

Jonah, Robinsons and Unlimited Gods

Re-reading Jonah as a Sea Adventure Story

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Abstract

The plot of the book of Jonah combines the motifs of a hero swallowed by a sea-monster with a hero rescued by a fish. The hero has to cross and survive the sea (as sphere of danger and death). In this article it is argued that the Book of Jonah belongs to a certain type of adventure stories, in which the hero not only survives his adventures but also experiences an intensive encounter with God.

Keywords

Encounter with God; sea travel/adventure story; Egyptian; biblical and western sea adventure stories

Getting the reader on-board

A thorough reading of the various interpretations of Jonah's sea journey by Jewish and Christian commentators and by western artists demonstrates that Jonah's adventure must have been a horrific one. The sea acts as an instrument of YHWH's wrath and plays its role as chaotic power. The big fish of the story, mostly interpreted as a whale by classical theologians and translators, should, according to the commentators, be seen as part of the chaos sphere and therewith a symbol of death and destruction, and as an instrument of YHWH's punishment.

Recently voices have been raised which challenge the negative reading of the sea within the book of Jonah. By their "oceanic reading" Nāsili Vaka'uta and Jione Havea, both originally from Tonga, point out that from islanders' viewpoint, the sea should not be described only as sphere of chaos and danger. The sea provides food and allows communication (between islands and islanders), the sea provides freedom and allows (or forces) the lonely sea traveler to come closer to his/her God (see below).

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This article attempts a comparative approach to the book of Jonah. It will be demonstrated that Jonah's story contains motifs which appear in ancient and classical (western) stories about shipwrecked travelers. Focus will particularly be on the Egyptian story of the Shipwrecked Sailor. The sea, the island, and (at first glance) a dangerous animal catch the reader's attention to explain the core of the story. A human being on sea should be aware that they would come closer to God in such an intensity, which they have never expected.

A Fishy Plot, a Nice Monster, and a Seemingly Namby-Pamby God – An Introduction to a Fogged Story

The book of Jonah contains at first glance a simple story. A prophet named Jonah becomes disobedient for a short time. He tries to run away from the creator and ruler of the world, is snapped by a great fish, and he learns obedience. Jonah then fulfills his mission, experiences the wonder of a collective conversion of an evil metropolis, demonstrates resistance against a gracious God, and receives teachings by the same God and reacts with final silence.

Simple and good enough for children's Bibles.

However, in the moment in which the reader starts to ask questions about the plot and its single steps they begins to sink—like Jonah in the depth of the sea—into the ocean of possible interpretations.

1. Jonah is swallowed by the big fish. To be swallowed by an animal, beast, or monster normally results in death. It seems to be no wonder that Jonah's stay within the belly of the fish is interpreted as a metaphor for death. On the other hand, the reader may ask: what would have happened to Jonah if the great fish had not appeared? Might he have drowned and disappeared?¹ Interpretations of the fish oscillate between the extremes of "dangerous sea-monster" and "helping animal" —both readings have good reasons (Lacocque and Lacocque 1981, 99).² Nevertheless, within the Rabbinical Interpretation the "helping animal" thesis prevails.³ In contrast, the majority of modern commentators interpret the fish as a symbol of death or as an instrument of YHWH's punishment.

¹ For this contradicting interpretation of the fish-motif, see Simon 1999, XXXV. Already Maimonides (1974, 411) has observed that YHWH speaks to the fish (ויאמר) and likewise to Jonah (Jon. 4:4, 9, 10). However, by this ויאמר the fish is not converted into a prophet. By YHWH's speech the fish and its "animal impulses" are initiated.

² Golka (1991, 64) argues in a similar vein. Against the often discussed motif parallels between Jonah and the Heracles saga in which the hero enters the mouth of the beast with the aim to kill it, the fish, according to Golka, is not a monster which has to be killed. The fish is YHWH's friendly instrument of transportation. Landes (1967, 449f.) argues in the same way: "The fish . . . is simply a beneficent device for returning Jonah." According to his view, the fish plays only the role of a rescue cab: "It is clearly before Jonah is swallowed by the fish that he is threatened by the sea and in danger of permanent residence of the netherworld."

³ According to Rabbi Tarphon in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* on Jon. 2:1, Jonah has entered the fish "just as a man enters the great synagogue. . . The two eyes of the fish were like windows of glass giving light to Jonah" (cited in Lacocque and Lacocque 1981, 56).

The divergent fish-reading seems at a first glance negligible. However, the interpretation of the fish⁴ has consequences for understanding the entire book. The fish as monster belongs to the motif of the swallowed hero, which appears in various myths and legends. Normally the hero must defeat the beast with a certain (from time to time mythic) weapon. Within the book of Jonah, the Psalm appears instead of a weapon by which the fish is defeated (Lux 1994, 163-86.). The motif of the “helping animal” belongs to the genre of sea adventure narratives (see below). This short overview of the contradicting fish readings suggests that the fish should not be interpreted as having only one meaning. Barbara Green’s question “Is the whale good or bad, a threat or a help—and better—how is it both?” (2005, 107) meets the ambivalent character of the hungry beast and the swimming rescue cab and prayer chamber (see Appendix A).

