

Taking the Argo to Nineveh: Jonah and Jason in a Mediterranean Context

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April 25, 2014 (slightly revised version of 1995 *Judaism* article)

The book of Jonah must be read, first and last, within its Hebrew context. Indeed, the text reverberates, especially to Hebrew ears, with clear echoes of biblical passages that come from the Noah story, from Jeremiah, Joel, and other prophets.¹ In numerous studies, commentators have pointed out these intertextual links, while disagreeing on the exact nature of their reemployment. They wonder if the author is being ironic, satirical, parodic, allegorical, or didactic.²

Still, the story of Jonah also reads like a maritime tale whose meaning might be enriched and its themes emerge in bolder relief, were it set against its Mediterranean background, especially Greek lore. Wedged between the empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, ancient Israel was also a Mediterranean country, in contact by sea from the earliest times with Greek civilization, among other maritime powers. While the cultural significance of this proximity has been recognized by some XIXth and early XXth century scholars, the use of the comparative method often has been too sweeping and led at times to reductive results.

In recent times, relatively little attention has been paid to the connections that the Jonah story may have to Greek tales, apart from a few notable recent and not so recent exceptions; elements of the legend of Heracles and the story of Perseus and Andromeda, for instance, are strikingly similar, as

¹See A. Feuillet, "Les sources du livre de Jonas," *Revue biblique* 54 (1947) 161-86; P. L. Trible, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia, 1963) 107-8, 110-12; J. Sasson, *Jonah. A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (The Anchor Bible, 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990) passim.

²See Sasson, op. cit., pp. 331-40.

Cyril of Alexandria and Jerome had already noted.³ In the end, though, these parallels have failed to impress most exegetes, who have concluded that they are not helpful in the interpretation of the book.

Yet, an interesting and hitherto little explored avenue is the puzzling parallels the book of Jonah presents with the story of Jason and other elements of the Argonauts' story. The parallel between Jason and Jonah, not mentioned by early Jewish or Christian writers, has been evoked by a few classicists at the beginning of this century, because of an unusual representation of Jason found in 1833 in Caere (Cerveteri). Their comments are very brief, however, usually framed within a very broad comparative format, and without seeing and developing any analysis of the details that show the extent of cultural interaction.⁴ Furthermore, the possible connection between the two stories seems to have been long since forgotten and has not drawn any attention from commentators of the text in the past sixty years.⁵

What I propose herein is to reexamine the parallels between Jonah and Jason. In particular, I hope to show how the author of Jonah plays with one of the variants of the story of Jason, or that Jonah's story, at the very least, can be placed within the nebula of variants of Jason's tale. The saga of the Argonauts seems to have been widespread in oral, written, and pictorial forms, while numerous representations of various elements of their story, conveniently gathered now in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*,⁶ are sufficient proof of its diffusion around the Mediterranean. Many stories attached to Jason as a kind of patron of navigators circulated widely. The differences to be found in the written versions of Pindar (518–438 BCE), Euripides (ca. 485–ca. 406 BCE), Apollonius of Rhodes (third century BCE), Valerius Flaccus (flourished in the first century BCE), and the so-called Orphic Argonautica, attest to the fluidity of a multi-faceted tradition which one imagines to have

³See A. Feuillet, art. cit., p. 162; E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967) mentions also the stories of Arion in Herodotus and Heracles'ed three day sojourn in a sea cave. A. Feuillet, after reviewing the possibilities, thinks that the results are meager and unimportant. P. Tribble reviews all previous proposals, op. cit., pp. 127–52.

⁴The most important work is by H. Schmidt: *Jona. Eine Untersuchung zum vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1907), pp. 22–23. As the title indicates, this is a broad comparative study which, in the opinion of Y. M. Duval, *Le livre de Jonas dans la littérature chrétienne grecque et latine* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1973), is carried too far. Flasch, *Angebliche Argonautenbilder* (Munich: F. Straub, 1870); Welcker, *Alte Denkmäler*; Radermacher, *Mythos und Sage bei den Griechen* (Leipzig: R.M. Rohrer, 1938), p. 183; also *Das Jenseits im Mythos der Hellenen*, pp. 67ff.); Kerényi, in *The Heroes of the Greeks* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1959).

⁵Not in Feuillet or in Sasson. The work of H. Schmidt (above, note 4) is not mentioned in J. Sasson's bibliography.

⁶Abbreviated as *LIMC* from now on, vol. V, books 1 and 2, see under Jason.

also been a living, ever-changing, oral tradition. One may suppose that from an early date, written, oral, and iconographic versions influenced each other in multiple ways.

My thesis, therefore, is that the author of the Jonah tale used bits of this widely circulating oral cycle within the framework of his own Hebrew tradition. His is a highly literate story, the work of a writer who used chiasmic structures, repeats, puns, and ironic twists. In their re-employment in the Hebrew story, the elements of the tale of the Argonauts appear only as vestiges, although I think they are more significant than has been granted until now.⁷ At a minimum, their selection and the way in which they are recast suggest an anti-polytheistic attitude turned against Ionians, as well as against the more obvious Ninevites. Many more elements are at work than were previously thought to be, as the study of parts of the story, especially philological and iconographic aspects, will soon make clear—an important consideration for the on-going debate on the nature and complexity of cultural borrowings. Such study also sheds some light on the extent of Near Eastern influence on early Greek culture.⁸

The argument will proceed as follows. First, after a rapid synopsis of the stories, the mythological motifs they have in common will be laid out in detail. Secondly, I will propose an explanation for their use and shape in Jonah. Finally, it will be shown that the use of some of these common themes persisted in the later (mostly Christian) iconography of Jonah.

