

On Jonah and the Concept of Justice

Gershom Scholem

Translated by Eric J. Schwab

A natural point of departure for contemplating the Book of Jonah can be found in its exceptional position within the books of the Old Testament canon. Along with the Book of Micah this book stands in the middle of the books of the twelve minor prophets. All of the other writings in the prophetic canon differ from the Book of Jonah in that they contain essentially the prophecies and speeches of the prophets themselves; nowhere is any noticeable biographical interest taken in the prophet, the medium of the divine word. These books do not speak *of* prophecy, rather prophecy itself speaks. By contrast, the Book of Jonah contains no extensive prophecies whatsoever, and considered from this viewpoint its contents would be exhausted by chapter 3, verse 4b. Thus a superficial consideration might sooner expect this book to appear in the third part of the canon among the hagiographies—as it obviously seems to contain an episode from the life of a prophet, in the same way that the books of Esther and Ruth are episodes—but not in the middle of the prophetic writings. Why is it placed nevertheless at its present position, and what are the ideas and teaching of this book?

In truth the Book of Jonah is not only rightfully included among the prophetic writings but moreover it contains the very key to understanding the prophetic idea in general. It is the ironic and at the same time

For their kind assistance with technical questions the translator wishes to thank Nico Israel, Jim McDermott, Noam Pianko, George Seligman, and Howard Stern.

Translations of biblical verses reflect the author's German renditions, which do not always follow standard translations.

utterly earnest expression of that which achieved its shape in prophetism. It is a *pedagogical* book; it is a *didactic* book. It presents the theory, one might say, for that which the other books deliver in detail. It will prove to be the necessary and most central part of the canon of the prophets. In this perspective, its purpose is to introduce that spiritual continuum of Judaism which is its ethics—and hence its purpose is to inaugurate a problem. Every such inauguration expresses itself in a question, and precisely in this the highest education is achieved. The teacher educates through questions, not through answers.

A human being is taught a lesson about the order of what is just. And there is indeed no figure more representative for the teacher than God himself, nor one more representative for the student than the prophet, considered as he is by Judaism as the highest order of man. That God himself gives the prophet instruction is the ultimate expression of the idea that the education in question here is truly the central and decisive education. Likewise, all other relations in this book are reduced to the most simple and obvious level. The relationships are pure and the characters taken as absolutes. This clearly exemplifies the generally valid proposition that the projection plane of the canonical coincides with the phenomenological layer of absolute experience. Which means this is not a matter of pragmatic reports about facts; rather, the canonical presents its teaching in the most easily accessible way (in a pragmatic *style*), and in this second degree—simplicity—it simultaneously warns of the widespread misunderstandings that have been and will remain bound to the problem of its applicability. The object of this instruction is the idea of justice. Education is a religious-prophetic category.

The inner structure of the Book of Jonah is entirely symmetrical, and the following symbolical representation, which is more than a simile, will show this. What happens in this book? It contains an episode. This episode presents itself as the neighborhood of the critical point on a line that completes itself in the infinitude of what occurs.

1. From the infinity of the divine word a *command* is sent forth to Jonah.
2. Jonah evades the mission imposed upon him, flees, and is punished. (The movement drops.)
3. In the hymn, the movement rises to its original-unitary height.
4. Jonah carries out God's command and proclaims the destruction of Nineveh. (What happens corresponds with the divine command. This

Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) was the founder of modern studies of Jewish mysticism and a close friend and correspondent of Walter Benjamin. Scholem's works include *On the Kabbala and Its Symbolism* (1965), *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (1971), and the memoir *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (1980). **Eric J. Schwab** is assistant professor of germanics at Yale University.

occurrence sets itself perpendicular to the occurrence that makes up the command, just as forces relate in physics.)

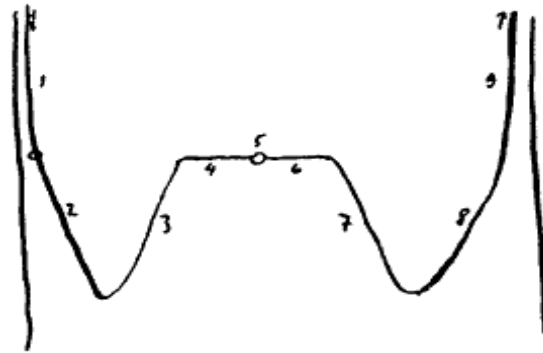
5. (Structurally the center or the point of crystallization, for this center is *neutral*.) Nineveh repents; God “turns law into justice” (Psalm 94).

6. God does not execute the sentence of destruction proclaimed by Jonah. (Numbers 4–6 are accomplished according to God’s plan, hence symbolically perpendicular to his command. The repentance of Nineveh and the transformation of law are single points, metaphysically; the non-execution by contrast is extended.)

