.41). Jonah protests against the popular post-exilic view that 'penitence reinstates the sinner in divine favour' (p.43). Jonah is seen instead to uphold a distinction between two different types of prophecy – 'conditional fate' (*fata conditionala*) which 'gives man an alternative' and 'declaratory destiny' (*fata denunciativa*) which 'works like a spell' (p.31) – and to be an advocate of the latter. Commending Augustine's terse 'Jonah announced not mercy but the coming anger' Bickerman presents Jonah thus: 'Jonah was not a missionary preacher threatening divine punishment as *fata conditionala*. Herald of God's wrath, Jonah declared the immutable and inevitable *fata denunciativa*: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"' (p.32). Thus Jonah's protest is against a theological view represented by major canonical prophets. 'The author of Jonah's story makes a confrontation between the thesis of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Malachi that if you repent God will also change His mind, and the antithesis, of Jonah, that God's word once spoken must be steadfast.' (p.43). What then is the purpose of the book? 'The thesis of Jeremiah and the antithesis of the prophet Jonah are reconciled and surmounted in a so-to-say Hegelian synthesis by the author of the book, who, as the ancient Jewish commentators noted, wrote a parable for Jerusalem... To the restored [sc.

post-exilic] and still sinful city [sc. Jerusalem], the author tells his parable. If God once did spare Nineveh, would He not save Jerusalem by His sovereign decision?' (p.44f). The mystery of divine omnipotence – that YHWH spares for His own reasons – is the message of the book (p.47f).

Fascinating though Bickerman's construal is, it faces serious difficulties. First, Bickerman does not properly establish that the category of 'declaratory destiny' is a genuine OT category; a couple of quick allusions to Amos 1.4 and Nahum's saying to Nineveh 'I will make thy grave' (pp.31f) do not suffice to establish the category, let alone to give it the kind of status necessary for Jonah to be able to appeal to it.<sup>[xiii]</sup> Secondly, Bickerman in effect makes Jonah the mouthpiece for a characteristic modern scholarly difficulty with Jer. 18.7-10. When, however, the language about divine reciprocity is read in its context of God as the potter whose power is absolute and unlimited (18.6), it becomes one strong formulation to be held in tension with another strong formulation, whose point is that YHWH's sovereignty is not exercised arbitrarily but responsibly and responsively – '*where God is most free to act, God is most bound in that acting*'.<sup>[xiv]</sup> Thirdly, Jeremiah's axiom is seamlessly woven into the Mosaic axiom about YHWH's mercy, and it is implausible to see a critique of the one without a simultaneous critique of the other.<sup>[xv]</sup> Fourthly, Bickerman objects to characteristic modern Christian tendencies to find opposition between Israel and the Gentiles, because this introduces into the book 'more than is really there' because 'the morality play of Jonah has a cast of three characters: God, the prophet, and the Ninevites' and 'there is nothing about Israel' (p.28). Yet his introducing of Jerusalem as necessary for understanding the book's concern transgresses his own principle of respecting the book's silence.

The other general approach is to see Jonah's problem as in some way specifically with divine mercy as such. Here it is worthwhile to set out a number of proposals.

First, Jonah's problem could be that divine mercy is morally and spiritually debilitating, in that it undercuts the cost of living before God with faithfulness and integrity and can induce cynicism. Wolff, for example, says, 'This exposes the essential reason for Jonah's despair... God does not abide by his word of judgment. On the contrary, through his mercy he puts himself on the side of Israel's merciless enemies. In this way Jonah chimes

in with the voices of the people with whom Malachi quarrels: "It is pointless to serve God" (3.14f). What difference is there "between the person who serves God and the person who does not serve him" (3.18)?'.<sup>[xvi]</sup>

Such a difficulty with the potential moral problematic of mercy is undoubtedly a real and recurrent issue (though the explicit articulation of the point is only in Malachi, and its transference to Jonah may in fact skew Jonah's own concern, as it resonates with nothing else in the book). One contemporary outworking might be welfare dependence. The policy of social compassion, realized through the provision of benefits to try to ensure that the hard-up are not deprived of a position within society, all too readily engenders a frame of mind in which it is not worth going to work or trying to better oneself if the financial and social benefits of work are not greatly different from those of social security. Compassion undercuts moral effort.