THE STORIES

In the extant written versions of the Argonauts' tale, Jason, son of Aeson, and great-grandson of Aeolus the wind, is given by his rival Pelias the impossible task of bringing back the Golden Fleece from Colchis. This is the fleece of a ram which was sacrificed after saving Phrixus, in a story reminiscent of the Aqedah in Genesis 22. The Golden Fleece is hanging on a tree in Ares' sacred wood in Colchis, Aetes' kingdom, and is guarded by a never-sleeping dragon. At Jason's call, the bravest of the Greeks hurry to the Argo, a ship built for Jason by Argos, with Athena's help. On their way to Colchis, the country of the sunrise in the Orient, the Greeks meet with many challenges. The greatest danger they encounter in trying to reach their goal is a stormy sea in which they must pass through the shifting or clashing rocks, the *Planctae*

⁷J. Sasson speaks of "vestiges of tales" but does not specify their origin (pp. 16-18).

⁸A question addressed, among others, by W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press) 1992, about the archaic period. The book appeared in German in 1984.

or Symplegades, which the sea alternately pushes apart and brings together. Once in Colchis, they ask king Aeetes for the Fleece. He promises it to Jason, provided the latter can subjugate the brazen-hoofed and fire-breathing bulls, plow a field, and sow the teeth of the local dragon. Jason manages these feats with the crucial help of the king's daughter, Medea. Because Aeetes goes back on his word, Jason sets out to steal the Golden Fleece. He succeeds, again with the help of Medea, who puts the ever-watching dragon to sleep with a magic potion. The Argonauts then flee with the Fleece and the king's daughter.

Jonah's tribulations, in contrast to Jason's, begin with a divine call. The task proposed by God to the hero of the book of Jonah is to bring a divine warning to the traditional enemy of Israel. However, rather than obeying, Jonah flees to the other end of the world, on a ship going to Tarshish. During the storm caused by God, the pagan crew, in great fear, prove to be respectful of all gods, especially Jonah's, and helpful to the hero. Jonah tells them he is the cause of the storm and following his advice, they reluctantly throw him overboard. He is swallowed by a large fish, kept in its entrails for three days, and finally vomited out onto dry land, after a long prayer which he expresses in the form of a psalm.

God reiterates his call, in spare words, and Jonah goes to Nineveh where he reluctantly announces the oracle, insisting on the impending doom. The oracle has been barely broadcast—Jonah has walked but one day in a city “of three days”—yet its call is immediately heeded by the Ninevites, and even more surprisingly, by the king who, though hardly informed of it, takes sackcloth and begins to fast. He orders all his subjects, even animals, to do likewise, in the hope of turning away God's anger.

God's anger gives way to mercy, which in turn makes Jonah very angry. He storms out of Nineveh, builds a hut wherein he waits to see what will happen. Overnight, God makes a miraculous tree grow; Jonah finds its shade soothing and pleasant. Next, God sends a worm which causes the tree to die and a hot wind which makes Jonah wish for death. In the ensuing discussion between God and Jonah, God asserts that his concern for the Ninevites is at least as valid as that of Jonah for the shade tree. The story ends abruptly, without indicating whether Jonah accepts God's point of view or not.

MOTIFS COMMON TO THE ARGONAUTICA AND JONAH

Several parallel motifs are of considerable significance in both stories: the names of the heroes, the presence of a dove, the idea of “fleeing” like the wind and causing a storm, the attitude of the sailors, the presence of a sea-monster

or dragon threatening the hero or swallowing him, and the form and meaning of the difficult word *kikayon*. Looking at these themes and motifs reciprocally illuminates both accounts.

NAMES

First of all, the names of the two sea adventurers appear to be strikingly similar, at least in Greek. Jonah's name in Hebrew, *Yônah*, when transliterated in Greek as *Yônas*, can easily be seen as a metathesis of *Iasôn*. Whether that was a factor in the author's choice of a name cannot be known. But it is curious to read in the twelfth-century commentator Eustathius that an ancient tradition thought the name Jason was a metathesis of his own father's name, *Aisôn*.⁹ The fluidity of this name, together with the personality of the hero, may explain why Jason was one of several Greek names often used by Jews in Palestine, Egypt, and Cyrenaica, at least from the third century BCE on.¹⁰ Regarding Cyrenaica, it is notable that in some of the many variants on the return of the Argonauts,¹¹ the latter reach Africa and meet a Triton, the merman of pre-Greek mythology, who announces to them that Cyrene would be the possession of their descendants. The legends and the name of a heroic sailor circumnavigating the sea on the first mythic long-ship would have appealed to Jews and other peoples who were settling around the Mediterranean sea. This interest is still in evidence at the time of the so-called 'ecTomb of Jason'ee in Jerusalem, which is dated to the beginning of the first century BCE and contains a Greek inscription and the drawing of a military ship.¹²

DOVES

The second element in the comparison of the two stories concerns the name of Jonah alone. *Yônah* in Hebrew means 'dove,' one of the birds used in very ancient sailing practice to guide lost sailors to land, as we see both in

⁹Eustathius, *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes* (M. Van der Valk, Leiden: Brill, vol. 1, 1971), p.773, lines 15-17.