7. Jonah quarrels with God, his misunderstanding becomes obvious.

8. God teaches Jonah the meaning of his mission in the *question*, and

9. in the infinitely echoing resonance of this question the circle of events completes itself in the unsaid.



Already this structure shows how false the widespread opinion is that number 3, that is, the hymn in chapter 2, is a later interpolation. Without this hymn the book’s completed and rigorous shape would fall apart; particularly the one cardinal point of the story’s upper plateau, the human grandeur in 4, which corresponds to the divine one in 6, would fall away completely. Command and question are the two antithetically oriented absolute acts of language’s positing that enclose the entire domain of language asymptotically.

The Book of Jonah has been characterized as a popular book, and in a certain way this is justified, namely, in the unsurpassed popularity of its style (taking this concept in its most comprehensive sense, which also primarily includes the principal plane of projection of all that occurs). This most profound book is simultaneously the most purely childlike; one could derive the concept of children’s literature from it. *Jonah is a childlike person.*

In Jonah the prophetic correlate to Job is given. Job and Jonah, these are the two great questioners, and the books that carry their names represent the two key questions in which the idea of justice constitutes and overconstitutes itself. Both books are themselves questions; both offer no

answer, rather the question itself is the solution. Jonah concludes with a question, the question through which history is called into life as opposed to the law of nature. Job as a whole is a question, which with every single "Where wast thou . . ." (chapter 38)—the cosmogonical question—becomes permanent. The Book of Job does not have the prophetic method. Jonah has it, and therefore this book stands among the prophets. Jonah is a didactic poem of prophetism, if you will. Its object—God's justice—seems the same yet nevertheless totally different, for in the very last instance Job questions what cannot be questioned about this justice, what eludes all prophecy and is incommensurable with it. But Jonah presents precisely what can be questioned about justice (*not* the answerable, for that does not exist at all), and this is the root of prophetism. Both address the boundary of the "good" versus the "real," but in entirely different directions. Jonah, the prophetic book, brings these boundaries into effect for the very first time and simultaneously destroys them because the good and justice are all-encompassing and everything else in contrast to them is weightless. In the Book of Jonah the boundary is a metaphysical semblance; in Job it is not, but only because a question is raised that is not fitting for us—that is the irony of Job. (In this we also find one of the reasons why the Book of Job is intrinsically related to lamentation, while such a relation is lacking in Jonah. One cannot lament about semblance.) The irony of Jonah is different, it is a prophetic irony. The prophet does not understand prophetism; what he does is essentially politics.

The structure of Jonah is directly opposed to that of the other prophetic books, for the main concern is not the objects of prophecy, other humans, but instead the prophet himself—the subject or rather the medium of prophecy. Precisely this mediumistic transparency makes it such a crystalline presentation of the prophetic problem. The evildoers in this book are virtually eliminated; Nineveh repents. The autochthonic difficulty of their problem is cancelled, the threads of the problem never get confused.

The question is an unending cycle; the symbol of this infinitude, in which the possibility of an empirical end is given, is the rhetorical question. This ("Jewish") question can be justly characterized as medial; it knows no answer, which means its answer must in essence be another question; in the innermost basis of Judaism the concept of an answer does not exist. In the Torah there are neither questions nor answers. The Hebrew word for answer is *teshuvah*, which, correctly translated, means: response, reversal—reversal of the question, that is, which is assigned a new value and thus returns, as it were. Viewed in this way the principle of Talmudic dialectics is easily comprehensible.

The deep conflict of the Book of Jonah resides in Jonah's desire to see an identity between prophecy, which from an empirical point of view is a prediction of the future, and historiography, which is a prediction of the past. The prediction about the future should not be any different

from one about the past: Nineveh is annihilated *in* the prophecy (precisely from a historian's standpoint). Chapter 3, verse 4b expresses this with a deeply rooted double meaning, "Forty days more and Nineveh is overturned," which from Jonah's standpoint is meant as a statement of fact, from God's standpoint as a warning. God Himself teaches the meaning of prophecy to the one He has sent by showing him that the categories that Jonah applies to nature (and in the first chapter even to himself) He applies to history. Jonah takes the standpoint of the law, and from this side he is indeed in the right; God takes that of justice; God denies the (mythical) law in history. In the act of repentance, the law is overcome and the judgment is not carried out. (On this, compare Psalm 94:14–15, particularly the interconnection of the two verses.) This, and nothing else, is the meaning of justice in the deepest sense: that judgment *is* allowed, but the execution of it remains something entirely different. The unequivocal connection of the judge's decision to the executive power—a connection that defines the actual order of law—is suspended by the deferment on the part of the executive power. This is what God does with Nineveh. The conclusion of 4:10—he had passed a sentence in order to carry it out, and he did not (yet) do it—is a classic statement of the idea of justice. Where the court pronounces a verdict, justice raises a question. As Daniel says: "In the counsel of the guardians a decree and in the verdict of the holy ones a question"—this is justice.