2. At the end of the book a nice God appears. He spares the city as a result of the collective reversal. The only question is: has YHWH known from the beginning of the story what will happen in Nineveh? At least Jonah claims that he has foreseen what will happen with the city (Jon. 4:2). Jon. 3:10 states that God has seen that the Ninevites “had turned back from their evil ways.” The consequence is that God himself repents. Jon. 3:10 and 4:2 should not be seen as two verses between which a tension exists. The reader is challenged by two Gods: the God of mercy who cannot always foresee what will happen in the future and who must sometimes reconsider his own decisions (Jon. 3:10), and the God who foresees everything and who uses the entire story to teach and to discipline his prophet (Jon. 4:2).
3. Against this backdrop, it remains open, if Jonah’s flight was caused by his insight that the *metanoia* of the Ninevites and the sparing of the city will expose him as false prophet or by his fear that he—the messenger of evil news—could be killed.
4. Jonah is one of the ficklest biblical figures. He runs (disobediently) away, courageously enters a ship, sleeps (in resignation or coolness; see below) during the storm, confesses to fear YHWH, the God of heaven (Jon. 1:9),⁵ recommends to kill him to save the others (Jon. 1:12), prays intensively within the belly of the fish (Jon. 2:3-10), fulfills his mission (Jon. 3:1-10), reacts angrily towards YHWH’s mercy (Jon. 4:1-3), and remains silent at the final end. However, what is expressed with his final silence? Is Jonah in this regard comparable to Job at the end of the book, who has understood everything now and decides it is better to be quiet? (cf. Simon 1999, 47f.)? Alternatively, does he decide to remain the same as he was at the beginning of chapter four, “unchanged, isolated, full of self-pity, wishing for death” (Landes 1978, 147)?
5. Jon. 1:5 portrays the protagonist amidst of the storm as a sound sleeper. Whereas the sailors try to lighten the ship by throwing all the necessary and unnecessary things overboard, Jonah goes down and falls into a deep narcotic sleep. The reader may ask: “How can someone find sleep while facing deathly danger?” Should his sleep be seen as an additional attempt to fly from

⁴ See e.g., Good 1981, 46, who interprets Jonah’s stay within the fish not only as a punishment but also as humiliation of Jonah.

⁵ Jonah’s confession to the sailors is more than only a “denominational affiliation” (Gruber 1992, 199); it is rather an ethnic and theological self-declaration.

YHWH's presence and power (Person 1996, 37)? Or did he start to sleep before the storm hit and did he sleep so deeply that he did not recognize the dangerous situation including the frantic activities on the ship's deck (Limburg 1993, 50)? Alternatively, does the focus lie here not primarily on the sleep but on the circumstance that Jonah continues "going down" (cf. ירד in Jon. 1, 3: *down* to Joppa and *down* into the ship) as an attempt to extend the distance between him and YHWH (Golka 1991, 53)? Or should his descent be seen as an additional step on his way into the sphere of death, to Sheol (Wolff 1977, 3, 88)? Obviously, the sleep of Jonah leads into speculations. The spectrum of interpretations is wide, and a decision in favor of one of the given proposals is not advisable.

6. After reading the book, the reader may ask: "Is human existence determined by a certain destiny or is there free will?" Jonathan Magonet summarizes the two antipodes with the two summits "power of God" and "freedom of man." In Magonet's view, the two opportunities are represented by the statement of the sailors in Jon. 1:14 and by the statement of the king in Jon. 3:9 (1983, 107). The attitude of the sailors is emphasized by the confession, "You are YHWH—and as you please you do" (Jon 1:14). Nothing and nobody can avert YHWH's determined will, neither Jonah's flight nor the despaired attempts of the sailors (Jenson 2008, 56). In Jon. 1:6, the captain has still expressed the hope that, if Jonah would join the common prayer, the ship and its crew could be saved ("Maybe [אוֹלֵי] God will think about us and we will not die"). The sailors must accept that every attempt to change the divine decision would be useless. This attitude contradicts the speech of the king in Jon. 3, 9: "Who knows [מִי יוֹדֵעַ], (maybe) God will turn around and have pity and turn away from his anger and we will not die [וְלֹא נָאֲבֵד]." In Jon. 1:9 the sailors know that Jonah is doomed—every prayer for his benefit would be useless. So they can decide only between a collective death together with Jonah or killing him by throwing him overboard. In Jon. 3:9 the expression וְלֹא נָאֲבֵד depends on the rhetorical question מִי יוֹדֵעַ. Hereby it is signalized: we are not doomed—even if YHWH's prophet has announced the contrary.
7. Who is right in this story? "YHWH of course!" the reader may answer. However, by this answer the theological intensity of the story is overlooked. In his remarkable article, Etan Levine argues against a one-sided reading and interpretation of the book. Levine discovers three theological positions in the book. First, YHWH is the God who has to react on human repentance with only one possible consequence -- with forgiveness. Second, Jonah demands that an evil city, full of malefactors must be punished. For this interpretation, one can find in a juridical point of view some good reasons. At least, Nineveh is known to the Biblical reader as center of the Assyrian Empire, as a city, which deserves YHWH's punishment (Nah. 1:1; 2:9; 3:7; Zeph. 2:13). Third, the author leads the reader into a "moral dilemma": The theological demand for forgiveness could be challenged by the juridical principle that the evil must be punished and vice versa (Levine 1984, 243).

This overview demonstrates that this story is not simple. The spectrum of interpretations is extensive and sometimes contradictory. Some interpretative decisions could be motivated by the expectations or the individual worldview of

the interpreters. No wonder that from a Christian viewpoint Jonah appears as having been converted, convinced, and repentant. However, not all of the commentators follow this interpretation. Therefore, Hauser insists that Jonah in chapter 4 remains as a “caricature of those who demand God’s justice” (1985, 35). The entire chapter four shows a Jonah who is “extremely self-serving” (36).