¹⁰See *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, vol. 3 (1964), p. 179, 9 mentions. For Cyrenaica, see index in W. Horbury and D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 326. Also: A. Lalonde, "La Cyrénaïque romaine des origines à la fin des Sévères (96 av. J.-C.-235 ap. J.-C.)," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, vol. II/10.1 (1988), p. 1045. Note the names of high priests under Antiochos IV: Onias, then his brother Jason, then Menelas.

¹¹In Pindar, *Pyth.* 4.

¹²See *The New Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem/New York: Israel Exploration Society and Carta; Simon and Schuster, 1993), p. 751.

the story of Noah and the saga of Jason and the Argonauts.¹³ When the Argonauts arrive at the Clashing Rocks (the Symplegades) and are unable to find a way out, Phineus, a king-prophet hunted by the Harpies (perhaps because he has betrayed divine secrets), advises the heroes to release a dove to see if it will go through (The story uses an old theme which appears already in a different form in the *Odyssey*: the flock of doves bringing ambrosia to Zeus must also go through the Planctae but invariably one dove is lost). The *Argo* eventually follows the dove; bird and ship find a passage through the rocks, but not without leaving a few vestiges behind them 'fzone, its feathers and the other, pieces of rigging. In other variants of the story, doves also play an important role; in Virgil's *Aeneid*, for instance, two doves lead Aeneas and the Sybil to the Golden Fleece hanging in a tree.¹⁴ In other texts, the prophecies uttered by an oracular oak are reported by doves.¹⁵

BOREAS THE FLEEING WIND

There is a further connection to Phineus, who in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, is pursued by the vengeful Harpies because he has betrayed prophetic secrets. After promising the Argonauts that he will help them with his prophetic gifts, he is delivered from his pursuers by the Boreads, the "fleers," sons of Boreas, the northern wind that brings the worst storms at sea.¹⁶ The story of Jonah begins very abruptly with his flight, right after God's command that he go and deliver his oracle to Nineveh. Jonah betrays nothing of the divine message entrusted to him, but he flees to avoid its accomplishment (as he sees it), and does so without explanation. He flees from the consequences of the message he has received but, paradoxically, not the structure of prophetic tales, in which one expects failure. In these stories, the structure is as follows: the more trustworthy the prophets, the less willing to hear them their audience will be. Above all, kings are expected to resist the message and punish the messenger, thereby increasing the element of veracity for the audience of the story. In fear of retaliation, Elijah flees to the Horeb after his victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, walks one day in the desert, sits under a broom tree, and asks for death, saying: "Israel has forsaken the covenant, slain prophets,

¹³Apollonius, *Argonautica* 2.317f.; 2.555f. The use of doves may have been a most ancient technique. It is not documented in J. Rougé, *La marine de l'antiquité* (Paris: P.U.F., 1975), or in L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974).

¹⁴*Aeneid* 6.190f.

¹⁵Soph. *Trachiniae* 169f.; Servius, *In Aeneidem* 3.466.

¹⁶Bora is still the name of a northern wind coming from Dalmatia and causing storms in the Adriatic Sea: J. Rougé, *La marine de l'antiquité* (Paris: P.U.F., 1975), 24. The Boreads are pictured as winged creatures, often naked, as in *LIMC* III/1 (1986), pp. 126-33.

and I, even I only, am left.”¹⁷ In the second part of his adventure, Jonah also flees to an analogue of the desert, that is, a dry place, with wind, as opposed to the fluid and humid vastness stirred up by storm winds. But he is not pursued. Jonah does what prophets (and Jason and his friends) are supposed to do, namely, he flees, but for no apparent reason. He is pushed by rhetorical reason alone, the force of the text and previous biblical stories.

The puzzling motif of Jonah’s flight, however, is connected to the Argonautic cycle of stories in two ways. First of all, it indirectly creates a storm caused by God’s great wind, in Hebrew *ruah gdolah*. Secondly, the Hebrew word for fleeing in Jonah 1.2, *boreah*, corresponds closely to the name of Boreas, the storm god and father of the Boreads. A “fleeing” sea creature, a leviathan, actually appears in the texts of Ras Shamra and is mentioned in Isaiah 27:1 and Job 26:13. It is a sea monster originating in the primordial chaos and threatening chaos. In the story of Jonah, however, the “fleeing” is separated from the monster, yet still connected to a storm. I propose therefore that the Greek word Boreas has a Semitic origin, perhaps the Ugaritic *boreah*. Chantraine’s *Dictionnaire étymologique du grec classique* gives no sure origin for the Greek word, but the presence of other Argonautic elements in the story of Jonah makes it distinctly possible that mythical elements surrounding Boreas were borrowed by the Greeks, together with the name, from Semitic mythology. The stories surrounding this divinity or hero associated with storms were adopted at a much earlier stage, perhaps at the end of the second millennium before our era. The sound change from a pharyngeal to an alveolar fricative (“ḥeth” to “s”) is natural, since Greek lacked the former (a later example of this sound change appears in one of Jerome’s letters, in which he speaks of a Silas whose Hebrew name is Shaloh).¹⁸

SAILORS

In Greek stories and in ancient folklore in general, sailors had a terrible reputation. It was thought that they were only after passengers’ possessions and money, which they could try to obtain, for example, by forcing a victim to sign a will in their favor before throwing the person into the sea. The sailors in the Argonauts’ saga are of an heroic type and do not do this. They are dangerous, however; in the later Argonautica Orphica, these adventurers behave according to expectations and become angry at Medea, because she has been denounced by the speaking or prophesying beam of the Argo. They are ready to throw her to the fish but Jason calms them in time to save her.¹⁸

¹⁷ 1 Kings 19:10. The whole story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18:20-40.