A second reading of Jonah's complaint is that it is a protest against unfairness: the Ninevites do not *deserve* mercy and sparing, presumably either because they are notorious sinners (1.2, though the text lays no special emphasis upon their sin) or because they are gentiles (though the text never makes a point of this), or both. It is common for commentators to cite the older brother of the prodigal son as a good parallel, for his angry resentment at his father's generosity to his undeserving younger brother (Lk. 15.28) parallels Jonah's angry resentment at YHWH's generosity to the Ninevites. The point of Jonah's objection is then not mercy as such, but *disproportionate* mercy: some people are so undeserving that to be merciful and spare them becomes a moral outrage.

A contemporary example would be the difficulty many have with forgiveness in extreme cases of suffering and evil. The refusal of some who suffered in German concentration camps or Japanese prison camps to forgive their erstwhile tormentors, or the attitude of Jamie Bulger's mother towards those who tortured and murdered her son, would be cases in point.

Another construal of Jonah's complaint sees it as a complaint against the risk to Israel of mercy to the Ninevites. This depends upon two considerations (neither of which are specified in the Jonah narrative); first,

the role of Assyria elsewhere in the OT as the great enemy of Israel; secondly, the likelihood that the book is written from a perspective when the Assyrian destruction of Israel had already taken place. To be an agent in the sparing of Nineveh could mean helping Nineveh towards the destruction of Israel. Jonah 'was being asked in effect to sign his own people's death warrant'.<sup>[xvii]</sup> The recognition that the bestowal of mercy may be costly, even sometimes fatal, for the human bestower (or agent of divine bestowal) arises from the fact that even a repentant recipient of mercy may only be repentant in the short term and may turn against a benefactor in the longer term.

A good recent example is the major subplot in Steven Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan*. In the aftermath of D-Day Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) leads a group of soldiers to recover Private Ryan who has parachuted into occupied France, because Ryan's three brothers have already been killed. Miller takes as an interpreter Corporal Upham, who is naïve and thoroughly unmilitary (whenever there is fighting he shrinks and cowers). En route they capture a German soldier. When most of Miller's soldiers want to shoot him, Upham protests 'This is not right', and Miller eventually releases him with instructions to hand himself in to an allied patrol. When Ryan is found at the town of Ramelle, Ryan insists on staying at his post, and so Miller and his soldiers prepare to defend Ramelle against a German attack. When the Germans do attack Ramelle, the released German soldier is among them. He kills one of Miller's men in a knife fight, but ignores and spares Upham who had been friendly towards him during his earlier capture. But Upham sees the German shoot Captain Miller and contribute to Miller's death. When allied reinforcements arrive and the German soldiers surrender, Upham, who hitherto has not used his gun, shoots the German in cold blood. For corporal Upham mercy has become too costly.

Finally, Jonah's complaint may be an attempt to limit divine mercy for no reason other than simple selfishness. Here the point depends upon contrasting Jonah's own receipt of divine mercy, which he celebrates within the big fish (with the resounding conclusion 'deliverance is of YHWH', 2.10b), with his unwillingness to see this extended to the Ninevites – an unwillingness without moral rationalizing. A biblical parallel here would be the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel where the receipt of forgiveness from God must be accompanied by the extension of forgiveness to others. This issue, which features in the Lord's Prayer (6.12)

and is underlined in the comments immediately following the Lord's Prayer (6.14-15) is illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18.23-35) which concludes the discourse on church discipline (18.1-35): to refuse to extend to another that mercy which oneself has received is by that very token to nullify the mercy. Jesus' definitional analysis of divine mercy could be developing the kind of concern already felt by the author of Jonah: to receive divine mercy oneself, yet selfishly to begrudge it to others, is to contradict and nullify the very nature of that mercy.

Which, if any, of the above represents Jonah's problem? Although my own inclination is towards the last mentioned (it develops a contrast clearly present within the text, and imports no reason from another text), it is probably not possible to specify any one version in such a way as to rule out the others. Although this could be construed as an interpretative failure, it may rather be the case that the lack of specificity as to the precise nature of Jonah's problem is intrinsic to the story. For the story's openness to a variety of construals, construals suggested especially by the book's rich canonical context, is a standing invitation to consider the variety of ways in which divine mercy can be considered objectionable and so be more or less misunderstood.