Loss in the Ocean of Interpretations

So what? The big fish as a greedy beast or a nice instrument of transportation, which provides also a prayer chamber; a finally remorseful or a consequently stubborn prophet; a God who has no idea what could happen in the future or a God who lets his marionettes dance and play to teach and to discipline his prophet; a human destiny which could be changed every time and everywhere or a fixed human doom without chances for escape? The divergent and sometimes contradicting answers of some elaborate readers of the book show that Jonah is not a one-sided story. The results and the insights of every reading process may be individual and—in comparison to others—contradicting. Obviously, the author is a master in his art of narration—he allows and he invites into the freedom of interpretation. As we know from the viewpoint of narrative linguistics, individual reading processes have their conditions and therewith their insights and results. To the conditions of the reading process belong the worldview and world knowledge of the reader.

A brilliant example of how world-view and world-knowledge shape the results of the reading process is the oceanic reading by two Tongan scholars, Jione Havea (2003; 2013a, 44-55; 2013b, 25-36) and Nāsili Vaka’uta (2014, 128-29). In their view, the sea is not only a place of chaos and danger, but it also allows communication (between islanders), provides food, and invites intensive encounter with God: “Of course, as any islander knows, one has to be g*d- fearing to survive upon the sea. The sea has the capacity to draw one closer to ones g*d” (Havea 2013b, 29).

So what? So the reader must decide between an angry beast and a friendly instrument of transportation but they are also challenged to see the ambivalence of the sea: dangerous on one side, and a place of intensive encounter with the divine on the other.

Jonah among the Robinsons - or How to Come Closer to God

In western interpretations of Jonah, the mystery of death and resurrection has played an important role since the influential work by Hans Schmidt (1907). Jonah must die in the belly of the fish and be reborn as YHWH’s prophet. Uwe Steffen’s interpretation—that only the one who has gone through this mystery could fulfill YHWH’s instruction—shaped the European, particularly the German, interpretation (1982, 47-70). This interpretation is misdirected for several reasons:

- Jonah was swallowed by the fish—a fight between hero and beast is not mentioned in the story. This is the fundamental difference between the Jonah story and the myths about swallowed heroes and the beast that must be defeated.
- There is no development, rebirth, or renewal within the story. Jonah is from the beginning of the story YHWH’s prophet—obedient or disobedient.

The understanding of an (ancient) story depends on various preconditions: the interpretation of single motifs and the embedding of the story within the history of religion. One of the most important preconditions, which could prefigure the understanding of a narrative, is its allocation to a literary genre.

The Jonah on the dry land is not the same as the Jonah on the sea. On the sea, he fears the *God of Heaven who created the sea and the dry land* (Jon. 1:9), he is ready to die to save the sailors (Jon. 1:12), and he prays intensively (Jon 2:2-10). On the dry land, he remains disobedient. Even the short scene, which shows him as YHWH's obedient prophet, contains some kind of retentiveness. The text states that Nineveh is a city of a three days walk (Jon. 3:3). Why does Jonah enter the city only in one day's walk? Why he has no more to say than the five Hebrew words, that the city will be destroyed within forty days? Perhaps his "slow reaction"⁶ demonstrates that he does not act like a prophet full of holy anger and divinely inspired enthusiasm.

This article shall try a cross cultural approach (see Appendix B) to the book of Jonah. The protagonist shall not be read and interpreted against the backdrop of the swallowed hero and the finally defeated beast. My proposal is to read Jonah among the Robinsons of classical and ancient stories about shipwrecked sea travellers. Of course, the great fish is not an island. But, as it shall be demonstrated here, the island within the shipwrecked stories is always portrayed in ambivalent terms, as prison, as place of danger and loneliness, and, in the same way as refuge, as idyll and place which allows for an encounter with the divine.

Robinson Crusoe of the classic novel by Daniel Defoe⁷ starts his adventures as a playboy, a *bon vivant*, an adventurer and a go-getter. His captivity on the island changes and converts him; he becomes a Bible-reader, a God-seeker and—last but not least—an ambitious missionary. The novels about shipwrecked travellers on a lonely island have one thing in common: nobody leaves the island the same person as before. Between arrival and departure from the island a deep and intensive change of the worldview and the inner attitude of the protagonist occurs.

The island that Robinson is marooned on is hell and at the same time paradise. It imprisoned the shipwrecked traveller, it provides monsters, beasts, and cannibals, it guaranteed survival and supply, and mostly, it occurs as an idyll. The episode on the island implies for the traveller testing and decision-making; the existence on the island creates a counter-existence to ordinary human life (Frenzel 1976, 384). Shipwrecked travellers are border crossers in a double sense. Of course, with the exotic island they enter into a new and unknown world and experience the relativity and constructedness of their own respective world-views (Bieber, Greif and Helmes 2009, 8).

⁶ Simon 1999, 28. Moberly 2003, 156ff., detects a more or less reluctant implementation of YHWH's order in announcing the destruction of the city. He interprets the deadline of forty days as too long extended - the threat of the coming catastrophe could be seen as minimised. Once again the reader is challenged to find an answer to the question: If YHWH has instructed Jonah to announce the destruction of the city without setting an exact date, does the deadline of forty days refer to Jonah as its only source?

⁷ Daniel Defoe's novel has the remarkable extended title, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pirates. Written by Himself.* It was first published in 1719.