¹⁸ AO 1155-77.

In a different story reported by Herodotus, sailors behave also as expected, throwing Arion of Mytilene overboard, out of greed for his money and possessions. He is saved by a dolphin which is sensitive to his poetic and musical gifts.¹⁹

By analogy, then, the much debated psalm in the book of Jonah could be, among other things, a parody of widely known stories about music-loving animal helpers. In any case, Jonah's sailor companions, contrary to what an ancient audience would expect, are respectful, tame, and even unselfish, though the reason for their civility may be simply a healthy fear of Jonah's God. Here is a man who, seemingly imprudently or rashly, has hired the whole ship and paid in advance, an action noted as unusual in talmudic literature.²⁰ He is a foreigner, alone, without protector or friend, at the mercy of a whole crew against whom he could never retaliate. Yet, these rough fellows not only do not attempt to kill him out of greed, but they do a most dangerous thing in stormy weather: they try to bring the ship to shore to save their onerous passenger.²¹

According to a literal interpretation of his Hebrew name, Jonah is a "dove" kept in the hold of the ship, something light and capable of flight. Yet, he engages in a downward movement, going down to Jaffa, into the ship, then down into its hold, where he falls into a deep sleep (*wayyerâdam*, a word also evoking, phonetically at least, a downward movement), and finally down into the great fish. Normally, passengers and crew were on the deck. The Hebrew text suggests that Jonah himself becomes part of the cargo; he is a piece of the ballast, often merchandise but normally stones or sand, kept in the depths of the hold of the ship. Surely, he is stowed in the most dangerous place of the ship, among stones and heavy cargo which could crush him in a storm. One might think of him as being in the same position as the oak beam placed by Athena Pallas in the Argo, a beam which occasionally utters "true" prophecies or predictions. The beam reveals Zeus' anger and invites the heroes to purify themselves,²² or warns that they are being pursued by the Erinyes, who avenge wrongs, especially murders committed among kinsmen.²³ Another similarity

¹⁹Herodotus, *History* 1.4. Parallel evoked by E. Bickerman, among others (see note 3 above).

²⁰*bNedarim* 38a; *PRE* 10. Tradition hesitates about the nature of the payment: Jonah's passage alone, or the value of the entire cargo, a problem evident in the difference between *MT* and *LXX*, and which puzzled Jerome, *In Ionam* 1.3. See Y. M. Duval, *Le livre de Jonas dans la littérature chrétienne grecque et latine* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, vol. 1, 1973), p. 100, n. 158, following L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6, p. 349, n. 28.

²¹As noted by J. Sasson, *Jonah* (New York: Doubleday, The Anchor Bible, 1990), 141-42.

²²*AO* 1157; Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 4.580-91.

²³*AO* 1159.

is that in helping the crew, and being “helped” by them, Jonah is acting like Phineus the seer, already mentioned above, whom the Argonauts—specifically the Boreads, Calais and Zetes, sons of Boreas—help after receiving precious information from him.²⁴

SEA-MONSTERS

There is no musically enchanted dolphin in the book of Jonah, but a large fish or *ketos* who swallows and then vomits up the hero. Neither is there a leviathan or dolphin in the extant textual variants of Jason’s odyssey. But Jason does fight a sea- or land-monster in several of the variants of the tale, often represented on vases, in actions similar to those of Heracles.²⁵

Or in scenes found widespread around the Mediterranean, Jason emerges from a coiled, upright serpent or monster.²⁶ It is in this context that earlier scholars briefly noted the connection with Jonah. In particular, a beautiful red-figured cup found at Cerveteri (Caere) in 1833 and dated from the beginning of the fifth century BCE (490–475) shows a scaly and wide-eyed monster vomiting a limp, naked, bearded, and long-haired Jason (see plate). To the right of the scene is Athena, with spear in her right hand, bird in her left, and perhaps looking into the eyes of the dragon, whom she has commanded to disgorge Jason.²⁷ Behind the dragon’s head, at left, the Golden Fleece hangs as limp as Jason, on a tree laden with fruit (apples?). It is most natural to conceive of this monster as a sea-monster, as did A. Flasch and other scholars,²⁸ given the position of Cerveteri, an Etruscan sea-port which would be understandably interested in Jason’s Gesti as those of the first navigator. An abundance of maritime themes at the place is evidence of this interest. The Boreads themselves do not appear to be represented at Caere but they figure prominently in many other places, for instance, in Laconia.²⁹

This cup has been widely commented upon in the past, but has remained unnoticed, as far as I am aware, by biblical commentators. Late XIXth and

²⁴*Argonautica* 2.172–530.

²⁵Like Heracles, who fights a sea-monster to save Hesione, for instance; see E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, p. 11.

²⁶*LIMC* V/2 (1990), p. 427, no. 30: seventh century scene, with Jason long-haired and bearded; p. 428, no. 34.

²⁷Reproduced in color in P. E. Arias and M. Hirmer, *Le vase grec* (Paris: Flammarion, 1962), fig. 147 (Italian original 1962. Also English translation, with marked differences). Also in H. Schmidt, op. cit., p. 23; Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks*, fig. 62; now in *LIMC*, vol. V/2, p. 428 (fig. Iason 32).