### **God's response to Jonah**

Given that, for whatever precise reason, the divine compassion towards - and sparing of - Nineveh constitutes a problem for Jonah, what then happens? We should first note possibilities that the book does not adopt. First, if Jonah's problem is with the understanding of central affirmations within Scripture, one possibility would be to respond with scriptural argument of some kind or other. Yet of this there is nothing. Secondly, although the book repeatedly portrays God's sovereignty (over sea, fish, plant, worm, wind), a sovereignty that can engender responsiveness among sailors and Ninevites and accommodate it accordingly, there is no exercise of this sovereignty upon Jonah in such a way as to 'compel' his response. Jonah<sup>[xviii]</sup> outside Nineveh is left to decide how he will respond.

So what approach does God take? Here we need to recollect a commonplace of the study of OT wisdom: wisdom literature characteristically eschews themes peculiar to Israel's identity and vocation

(election, covenant, prophecy, priesthood, holiness – or, indeed, the citation of Scripture) and appeals rather to regular characteristics of the created order; in schematic terms, instead of the authoritative voice 'from above', i.e. 'thus says YHWH', we have theology 'from below', e.g. 'Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways, and be wise' (Prov. 6.6). As Tribble puts it, 'YHWH develops the argument through natural rather than revealed theology'.<sup>[xix]</sup>

YHWH's argument, an analogical appeal to the bush which grows and withers,<sup>[xx]</sup> may at first sight appear strange, as Jonah's concern is not the withering of the plant as such but rather the loss of his shelter and his consequent discomfort; i.e. his concern is not for the plant but for himself. But the point would appear to be a persuasive redescription of Jonah's situation, thereby allowing Jonah to see himself as not merely selfish. Jonah at any rate does not resist the suggestion that his misery may not be merely selfish (4.8) but may in some sense be altruistic (4.9, with an implicit 'Why yes, my misery is because of my concern for that poor plant'), even though this opens the way for a final riposte.

Two aspects of YHWH's final words are striking. First, the Ninevites are characterized as profoundly ignorant. The precise nature of this ignorance is not specified. Although it is easy on the basis of other OT texts to give moral and religious content to that ignorance (e.g. Isa. 10.5-15, arrogance; Nah. 3.19, cruelty), our text simply stresses ignorance *tout court*. YHWH's redescription of Jonah's selfish misery as care for the plant is minor compared to this redescription of the most powerful culture of Jonah's world as marked by the ignorance characteristic of infants. It is a stark case of a religious evaluation being at odds with an evaluation by conventional criteria. Despite the form of YHWH's words as natural theology, one should not overlook that the evaluation presupposes the wisdom of revelation represented for Israel by *torah* and prophecy (cf. Deut. 4.5-8). The point is that the wisdom which comes from *torah* should engender towards those who lack it not arrogance or disdain but rather pity.

Secondly, YHWH's keyword is *hûs* ('pity', 'care about'). This is perhaps initially surprising, as one might have expected a repetition of one of the terms characterizing YHWH in 4.2, either *hānan* ('be gracious') or *riham* ('have compassion'). But maybe the point is precisely that this is a term that does not have the resonances of association with the character of God

that mark the other terms. The most common usage of *hûs* is with the eye as subject,<sup>[xxi]</sup> so that its primary resonances are with the human phenomenon of a tear coming to the eye, the spontaneous and unpredictable bodily response to other creatures in need. One needs no special intelligence, never mind special revelation, to recognize and understand the tear that shows the care of the heart. How much more then should something so basic to human experience be recognized as characterizing humanity's creator – and, by extension, any who might claim in some way to know this creator.

### Conclusions

What should we make of the book's presentation of Jonah's complaint and its strategy for seeking to resolve it? First, in our contemporary theological pedagogy we should never lose sight of that issue around which the book of Jonah (so I have argued) revolves, the problem of defective understanding of confessions which are foundational within Scripture and for faith. The ease with which truths that should inspire worship and service can become slogans to be bandied around in point-scoring or self-justification should be a permanent critical concern for what we as theologians do. For many today, both within and outside the Church, the theological confession which plays a role comparable to those of Exodus 34.6-7 and Jeremiah 18.7-8 is 1 John 4.8,16, 'God is love'. This is regularly taken as a freestanding axiom that hardly needs the particularity of the death and resurrection of Jesus to give it content, and that can readily be used to undercut a greater or lesser number of other moral and theological elements of historic Christian faith. It too rarely plays the role of enabling critical discernment of true knowledge of God in Christ that it plays in its Johannine context. But there is little or nothing in either Scripture or the creeds which is not misunderstood by someone somewhere. Theological education, like spiritual growth, must be an unending process.