The ambivalence of the island appears within an extended spectrum: on the island, the hero is confronted with cannibals (*Robinson Crusoe*), man-eating snakes, jaguars (*Wyspa Robinsona*),⁸ and love-hungry female half-goddesses (Homer, *Odyssey*, VII, 259). Occasionally the protecting island and its dangerous element is reduced to a small boat on which the shipwrecked traveller tries to survive. This motif appears impressively in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) in which the hero remains alone in a small lifeboat together with a full-grown Bengali tiger named Richard Parker. The tiger is a deadly threat *and* rescue at the same time. The hero must feed him with all that he can take from the sea—otherwise he himself would be eaten by the tiger. By rescuing the tiger, the hero rescues himself. After weeks, the boat reaches the Mexican coast and Richard Parker disappears in the jungle: “Richard Parker, thank you. Thank you for saving my life,” states the hero as he farewell the tiger.

To demonstrate that the book of Jonah belongs to the genre of shipwrecked sailor stories, it should be compared here with one of the oldest versions of this genre of stories, the Middle Egyptian tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor.

The story of the Shipwrecked Sailor

The Shipwrecked Sailor belongs to a special kind of classical Egyptian literature, which treats the themes of foreignness and existence outside of Egypt. The sphere outside of Egypt belongs to a chaotic world; a counter-world to the perfect world of the Egyptian state. In contrast to the wonder-less life in Egypt, the journey outside of Egypt allows two extraordinary things: the encounter with God and the experience of miracles. The story starts with a short notice about the return of a ship expedition. Immediately after his arrival to the capital, the Shipwrecked Sailor, a member of the crew, starts to narrate his adventure at sea to his captain and expedition leader.

The main figure and the narrator is the nameless Shipwrecked Sailor. The leader of the—obviously not successful—expedition has fallen into a state of depression and desperation. He expects that the forthcoming report to the ruler, or king, will have negative consequences for him. The Shipwrecked Sailor tries first to encourage him, to prepare himself for the audience and to speak to the ruler frankly and without fear. To cheer the expedition leader up, the Shipwrecked Sailor starts to report his own story. He had also been a leader of another ship expedition. His crew was a brilliant one, they managed to navigate the ship under every condition and they “were courageous like lions” (Shipwr. 30). Out in the sea, a storm started and the ship sank. He alone survived. He was carried by the waves to an island. He spent his first days on the island in loneliness; “his heart was his only companion” (42). On the island, he found every kind of fruit so that starvation was no immediate threat. Suddenly he heard a great clap of thunder,

⁸ Arkadi Fiedler's novel *Wyspa Robinsona* (*Robinson Island*) from the year 1954; the German translation, *Die Insel der Verwegenen*, was published in 1958 in East Germany and contains the story of a Polish adventurer who survives a shipwreck together with two indigenous persons. The second novel *Orinoko* (1957) describes the life of the hero within the Orinoco delta. The story shows Marxist influences. The hero develops from an ordinary adventurer to the protector and liberator of the oppressed indigenous inhabitants of the Orinoco region. After he and his two comrades arrived to the mainland (after a period of struggle for survival on the island) he starts to organize the (successful) resistance against the Spanish conquistadors.

trees were breaking, the earth was trembling, and a large snake with a beard and eyes of lazuli appeared. By these signifiers, the true character of the snake becomes obvious—the large snake is a god. The divine snake opened his mouth to him. Several times this snake asked him how he reached this island: “If you delay telling me, who brought you to this island, you will find yourself as ashes” (71).

Fear made the Shipwrecked Sailor speechless. Then the divine snake took the Shipwrecked Sailor in his mouth and carried him to his living place and repeated the questioning. Only then was the Shipwrecked Sailor able to answer; he starts to explain how he came to the island. After his report, the divine snake metamorphosed from an angry monster into a kind being. He tells the Sailor that he must neither fear nor become pale: “Look, a god has saved your life and he brought you to this island” (114). The snake explains to the Shipwrecked Sailor that he will be rescued; the island will provide everything (115), and after four months, a ship from the capital will come and take him home (116-121).

To comfort the Shipwrecked Sailor the divine snake starts to narrate his own sad story. He has lived together with 75 other divine snakes on the island, together with his daughter who was given to him as answer to his prayers. During his absence from the others, a catastrophe occurred: a star fell from heaven and burned all of the other snakes, including his little daughter. He returned to find them in ashes (125-132).

Then the Shipwrecked Sailor worshiped the divine snake. He promised to send him precious goods and to make his name known to the capital (137-48). This will “be done for a god, who loves, in a distant land that people do not know” (147).

However, the divine snake just laughs. He is the Lord of Punt who owns all the valuables mentioned by the Shipwrecked Sailor. Also, these valuables would never reach him, he explains, as this island will disappear and be (re-)converted into water (154).

The promised ship arrives. The divine snake requests from the hero:
Make me a good name in your city. (159)

The Shipwrecked Sailor boards the ship and returns to the capital; there he receives a warm welcome by the ruler.

His report is over. However, the leader of the expedition remains fatalistic. He states:

Who would give water to a goose when he will be slaughtered in the morning of the next day? (184-86)

In the following comparative analysis similarities in the use of motifs between the story of the Shipwrecked Sailor and the Book of Jonah will be discussed.