²⁸Flasch, *Angebliche Argonautenbilder* (Munich: F. Straub, 1870), p. 27.

²⁹See Laconian iconography. Check *LIMC* on Boreadae.

turn-of-the-century commentators offer varying interpretations of this scene. A. Flasch thinks that the dragon is alive, forced to disgorge a passive Jason, which is also my interpretation.³⁰ Flasch is followed by H. Schmidt and others, e.g. Pfuhl and Kerényi. Vian, in his edition of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, mentions the cup without comment. M. Lawrence, after E. Pfuhl and K. Kerényi, thinks it is a sea-monster "forced by Athena to disgorge Jason [...] a rare variant of the famous story."³¹ The rest of Lawrence's article deals with the iconography of Jonah's story. But the commentary of P. E. Arias and M. Hirmer on Athena is inexact. They think that Athena, with owl, is looking with surprise at Jason coming out of the dragon's mouth.³²

It is interesting to discover that a version of Jason's story had Athena as his helper, rescuing him from death, which is perhaps closer to the role of the Hebrew God in the book of Jonah. The bird she carries on her left hand, however, is not necessarily the usual owl, as all commentators seem to identify it,³³ but could actually be a dove (or a sea bird). Athena's owl is usually represented with its head turned outward, facing the viewer, at least in all images of her catalogued in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*.³⁴ On the Caere cup, the bird has a straight beak and a more sloping body. However, since ornithological details may not have been the concern of the vase painters, the idea of a dove can only remain a suggestion. The role played by doves in reporting prophecies and helping heroes has been mentioned above: in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, the crew of the *Argo* takes along a dove in a cage. They also are featured in several illustrations of the episode of the capture of the fleece.³⁵

³⁰ *Angebliche Argonautenbilder* (Munich: F. Straub, 1870), chapter 3, p. 25. See also Radermacher, *Das Jenseits im Mythos der Hellenen*, p. 67. But see Welcker, *Alte Denkmäler*, p. 378.

³¹ "Ships, monsters and Jonah," *American Journal of Archaeology* 66 (1962), 294, pl. 78, fig. 7. She is following E. Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen*, vol. 3, (Munich, 1923), pl. 164, no. 467; and K. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (1959), fig. 62, pp. 264–65, for a commentary on the Cerveteri vase.

³² "A l'intérieur, Athena casquée, armée de l'égide et de la lance, la chouette dans la main droite, assiste, étonnée, à l'approche du héros Jason (*Iason*) qui sort de la gueule ouverte du dragon."

³³ P. E. Arias and M. Hirmer, *Le vase grec* (Paris: Flammarion, 1962), fig. 147 and p. 80 for a brief commentary.

³⁴ *LIMC* II/1 (1984) 975-76; II/2 (1984) No. 187, etc.

³⁵ A fifth to fourth century BCE Greek volute-krater features doves in two trees connected with the Jason story: *LIMC* V/2 (1990), Iason 17. The Golden Fleece hangs from an olive-tree, to the left, and a dragon is coiled around the trunk of an apple-tree (?) to the right.

THE KIKAYON

In the second part of Jonah's story, the word *kikayon* is a famous *hapax legomenon* which, in its context, refers to a plant, with later tradition hesitating between a type of gourd and *ricinus communis* (castor oil).³⁶ Many interesting explanations have been offered, none of them entirely convincing.³⁷ No one seems to have noticed, however, that this word sounds very much like the brew prepared by Medea, *kukeon* or *kukaon* (from the verb *kukaô*, to stir up, to create confusion), in Apollonius' version and in the *Argonautica Orphica*.³⁸ Here, a mysterious potion, a mixture made of medicinal and dangerous plants,³⁹ is used by Medea to put to sleep the serpent or dragon guarding the tree where the fleece was hanging. In Apollonius, Medea rubs the head of the monster with the potion and sprinkles it to achieve the same result. In some later (Roman) representations, she is shown presenting a vial to the serpent coiled around the tree, while Jason, unseen, grabs the Golden Fleece. The *kukaon* or *kikaon* is also the name of the drink of barley gruel and water, associated with Eleusinian mysteries,⁴⁰ where perhaps the role of the python had been similar to that of the sea monster in ancient versions of the tradition. The problem is that the *kikayon* of the Hebrew story is obviously a fast-growing plant, not a potion or brew. Yet, the Greek magic mixture is clearly made with pharmacological plants. Furthermore, whatever the Hebrew *kikayon* denotes, it acts as an emetic or aims at making Jonah rid himself of his anger, in a punning parallel with his disgorgement from the fish. I would like to suggest, then, that the *kikayon* of the book of Jonah may have lost its original meaning but retained the idea of a magic act, perhaps together with the emetic or purging virtue of the original, suggested by the Hebrew sound (*wayaqe'* in Jonah 2.11, from the verb *qi'*) associated later with other plants, such as the *ricinus*. In the Hebrew text also, the dragon has been reduced to a worm, an annoyance whose night work, however, makes Jonah wish for death. In the second part of Jonah's story, there is no magician (daughter of a king) or any dragon to be put to sleep. There is, however, a gleeful and absurd reduction of the Greek monster to the size of a worm and the fire-breathing of an irate Jonah whom God attempts to calm down.

³⁶Note that Aquila and Theodotion transcribed the word, *kikeôna* (Sasson, p. 292).

³⁷Surveyed and evaluated by B. P. Robertson, "Jonah's Qiqayon Plant," *ZATW* 97 (1985) 390-403.