The following theses are intended to give expression to the content of this idea as it permeates not just the Book of Jonah but also all of Judaism in the widest scope.

1. Justice is the idea of the historical annihilation of divine judgment, and just is that deed which neutralizes divine judgment upon it. Justice is the indifference of the Last Judgment; that means, within it unfolds that sphere in which the enactment of the Last Judgment is infinitely deferred.¹ Messianic is that realm which no Last Judgment follows. Therefore the prophets demand justice, in order infinitely to eliminate the Last Judgment. In just actions, the messianic realm is immediately erected.

2. All prophetic concepts are concepts of distance. The just man (*zaddik*) lives in the true distance: "The just man lives *in* his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4); for faith is a relationship based on a distance. Deferral, and hence the order of distance most important for the constitution of the concept of justice, contains in itself the ground of duration, the *being* of justice. Distance is the methodical idea of all prophetic concepts, and, therefore,

1. In monotheistic religions, death is thought of as a movement. And because the concept of movement was misinterpreted into meaning something mechanical, death became the movement into the other world. In the religious topography it had to stand in the middle and thus where life was viewed as a straight line, this line had to be extended. The true concept of movement, however, implies a concept of life that is not just a straight line. The life fulfilled within this order is the tribunal; the idea of the Last Judgment is the absolute positing of a temporal order whose pure life is death.

precisely, the “nearness to God is his [the just man’s—trans.] good” (Psalm 73:28).

3. The positing of the question is the verdict of justice (see above); the Book of Jonah ends with a question.

4. Divine judgment is the judgment that is its own execution.

5. Divine judgment is anticipation of the Last Judgment applied in a special case. The theory of divine judgment and its various categories is the border domain between ethics and religion. But this concept, the only one in Judaism that in its essence includes anticipation, gets neutralized and annihilated in prophetism. Those systems of order in which this neutralization is carried out are themselves in no way capable of anticipation, and this comprises one of the deepest differences between the concepts of Judaism and the mythical ones of Christianity, to whose innermost essence the possibility of their anticipation belongs. (Faith, love, and hope can be anticipated.)

6. The deferral that has become action is justice as deed (*zedakah*). From this can be deduced the meaning “good deed,” which this concept has (almost) exclusively in later Judaism. The good deed, for example the giving of alms, as that work which the poor may claim in the name of God but no longer in the name of the law (S. R. Hirsch), is a deferral of one executive power by another. Over the poor shall come judgment as over the rich. (“Thou shalt not prefer the poor man before the tribunal.”) But this judgment is not to be carried out; the poor man stands under God’s command. *And this nonexecution is not possible other than through another execution, which in regard to the poor man becomes a good deed.* Accordingly, this concept is unknown in Hebrew since justice already contains it. (*Gemilut hesed* is an utterly different concept and not really central; it means humanity in one’s behavior.)

The fundamental difference between justice and love, as well as their fundamental affinity, cannot be developed here in detail. Love is the annihilation of judgment, justice that of the execution; one who loves does not judge. Justice and the law complement each other and coincide; love and the law exclude each other.

7. The famous saying in Proverbs 10:2 means: “To act in deferral delivers from death,” and specifically not just the one who acts, but all beings. This may also account for the great triumph of justice in Talmudic law and in rabbinical Judaism. A court of law that in seventy years had executed one sentence of death was named homicidal. The Torah knows the death penalty; Talmudic law does not question it but enacts the idea of deferral by imposing an extraordinary burden of proof in all criminal cases. Through such a burden judgment is rendered practically impossible. The underlying idea, however, always remains the same: judgment is possible, its execution is not possible. The human court’s verdict does not entail its execution; justice fills the abyss between them.

8. The symbolical deed is the just deed. The deed void of meaning

is the just deed. To act in deferral implies to eliminate meaning. The meaningful deed is the mythical one and answers to Fate. *Justice eliminates Fate*. Isaiah 65:19–24 not only indicates the elimination of Fate in messianic time but also provides the method of this elimination in the idea of deferral. For the messianic center of justice is expressed there *ironically*, since in truth there are not any sinners in messianic time.

9. The historical ideas of the Bible all relate to the temporal concept of the eternal present. Messianic time as eternal present, and justice as something that is present and substantial, are corresponding notions. Were justice not present, then the messianic realm too would not only not be present but would be altogether impossible. Justice, like all Jewish concepts, is not a border concept, not liminal, not some mechanically infinite, ever-approachable regulative idea. (Whatever is liminal can be anticipated: the secret of Christianity.) “The reason for what the wise men call the world to come is not that this coming world is not already present, and that only after the demise of this world the other one would come. This is not how things are; rather, that world is continually present” (Maimonides). Prophetism is the prediction of the eternal present.