Both stories have an **open and ambivalent end**. After YHWH's unanswered question the book of Jonah concludes with an open ended question. It is up to the reader to answer the question. They can agree with the God of creation who is responsible for all his creatures or they can accept Jonah's position that an evil deed of a collective kind in the case Nineveh/Assyria cries for punishment. The reader may choose between YHWH's optimistic position that every human fate has the chance for a positive change, or share Jonah's position that an evil

doing must have consequences. The end of the Shipwrecked Sailor is in the same way open and ambivalent. The reader may accept the optimistic position of the Shipwrecked Sailor—every individual can make a positive experience—or the pessimistic position of the divine snake.⁹

Both stories contain the motif of **arbitrary eschatology**. The end of the Jonah story demonstrates how God can deal with his creatures—in this case with mercy—but he is not obliged to do so (Höffken 2000, 297). The reader of the Shipwrecked Sailor story is confronted with a special case of a limited eschatology. The question why the divine snake has to experience the demise of all his companions and his daughter by a divine initiated cosmic catastrophe remains unanswered. The reader—and maybe the author—cannot explain why the Shipwrecked Sailor's fate takes a positive turn, whereas the loss of his social environment is unalterable for the divine snake.

Jan Assmann argues that **loneliness, the remoteness from human society, and the absence of God** is the leading motif of the Shipwrecked Sailor story (2005, 50). Indeed, both Jonah and the Shipwrecked Sailor experience the absence of God in an ambivalent way. Both were catapulted out of human society. Jonah's fall in the depth of the sea and his journey to Sheol force him to experience remoteness from God. His prayer from the belly of the fish is nothing else but an attempt to re-establish closeness to God.¹⁰ Both heroes must consider that they are now far away from God's presence. Jonah has tried to escape from YHWH by crossing the sea, his descent to the depths of the sea intensified this (ridiculous) movement. For the Shipwrecked Sailor, his sea journey has brought him outside of Egypt and therefore outside of the cultivated land and the sphere of his God(s). His stay on an isolated island intensifies his sense of being isolated. However, the imagined absence of God proved to be a mistake.

Both heroes experience an **encounter with God far away from the human sphere and civilisation**. Within the belly of the fish, Jonah expresses his gratitude that *he has been saved* by YHWH.¹¹ Particularly the conviction that his prayer from the fish's belly has already reached YHWH's Holy Temple (Jon. 2:8) expresses that his relation to YHWH is re-established. In the depths of the sea, he expresses his gratitude that he has been saved by the God from whom he had wished to be as far away as possible. In an Egyptian perspective, an encounter between humans and Gods is only possible in border areas like isolated islands or dreams.¹²

Both stories contain an **encounter with the divine will, which remains unreachable**. The big fish disappears in the sea, just like the Shipwrecked Sailor's

⁹ De Manuelian (1992, 232), refers to the final scene of the Shipwrecked Sailor as an offer to the reader to extend their world-view. The reader could adopt and except the positive view of the Shipwrecked Sailor—or they can share the opinion of the leader of the expedition that every human being can make the experience of a dramatic negative change (232).

¹⁰ Janowski (2006, 57) states, that Jonah's descent into the Netherworld and his ascent to the Temple are pragmatic images of the absence from and the presence of God.

¹¹ The use of the tenses Perfect and Waw-Imperfect implies that Jonah does not cry for his rescue but that he expresses his gratitude for his already occurred salvation. He *had cried* and *YHWH had answered and heard* (Jon. 2:3); *he went* down to the bottoms of the mountains, and *YHWH has brought him up* (Jon. 2:7); *his prayer has come* to YHWH's Holy Temple (Jon. 2, 8).

¹² Hornung (2005, 132) states that Egyptians Gods do not walk on earth among the humans; an encounter with them is only possible in borderlands in which the sphere of humans and Gods come closer, like on an island far away or within a dream.

island, which returned into water. The island and the fish as places facilitating an encounter with the divine remain as utopia, as utopian places. To the motif of the encounter with the divine belongs the three days motif. Jonah's three days within the belly of the fish are concluded by his psalm. According to the progress of the plot, the reader may combine the three days with an uninterrupted and continuous recitation of the psalm. However, the Waw-Imperfect (וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל) in Jon. 2:1 indicates that Jonah's psalm recitation was only one single act. Therefore, it remains open if the encounter with the divine as it is expressed by the psalm points to the end of the three days, or if the entire stay within the fish is combined with the motif of ongoing encounter with the divine. Within the story of the Shipwrecked Sailor, the three-day motif appears immediately before the encounter with the divine being. It is amazing that within this story the three days motif is combined with **loneliness** and the **sojourn within the shadow of a plant**.

I spent three days alone
My heart was my companion
I slept in a shelter of wood / (or) I slept in the shadows of a tree¹³
I embraced the shadows. (Shipwr. 41-45)

Whereas the combination of the motifs *stay of three days, loneliness and sitting within the shadow of a wooden hut or a tree* appear in the Shipwrecked Sailor's story together and immediately before the encounter with the divine, they appear in the book of Jonah at the beginning and at the end of his encounter with God. Jonah stays three days within the belly of the fish and he sits lonely and frustrated under the shadows of the plant and his hut (Jon 2:1; 4: 5, 6).

The encounter between the main character and God in the sea is the precondition for the next common motif. **The God** who encounters human beings on the sea **comes into prominence** within a human collective to which he was unknown before. After the storm, YHWH is accepted as the ruler over the sea by the sailors; and after Jonah's five words, YHWH is known and feared by the inhabitants of the huge city of Nineveh. A complete conversion is not mentioned here. Nevertheless, the Ninevites are now informed about the existence of a God who was until this point unknown to them. This God has the potential to destroy the city and this God is a merciful one. Obviously, the god of the Shipwrecked Sailor story does not have a potential like this. He only desires that his new declared messenger will make him a good name within the capital. As it seems, both Gods demand from nation(s) far away the knowledge of their existence and power. The Shipwrecked Sailor sends the divine snake precious gifts from Egypt, likewise as it is usually "done for a God who loves in a distant land that people do not know" (Shipwr. 147). In the same way, the Ninevites only have to accept the existence and the power of the God of Israel—a conversion into Judaism is not demanded by this God. The acceptance of the far away God has a ritual consequence: the burnt offering. After his first three days on the island, the Shipwrecked Sailor made a burnt offering to the Gods. This private offering without a temple and a regular ritual seems strange from an Egyptian viewpoint. The reaction of the sailors within the Jonah story is likewise odd. They offer the unknown God a sacrifice (Jon. 1:16). It is not intended here that the sailors

¹³ The Egyptian origin allows both translations.