Secondly, when Jonah's problem is that he knows the scriptural words but cannot grasp their true meaning, the book moves the issue onto a different level – appealing not to Scripture but to reason, not to revelation but to natural theology, not to a divine imperative but to analogical wisdom. Although we are familiar with this mode of argument in the teaching of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, we perhaps less readily recognize it in an OT context. The book of Jonah does not question the foundational role of

Israel's particular knowledge of God or of the corresponding task of prophecy, nor does it suggest that appeal to natural theology could dispense with the word of YHWH to Moses or Jeremiah. Rather natural theology plays a subordinate and critical role, to enable fresh re-engagement with the given content of revelation when that content has for some reason become problematic.

Finally, the book of Jonah reminds us that theological understanding is exemplified in a person's attitudes and actions. 'Theology is a practical, not a merely theoretical discipline: it aims at wisdom, in the broad sense of light for the human path. Our theological enterprises must therefore be judged at least in part by their fruit'.<sup>[xxii]</sup> But this is something that is increasingly difficult to aim for in the contemporary academy with its concern for measurable learning outcomes, measurable by immediate tests according to specific academic criteria. This represents a narrowing of the nature and purpose of higher education that will increasingly impoverish us the longer it holds sway. It is no doubt too much to ask for that practical implementation of qualities such as compassion should be able to hold any formal place in a university's assessment of a student's learning of theology. Yet if we do not recognize that practical implementation of appropriate qualities over the long term is in fact integral to our work, we may lose sight of what makes theology the discipline that it truly is. We may find ourselves intellectualizing and institutionalizing Jonah's problem in the kind of way that makes progress beyond the problem ever harder to come by.<sup>[xxiii]</sup>

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[i] Originally delivered as part of a consultation on "Scripture and Theology" – Cambridge, U.K., 2001.

[ii] A succinct guide to the major interpretative options down the ages can be found in Elias Bickerman, 'Jonah or The Unfulfilled Prophecy' in his Four Strange Books of the Bible, New York: Schocken, 1967, pp.1-49 (available with full annotation as 'Les deux erreurs du prophète Jonas', Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses, 45 (1965), pp.232-64). A fuller and lively (but tendentious) account is Yvonne Sherwood, A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture, CUP: 2000.

[iii] Phyllis Trible, in her initial doctoral work on Jonah, proposed a reading of the book as a midrash on Exodus 34.6f (Studies in the Book of Jonah, PhD diss., Columbia University, 1963; University Microfilms, pp.162ff). Although it is not uncommon for scholars to designate Jonah as a 'midrash' (see recently R. B. Salters, Jonah & Lamentations, OT Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994, pp.47,49), the term tends to be used imprecisely, and Trible herself has come to express reservations as to its appropriateness ('The Book of Jonah' in Leander E. Keck et al. [eds.], The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. VII, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, pp.472-74).

[iv] To see the interpretation of 4.2 as crucial to an understanding of the nature and purpose of the book as a whole would, I think, command a wide consensus.

[v] See my 'Preaching for a Response? Jonah's Message to the Ninevites Reconsidered', forthcoming in *VT*.

[vi] It is thus comparable to Job 1-2, where also a fundamental theological issue is explored in an imaginatively engaging narrative that envisages extreme scenarios (see my The Bible, Theology, and Faith, CUP: 2000, pp.84-88,75).

[vii] In traditio-historical and compositional terms it is almost impossible to be sure which passages are earlier or later than others. How Exodus 34.6-7 relates in these terms to other expressions within the OT of YHWH's merciful and compassionate nature is unclear, and similarly for Jeremiah's axiom with reference to other texts which speak of YHWH's relenting. My point relates to reading the OT in the light of the shaping processes which have made it the textual collection it now is.

[viii] Although in terms of the Hebrew of Exod. 34.5,6 either YHWH or Moses could be speaker of the key words, the citation of this passage in Num. 14.17-18 regards YHWH as the speaker and I see no reason to dissent from this.