³⁸Not in Pindar, but in several passages of the version in Apollonius of Rhodes and in the *Argonautica Orphica*.

³⁹Note also the tradition of fast-growing trees in the *Argonautica Orphica*.

⁴⁰See A. Delatte, "Le Cycéon, breuvage rituel des mystères d'Eleusis," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 32 (1954) 690-748.

THE FUNCTION OF THESE MOTIFS IN JONAH

It is not surprising in itself that motifs and characters known from a version of the story of the Argonauts would appear in the book of Jonah, when one considers how widespread they are in the literary (from the fifth century BCE) and iconographic record (from the eighth century BCE) of the whole Mediterranean region. Furthermore, the Hebrew story is far from being a pale recasting of Jason's adventures. First of all, the related elements of flight and storm complicate the picture, in that Semitic versions of this story had been circulating for an even longer time, and had themselves been borrowed by the earliest Greek settlers of the Mediterranean. The Greeks seem to have borrowed a Boreas and sea-monsters at an early date. Textual and pictorial materials show that Greeks took over stories of sea-monsters from the East in the early, so-called "orientalizing" period.⁴¹ Behind Jonah's story and its vestigial echoes of Jason and the Argonauts, there are remains of an older, more widely told story of a fight between a god and a sea-monster.⁴² These stories all seem to belong to the category of tales of voyages to the netherworld.⁴³ Secondly, the creator of Jonah appears to be playing in a very conscious manner with some of the elements and motifs of the Greek story, inverting some, laminating others, or fusing them with Hebrew themes on the basis of linguistic or structural similarities.

One may begin with the complex geography of the Argonauts' saga, which has been drastically simplified in the story of Jonah, with only Tarshish and Nineveh mentioned as presumably summarizing the known world contained between these extremities. And then there is, at least at a superficial level, the beneficial dove of the Argonauts' tale which is turned into an occasion of trouble for the sailors of the Hebrew story. At a deeper level, however, it causes the conversion of the crew, who sacrifice to the proper god after they have been saved. Throughout the ordeal they act civilly, even generously,

⁴¹K. Shepard, *The Fish-Tailed Monster in Greek and Etruscan Art* (New York and Menasha, Wisc.: Privately printed and G. Banta Co., 1940), 4-9, for mermen, 10-11, 19, 43-44 for discussion of the origins of Skylla, a sea-monster popular in the fifth century BCE. There is no mention of Jonah in this work. See also G. Ahlberg-Cornell, *Heracles and the Sea-Monster in Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painting* (Stockholm: P. Åströms Förlag, 1984), 17, for Near Eastern influence on Greek art in the middle of the seventh century BCE. This author suspects Corinth had a special role in the cultural transmission in that period. See W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴²See J. Fontenrose, *Python. A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1959), 121-45, esp. 133-34; 143-45.

⁴³Fontenrose, *ibid.*, p. 485.

though not heroically, instead of showing the greed and lack of courage which are their normal attributes, as in the much later and edifying story of Paul of Tarsus' shipwreck in *Acts* 27.⁴⁴

The storm is not a dangerous moment for Jonah but rather simply a means to return the hero to the land he should not have left. Instead of being sent away on a highly risky journey by a jealous or fretful king figure, he chooses to bring his fate upon himself. The king in the second part of the story is not a frightening or vengeful character bent on eliminating or testing the hero or prophet, as are Pelias, Aeetes, or even Jezebel in Elijah's story. Rather, he is most pliable, a keen listener, obedient and prompt to repent. The never-sleeping dragon guarding the Golden Fleece has been miniaturized and become a worm. I have suggested above that some of its characteristics have been given to Jonah himself, who watches intently over the city he wishes to see destroyed. Like the dragon preventing Jason's possession of the wondrous Fleece (a magical remain of a foundational sacrifice), Jonah fiercely blocks access to divine mercy. He is willing to face God in hot anger and apparently knowing no reason. The pharmaceutical mixture which Medea uses to put the monster to sleep has changed in form but retained its soothing quality for the overheated Jonah. Yet, the leafy *kikayon* remains somewhat of a conundrum. In the later iconography to be mentioned below, Jonah is seen resting under, or surrounded by, a large-leafed bush which resembles some of the earlier images of the tree in which Jason finds the Golden Fleece. Perhaps tree and magic mixture have been associated from the earliest times.

The question now is whether this recasting of the Greek story has been done simply in jest, or is part of a more complex structure. The comparison of certain themes present in both stories may throw some light on this problem. Jason's calm, contrasted with Aeetes' anger, parallels Jonah's extraordinary passivity. Jason needs assistance at every crucial turn of the story and appears weak, a kind of anti-hero.⁴⁵ But Jonah's passivity does not stem from meekness, rather it comes from his extreme view of prophecy. Medea's night monologue in Apollonius' *Argonautica* 3.771ff., when she is wavering in her desire to help Jason tame Aeetes' monstrous bulls, presents interesting parallels to that of Jonah. Perhaps it is not overly speculative to say that the way in which Apollonius presents hellenism as immensely seductive to Medea, daughter of a tyrant, has its counterpart in the Hebrew author's idea of a

⁴⁴On which see G. B. Miles and G. Trompf, "Luke and Antiphon: The Theology of Acts 27-28 in the Light of Pagan Beliefs About Divine Retribution, Pollution, and Shipwreck," *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976) 259-67.