“abandoned their pagan creeds and adopted the faith of Israel” (Simon 1999, 15). However, a sacrificial practice by pagans, done on a ship by the use of any animals, is clearly a contradiction to ritual instructions of the Pentateuch that the Temple (or from a post-exilic viewpoint, Jerusalem) is the only place for this practice from which pagans must be excluded. Obviously, our author is not interested in questions of a regular cult. The sacrifice of the sailors establishes a relationship to the God far away as an expression of gratitude after their rescue. The burnt offering of the Shipwrecked Sailor points in the same direction. His sacrifice is dedicated to Gods (plural). Therewith, it is indicated that the name and the character of the rescuing God is unknown. The Shipwrecked Sailor’s offer to send precious gifts from Egypt to the god of the island has been compared to the theology of the 26th Dynasty, that the rulers and Gods of the kingdoms outside of Egypt could send gifts to the Egyptian gods and bless them (Redford 1973, 16). This is the theology of the newly discovered Gods in both stories. They accept offerings from everybody without any ritual restrictions and regulations and they want to be known as *the God*, a conversion into a new faith with all of its consequences like circumcision, food taboos, feasts, etc., are not necessary.

Both heroes experience the **metamorphosis** of the, at a first glance, dangerous **monster into a friendly and helping being**. The metamorphosis is realized by a speech act of the hero and after both have been swallowed/taken by the mouth of the beast. After overcoming his fear and panic, the Shipwrecked Sailor starts to explain the circumstances for his appearance on the island. His speech reveals him as a human being who is able to communicate. Immediately the divine snake refers to the circumstance that a/the god has saved his life. In the Egyptian text, it remains open if “God” should be translated in a determined or undetermined way.¹⁴ In contrary to the Shipwrecked Sailor, the emotions of Jonah after he was thrown into the sea and swallowed by the fish are not narrated. First, the text (Jon. 2:1) states that Jonah was swallowed (לבלע). The root בלע is in the majority of its appearances used to express being swallowed to death (cf. Num. 16:30, 32, 34; 26:10; Deut 11:6; 2 Sam 17:16). Immediately after this, it is mentioned that Jonah was within the מעה of the fish for three days. The expression is also used to express the shelter of the embryo in its mother’s womb (cf. Gen. 25:23; Ruth 1:7; Isa. 49:7). The role of the fish is ambivalent: did it swallow or eat Jonah up, or provide shelter for him in its belly? In contrast to the Shipwrecked Sailor, Jonah need not overcome his fear. From the beginning of the psalm, he expresses his gratitude for his rescue.

Back to the oceanic reading: in both texts **the sea is the sphere which allows for a real encounter with the divine**. The storm and the experience of his rescue brought Jonah closer to his God. The tense-structure of the psalm could be summarized in one sentence: he expresses his gratitude that YHWH *has saved* him. His desire to see the Holy Temple again (Jon. 2:5) is not less than the promise that he will seek YHWH’s presence at the Temple; his statement that he will fulfill what he has vowed (Jon. 2:10) points at his close relationship to YHWH in the future. Obviously, after reaching dry land, his promises are soon forgotten. The encounter with God in the sea remains a brief episode in Jonah’s biography. In