[ix] Num. 14.18; Neh. 9.17,31; Ps. 86.6,15; 103.8; 145.8, etc.

[x] The combination of Exodus 34.6 with Jeremiah 18.8 is also found in Joel 2.13b. Since the 'who knows whether He may turn and relent..?' of Jonah 3.9 also appears in Joel 2.14a, there is clearly an interrelationship between these two passages, though the nature of that interrelationship is not our

present concern. See T. B. Dozeman, "Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Yahweh's Gracious and Compassionate Character", JBL 108 (1989), 207-223.

[xi] Cf. Brevard Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, London: SCM, 1979, pp.417-27 (419f): "The main issue is described either as Jonah's effort not to be a false prophet, or as analysing the relation of conditional to unconditional prophecy, or as dealing with the lack of fulfilment of the prophecy against the nations. This position has generally been advocated by Jewish interpreters..., but also by an impressive number of non-Jewish exegetes".

[xii] See [n.1](#). A valuable summary of Bickerman's interpretation is provided by Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 346.

[xiii] Bickerman appeals to the idiom of 'cry against' (qārā' 'al) as demonstrating declaratory destiny (p.32). But even on the understanding that prophecy is intrinsically conditional, a message of judgment is a genuine message of judgment unless and until it evokes repentance.

[xiv] See my "'God is Not a Human That He Should Repent" (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29)' in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (eds.), God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998, pp.112-123, esp. pp.112-15 (114).

[xv] Bickerman could perhaps argue that the Mosaic axiom is in effect interpreted by Jeremiah's axiom – mercy entails relenting – but such a focussing of the Mosaic axiom is not self-evident in context, and is not supported by the concluding divine question (4:10-11).

[xvi] Hans Walter Wolff, Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986 (ET by M.Kohl from German of 1977), p.168, cf. p.176. Similarly Terence E. Fretheim, The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977, p.121 (&31-37).

[xvii] John F. A. Sawyer, Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament, Oxford Bible Series, OUP: 1987, p.114.

[xix] Phyllis Trible, 'Divine Incongruities in the Book of Jonah' in God in the Fray [see [n.13](#)], pp.198-208 (207).

[xx] The relationship between Jonah's booth (4.5) and the plant (4.6), the purpose of each of which is to give shade, is not entirely clear. The situation can, of course, be rationalized without difficulty – 'Anyone who has sat in a tent for a day in the Near East understands that additional shade is always welcome!' (Fretheim, Message [see [n.15](#)], p.123).

[xxi] As Wolff succinctly says about hûs, 'The word occurs 24 times in the Old Testament. On 15 of these occasions the eye is the subject' (Obadiah and Jonah, p.173). For general discussion see S. Wagner, 'chûs', TDOT IV, pp.271-77.

[xxii] Colin Gunton, The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity, CUP: 1993, p.7.

[xxiii] I am grateful to David Day for comments on a draft, also to those who responded when the paper was read in Cambridge and at a meeting of the Durham OT research seminar.

The significance of wisdom in relation to biblical study can be conceived in at least two quite different ways. On the one hand, there is the familiar agenda of wisdom as an aspect of biblical religion, to be studied like any aspect of biblical religion. Familiar issues here include: the history and development of wisdom within Israel; the nature and extent of wisdom literature; the relationship between wisdom in Israel and wisdom in the ancient Near East; Jewish and early Christian developments and reworkings of wisdom, especially, in a Christian context, in relation to Christ; and so on. On But God had brought good out of evil, had taught him the beauty of repentance and the greatness of His mercy. And, surest proof of all that he was quite forgiven, the Divine Spirit had come back, the great impulse arose, which formerly he had fought against and beaten down, "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it." So wonderful indeed are Gods ways of dealing with the hearts of men that Jonah was probably a fitter messenger to Nineveh after his attempted flight than he had been before. By our very failures, God educates us to do His will. It seems hard that we should often be left to exert ourselves for things that fail—that even with the best intentions we do things which turn to harm, and leave us to self-reproach. God has the spiritual gift of showing mercy and compassion on the sick and suffering. One of my favorite stories is of my own mother when she had open heart surgery several years ago. She had four bypasses. By the way, our next message is on the patience of God, so I will say no more at this point. Number four, when you ask what is involved in mercy? It also involves His punishment, believe it or not.