10. In Judaism it is the idea of justice that designates the relationship of the canonical to tradition. Without this idea, tradition and the canonical remain strangers without any actual connection to each another. But precisely in the justice that arises from the canonical, tradition is attained and founded at the deepest level. For the idea of tradition means just this: the (written) Torah cannot be applied. It is the Law of God, the right that is not yet justice but rather transforms into it in the unending deferral of tradition. In it, revelation and messianic time are bound together inseparably.

11. Ethically different actions form a steady stream of transformations;² the self-transforming deed is just. The singular, unsteady deed is the unjust and evil one. There is no continuity of Evil. The world of transformation is the messianic realm, the Time of Justice. (The story is told of Baal-Schem that he said the following about an ascetic who performed mystical deeds, and thus distinguished himself through singular actions: “In the world of transformations they’re laughing about him.”) In justice the absolute constancy of the highest ethical sphere is presented. Justice is the order of the world (*tikkun shel olam*) and the messianic realm the world of order (*olam hatikkun*).

12. In the same way that the world to come already exists, the justice to come also exists. This coming is its unfolding; *zedakah* does not become but reveals, unfolds itself (Isaiah 56:1). Its coming is only the breaking

2. Transformation—compare Tikkune Sohar 60b/61a f: “The transformation—that is the lower *shekhinah* (the ‘realm’), which is transformation.” But in messianic time nothing transforms any more; the name of God becomes *speakeable*, which now can only be written (*Mishnah!*). The manifold paradoxicality of this passage is symbolic: the realm itself is read messianically!!

through of the shining medium through a darkening. Therefore, as well, the *zaddik*, the just man (for instance in chassidism) is only *mitgaleh*. Nobody can become a *zaddik*, he can only be one. The "hidden just man" however is the category in which prophetism unfolded the concept of tradition. This category is the living heritage of prophetism in the midst of the Jewish people. The fellow human is the hidden just man; he hands down the nameless things. Upon these just ones, who shine invisibly, Jewish popular belief builds the existence of the world (the sayings of the thirty-six hidden ones, the *niztarim*). The death of the just ones is hidden; it is the *zedakah* that happens to them, no longer the one that they do. This death is the last, absolute deferral in which the distance transforms the poles of its relation and *faith* passes over to God.

Seen from this standpoint, the problem of the Book of Jonah can also be grasped in this way: its conflict is based on a fundamental confusion. For why does Jonah want to identify prophetism with historiography? It is clear that he is confusing the eternal and the noneternal present. In Nineveh he is supposed to make a prediction about the eternal present, but he himself considers this prediction as bearing on the noneternal one. The times that *transform* themselves within the eternal present are supposed to be identical. But what is identical does not transform itself, and what transforms itself is not identical. This is the basis of the story's jokelike aspect. (In the same way, many jokes are based on a shifting of accent in expression. In this sense, 3:4 is the point of the joke.) It would be an error to claim, as often happens, that the inner center is to be found in the repentance of Nineveh, hence in the proof of the positive effect of the prophetic word, and therefore that its contrast to the rest of the prophetic books consists exclusively in the focus having shifted from the prophet to those at whom the prophecy is directed. Rather, the repentance only serves to inaugurate the more significant problem of the divine deferral, and in this way also is to be understood why in the Jewish liturgy the Book of Jonah has its place as *haftarah* in the Mincha-prayer of the Day of Atonement. The temporal idea of this holiday is expressed by the Book of Jonah in a distinct way. One who prays on this day learns what it means to be just, and what else does the Day of Atonement demand from him but this?

Remarks about Individual Passages

Chapter 1. Although the episodic "and" is entirely customary in the usage of historical narrative, perhaps it may be permitted here to take it in its original meaning as a symbol of the infinitude of the event in which God's word goes out to Jonah: Chapter 1 likewise already states indirectly the idea of justice. Achad Ha'am might rightfully have drawn on this

chapter in order to illustrate the arguments he puts forward in “Die Schwankenden” [The Undecided Ones]. All the more so since the decision here is given from the outset because the whole thing is presented as a divine judgment. The sailors are right to call for a twofold divine judgment. The double meaning of the end of 1:14 once again points to the problem of the whole: (1) “as it *has* pleased you, so you (will) actually do”—Jonah’s view, and (2) “as it pleases you, you can do.”

Chapter 4:4 can be translated: “Are you right to be angry?” or “To do a good deed, does it anger you?” That the double meaning in the text is intentional could be concluded from the accentuation, which differs from that of the isophonic word in 4:9; the word *haheytev* [that is, “one who does good”—trans.] has a dividing accent (*tipcha*) in the first, a connecting accent (*mercha*) in the second.