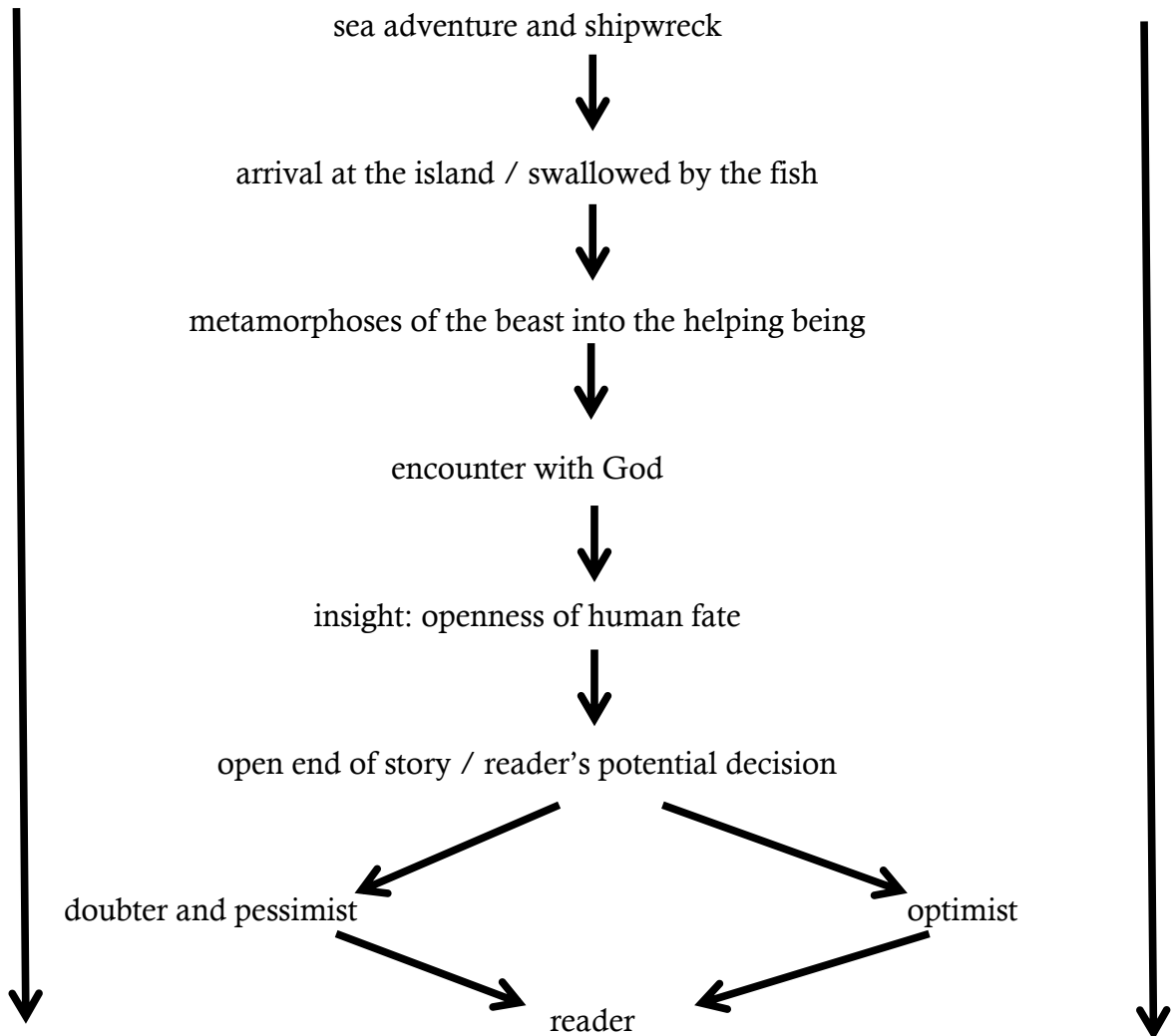
¹⁴ The Egyptian expression for god appears without a deictic pronoun. It is open for any or “the” god to have been the Shipwrecked Sailor’s saviour. Similarly, it is not clear if the divine snake was the saving god.

contrast, the Shipwrecked Sailor is portrayed as being more faithful. He returns home as the messenger of the previously unknown god.

Jonah and the Shipwrecked Sailor - a comparative outline

Jonah and the expedition leader as pessimists

Shipwrecked Sailor as optimist



The comparative scheme demonstrates that both stories use a similar structure of motifs. They use the key motif of the adventure of a shipwrecked traveler who experiences an intensive encounter with God:

Two men are drifting within the stormy sea. They arrive at a single island with a divine snake as the only inhabitant or they are swallowed by a big fish during a divine mission. Snake and fish are changing—metamorphoses from a dangerous beast into a helpful being. The initial moment for this change is the human ability to communicate with the divine face-to-face. The travellers experience a peculiar encounter with God, an encounter that would not be possible with the same intensity on dry land. Then both heroes proceed in different directions. The Shipwrecked Sailor travels home as the messenger of the newly-discovered god and as a striking example that every individual fate can experience

a good (or like the divine snake a bad) change of their destiny. Jonah is different. Outside the city of Nineveh, he remains a human being with a negative awareness: a negative doom like the judgment of Nineveh must be fulfilled. At the end, he remains ambivalent. The reader must decide if they would agree with a Jonah who is now convinced by the God of mercy or if they agree with the stubborn, pessimistic, and silent Jonah. In the same way, the reader of the Shipwrecked Sailor is challenged. It is up to them, if they would share the optimism of the Shipwrecked Sailor or the pessimism of the leader of the expedition.

Conclusion: Robinson as Pattern - Towards an Oceanic Reading of the Jonah Story

Daniel Defoe's Robinson starts his sea adventure, survives a shipwreck, and arrives at an isolated island. He develops strategies to survive as a human being. The former *bon vivant* is converted into a diligent Bible reader, a missionary, and a God-thinker. He leaves the island after 28 years converted. Jonah has only three days in the saving belly of the fish. He did not reach dry land converted. However, during his stay in the fish's belly, within the depth of the sea, he is confronted with his own experience of God's presence. His life within the prayer community of Israel becomes more valuable in his eyes; YHWH's Holy Temple is the place he wishes to see again. The faith of the other Robinsons is solid. The Egyptian Shipwrecked Sailor desires to return home, to embrace his family, and to enjoy the security of a tomb in his homeland. Jonah is different: the Sea has provided to him the adventure and the gift of an intensive encounter with God—for three days.

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Appendix A

About Whales, Sea Monsters and Pleasant Fish

It is an endless discussion between scholars if the fish of the book of Jonah should be interpreted as a sea monster from which the hero must be rescued by YHWH's interaction or if he serves as YHWH's instrument to save Jonah, i.e. as a divine rescue cab. The reading of the fish as a sea monster is influenced by several sources. One source is Hermann Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851), which alludes to the Jonah story several times.¹⁵ Melville's novel presents a dangerous whale - but this whale has nothing to do with Jonah's fish. The leading motif of the novel is Captain Ahab's hatred of the white whale Moby Dick—with deathly consequences for the ship and its crew.