⁴⁵For Jason as anti-hero, see G. Lawall, "Apollonius' *Argonautica*: Jason as Anti-Hero," *Yale Classical Studies* 19 (1966) 119-69.

natural attraction that pagan sailors, and Nineveh's king and people feel for the Jewish God. This appeal has little to do with Nineveh, whose historical kingship ended at a much earlier time than the composition of this story, but would make sense in an atmosphere of competition between Hebrew and Greek cultures. The author might be inverting the image of attraction presented by Greek civilization and so present foreigners suitably attracted to the Hebrew divinity when they are Greeks (the sailors?), and stupidly so when they are Ninevites.

Recent studies of the book of Jonah, while discovering new layers of meaning in the story, have exposed the complex structure of the narrative.⁴⁶ They reinforce the notion that the work is an ironic parable, one with a pointed question. The parallels we have detected between the story of Jonah and that of Jason point even more strongly in the same direction. To the irony underlined by several commentators,⁴⁷ it is possible to add a new twist, namely that Nineveh encompasses the 'Ionians' also. Nineveh and *Yavan* sound similar, as do *Yônah* the "dove", *Yôniyah* the ship, and Ionia the region. Phonetically as well as mythopoetically, it appears that the author of the book of Jonah is playing with a variant or variants of Jason's adventures as told in Greek and other languages, selecting some of its motifs or sounds and refashioning them for altogether different purposes, all the while with a view to entertain. The author manipulated a myth which had become alien and re-elaborated parts of it in order to reflect on and reinforce his own culture.⁴⁸ The hero's name, a storm caused by a fleeing/northern wind, uncontentious sailors, a sea-monster swallowing and regurgitating the hero under divine command, a monster diminished to worm size in the second part, a magic emetic—all these serve the author's meaning.

If it is true that the element of mockery of the Greeks is part of this story, then all the more reason to set aside the view of the book of Jonah as a didactic parable teaching that divine compassion knows no boundaries and is universal.⁴⁹ Christian exegetes have often propounded a universalistic

⁴⁶Especially J. Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (1976); D. L. Christensen, "The Song of Jonah: A Metrical Analysis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985) 217–31.

⁴⁷On Jonah as a parody: A. Band, "Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody," *Proof-texts* 10 (1990) 177–195, who may be exaggerating the comic effect. Band is in substantial agreement with J. Miles especially, M. Burrows, B. Halpern and R. Friedman, J. C. Hulbert, J. Ackerman and others. The parodic interpretation has been strongly opposed by several authors, esp. A. Berlin.

⁴⁸Cf. E. Gruen, "Cultural Fictions and Cultural Identity," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 123 (1993) 1–14.

⁴⁹For instance, this is considered the main point of the story in *The New Jerome Biblical*

interpretation, put forward by Jerome, for instance, and especially by Ephrem the Syrian, who had his own neighborly reasons to offer a literal interpretation and present the Ninevites in a flattering light.⁵⁰ Philo of Alexandria could have been expected to offer this kind of interpretation but it is absent from his commentaries on Jonah.⁵¹

In line with tradition, I would argue rather that the problem posed by God's boundless compassion is the primary subject of this story. The question is framed in an ironic and even tragic mode, in spite of the author's apparently jocular manner. The geographical or ethnical considerations on the bounds of divine compassion which later (Christian) interpretation found congenial add a new, secondary dimension to the original story, the main point of which is to highlight a debate or question intrinsic to Israel. It is the answer to that question, in turn, which may be given universal significance.

As commentaries have long shown, the book of Jonah presents a reflection on the dangers of prophecy. In Israel, oracles of doom had long before given place to conditional oracles, which were better suited to the vagaries of historical circumstances. But the conditions for belief in conditional oracles appear to have developed also in the Graeco-Roman world. Even though on the surface they differ in mode, goals, and significance, a self-questioning or ironic discourse on prophetic traditions arose in both cultural areas.⁵² Similar questions were raised in Hebrew and Greek stories regarding the functioning of divine justice and mercy and their mechanism. This is not to say that the Greek and Hebrew Weltanschauungen of the time were identical. Rather their differences are to be sought at another level, in the tautness of the question that the author is asking Israel, as will presently be seen. This tenseness, I suggest, stems from the structure of the Hebrew faith, in which the dialogue regarding the mechanisms of history was projected as being conducted with a God who is creator of the universe, and therefore free and totally gracious, above any contingency. This divinity might well decide to reverse or change the flow of nature or history, thus lifting the burden of fatality. From the prophet's point of view, however, the kind of conditional oracles that the nature of the divinity required made the dangers of life altogether too predictable.

Yet, the story of Jonah contains a more poignant idea than a concern for

Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 580–84.

⁵⁰See E.E. Urbach, "Tshuvat anshey Nineveh" *Tarbiz* 20 (1959) 119–20.

⁵¹Duval, vol 1, p. 77. See F. Siegert, *Drei hellenistisch-jüdische Predigten* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum NT, vol. 61, Mohr: Tübingen, 1992).

⁵²See E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (1967), 29–33, where he explains the evolution of oracles of doom (*fata denuntiativa*) and conditional prophecies.

the prophet's thorny position. If the tale places its hero Jonah in a rhetoric of prophecy that is problematic, it also implies a basic questioning of Israel's relation to God. Jonah is apparently caught in a dilemma between basic tenets of Israel's faith whose consequences the author exaggerates to bring them into clear conflict. Jonah is shown as trapped between two extreme ideas: one is the notion of the automaticity, swiftness, and infinite range of God's justice and anger in response to Israel's failures; the other is its converse, namely the automaticity, and infinite patience, of divine compassion.