The second source is the translation of LXX with κῆτος, which refers to the Biblical Leviathan. However, if the Hebrew text points at the Leviathan, the expressions לִיָּתָן or תַּנִּין is used. The third source appears within the comparison

¹⁵ The novel contains a number of allusions to the Hebrew Bible: the gloomily characterised captain of the whaling expedition is named after the Biblical King Ahab; on his last day on land, the protagonist meets a (prophetic) figure with the name Elias who pronounces the sinking of the ship. A direct allusion to the "whale" of the book of Jonah appears with the famous sermon of Pater Mapple. The whale appears here not as a beast but as the instrument of God's punishment. Jonah's and Captain Ahab's whales are changeable. From Pater Mapple's viewpoint, both are instruments against human self-exaltation. However, in Mapple's worldview, Jonah's "whale" is a dangerous being which is used by YHWH as an instrument of punishment. It is quite conceivable that Melville's *Moby Dick* was influenced by the interpretation of Jonah's "whale" in the 19th century as a representative of a chaotic and dangerous nature. A negative "whale-reading" would be hardly imaginable within the literature and the cinematic art of the 21st century. In the times of Greenpeace and the melting polar ice, whales are portrayed as wise and friendly, sometimes human-saving beings. For an example, see the whale scene in Robert Zemeckis movie *Cast Away* (2000).

between the book of Jonah and Greek and Roman mythology. A well-known example is Heracles. Hesione, the daughter of Laomedon, was presented as a gift for a sea monster (and not for a fish). Heracles, to rescue her, enters *voluntarily* the mouth of the sea monster, stays three days in its belly, besieges the beast with his sword, and escapes together with Hesione (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XI, 221-28). With the exception of the three days stay in the belly of the fish/monster, the Jonah story and the Heracles saga have nothing in common.

The fish as friendly being and as savior of sea travellers is a well-known motif. It dates back to the Indian *Mahabharata*.¹⁶ The fish named Matsya represents the first Avatar of Lord Vishnu. Matsya reveals himself to the hero Manu and predicts the coming flood and the end of humankind on earth. He orders him to build an ark and to bring the seed of all creatures into it. The flood comes and Manu survives within his ark. He is saved and guided by the fish Matsya who carries him to the top of the Himalaya where he goes on land and starts to re-create all creatures (Buitenen, *Mahabharata* 3 [37.a], 185, 583-85).

Reading through sagas about sea travellers on one hand and about swallowed heroes on the other demonstrates that the fish motif is not often combined with any kind of sea monsters. Against this backdrop, the fish and the sea in the book of Jonah should not be seen as a symbol for death (or, subsequently, of resurrection). The psychological reading of Jonah, the whale, and the sea has interpreted the sea and the fish as spheres of death, Jonah's re-emergence from the fish as symbol of resurrection and also of overcoming an oedipal-complex (Jung 1956, 109-110; 156; 419 and Lacocque & Lacocque 1981, 27). In contradiction to the swallowed and reborn hero of the psychological reading, the biblical Jonah fits better to the motif of the shipwrecked sea-traveller. His island is the fish; at a first glance, he is confronted with a deathly danger but within the progress of the plot, the island/fish is converted into a rescuing medium. With regard to the comparison of the literary motifs, Jonah shows a proximity towards the modern novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (see above). Here appears the triad shipwrecked sea traveller, lifeboat, and Bengali tiger. The hero survives his adventure in a small boat together with a hungry tiger—at first glance, a hopeless situation. Nevertheless, the tiger has to play an ambivalent role: he is the threatening and in the same way the saving element of the story.

Appendix B

Crossing the Ocean of Interpretation: Cross-Cultural Reading of a Cross-Cultural Book

The book of Jonah is a cross-cultural book in several respects. Its protagonist is a cross-border commuter and traveller. He experiences abroad the behaviours of strangers, like the sailors and the Ninevites, and of his God, who did not meet his expectations. He experiences his God as a global player who acts without limitations.

The book of Jonah has a cross-cultural plot. With regard to the literary character of the story, the book demands a cross-cultural reading. To this cross-

¹⁶ The entire opus contains more than one hundred thousand verses. The redaction of the collection occurred during the first century B.C. However, the collected material is considerably older; see Simson 1979, 58.

cultural reading belongs the certain situation that humans experience at sea, a situation of danger and threat. This extreme situation forces the protagonist to reconsider the outline of his life. This literary motif is widespread in world literature.

The figure of Jonah has often been compared with heroes who have been swallowed by a sea monster. They survive the adventure by using a magic weapon, a certain kind of poison or a spell.

The interpretation of the story depends on one's reading of the fish. Against the backdrop of myths about swallowed heroes the fish may be seen as a sea monster. This interpretation is not the only possible one. In the same way, it is possible to interpret the fish as if a rescuing submarine.

Sea travellers are adventurers. But they do not experience simple adventure stories on sea. They survive border situations, they experience the proximity of death, and they meet a god who is different from their former beliefs.

Jonah has something in common with classic sea travel stories. Like Robinson Crusoe, Jonah does not return the same person as at the beginning of his journey. Robinson Crusoe, the former go-getter, is converted into a Bible reader and missionary. Against his God Jonah has nothing to say in the first three chapters of the book. Chapter four presents a converted Jonah who has the power to resist and to contradict.

The struggle to survive in the ocean has changed both heroes—and together with them, their Gods.

Jonah, the sea traveller of the Hebrew Bible, and the Robinsons of the Western sea adventure novels, have something in common. They leave the safety of dry land, they struggle, they survive, and they meet a God who is different from their expectations. In this light, Jonah becomes in a certain way the Robinson of Ancient Near Eastern literature, and vice versa. The sea adventure, the surviving of the hero, the encounter with God—these things create a truly cross-cultural story.



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