One may imagine the ancient Hebrew or Judaeian audience of the story smiling at the Ninevites' (or Ionians') expense, for how could the latter be so dense as to think of divine mercy as remotely possible for them? Furthermore, how could this compassion be exercised towards people who, in Israel's estimation, did not even know the boundaries of sinful action and included in it their domestic herds? Here, there may have been a dark joke or innuendo, still having force for later Jewish commentators, regarding the sexual mores of Ninevites (or Greeks/Ionians; it may have been a joke often reciprocated). But Nineveh is the converse of Israel, where prophetic and Deuteronomistic traditions would have it that conversion had hardly ever been completed in the past, or that it had been accomplished by a few rare individuals, and specifically not by kings, who needed repeated warnings in the normal discourse of prophecy.

The story contains a logical exercise or equation which can be formulated as follows: If a conversion which is rhetorically and historically wrong—no effort by the “prophet;” too obedient a king; in Nineveh the paradigmatic enemy—manages to bring about the immediate and full benefits of divine mercy, then shouldn't the listeners ask themselves what is the proper dynamics of conversion and mercy? “How much” conversion is actually necessary, what is the threshold for mercy to operate, and what must one do, short of total conversion, which is actually so impossible that it looks silly? The author's vision of what a divine determinism would entail is amusing, at least superficially. But this vision of the world is deeply ironic, in that it questions the listeners' ordinary notions, which are of a world bound by determinisms of all kinds, yet freed, even at the most physical level, by the divine word. In the book of Jonah, physical nature is entirely removed from the reach of determinism: storm, fish, worm, are all appointed by divine command. But, and this to me is part of the irony of the book, determinism is applied to the divine sphere. In Greek stories, on the contrary, there is considerable fickleness to be found in the Greek gods. So, here too, the author might be thinking about Greek conceptions of the world, under cover of anti-ninevism. The lesson of the book, if there is one, is the strengthening of “ordinary” or

common perceptions—I mean ordinary for a listener or reader of the biblical stories—not for a non-Hebrew, say a Greek, who precisely has these beliefs, namely that the gods are all powerful, and that nature is essentially ruled by unpredictable gods. The hidden philosophy of the book, to be derived from its ironical posture, would be exactly contrary to its surface story and to popular forms of Greek wisdom. It would be suggesting that there is determinism in nature, but complete divine freedom.

In Greek mythology and theater, the precautions taken to keep the heroes away conspire to bring them back to the center of the drama through a complicated chain of events. The book of Jonah does away with the niceties of the complex mechanism which Greek drama slowly unfolds and presents a hero who, though naked and battered, remains proud before his God.

ECHOES OF JASON IN THE LATER ICONOGRAPHY OF JONAH

Jonah as naked hero features prominently in later Christian iconography. Scholars have shown that ancient versions of sea stories and especially their iconography (for instance combinations of the story of Heracles and Hermione), were integrated more or less successfully in Christian retellings and illustrations of Jonah's story.⁵³ I suggest that among the themes re-employed in this iconography, some of the motifs of the Jason cycle might have an important role which has not been brought to light until now, at least to my knowledge. Motifs which were common to both stories in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (and even before?) are still fused together in the first centuries of our era. I can indicate only briefly some of the parallels and adaptations, however, while hoping that a full study of the representations of Jason and Jonah be undertaken in the future to check the hypothesis.

The transformation of motifs taken from Graeco-Roman depictions of other heroes and their re-employment in Christian and Jewish representations of Jonah have long been noted. For instance, it has been shown that the image on a sarcophagus from Santa Maria Antiqua of a naked Jonah resting languidly under a vine, closely resembles that of Endymion reclining in seemingly beatific pleasure, with his right arm stretched behind his head.⁵⁴ Structurally

⁵³See important pages in Y. M. Duval, *Le livre de Jonas dans la littérature chrétienne grecque et latine* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1973), esp. pp. 13-19 for texts and 19-39 for figurative art.

⁵⁴T. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), fig. 13, and pp. 30-31 (following Von Sybel, see Mathews' note 16). A structurally similar image of Jonah asleep under staked up gourds, with long hair and no beard, appears on a third century (end of the century) fragment of

speaking, however, and without dismissing the aforementioned striking comparison, the presence of a ship, a sea monster to the left (not a whale or fish), a tree (not a gourd?) above Jonah, with a ram and two sheep (?) above him, and a woman standing to his right—all of these elements make sense as the continuation of the Jason imagery. I propose therefore that the artist conflated stock images of both Jason and Endymion. I note also that this paradisiac interpretation of Jonah under the gourd, though in line with the Jewish interpretation of the *sukkah* and the Christian idea of resurrection, and fitting long-standing representations of Endymion and even Jason (there is an Edenic quality to the wood where the latter finds the Golden Fleece), is completely contradictory to the sense one gets of Jonah in the Hebrew story, namely that of an angry and sulking man. Furthermore, in the Biblical story, the episode of the gourd is placed after Jonah goes to Nineveh and is well separated from the storm and disgorgement episode. But in the Jewish or Christian iconography of Jonah, the gourd scene is set close by the ship and sea-monster or whale, and Nineveh is altogether absent. The simplest explanation for this juxtaposition is that painters and sculptors were fitting familiar images from Greek mythology onto Jonah's story.

In one of his letters, Augustine answers, or rather dodges, a curious question asked by a pagan friend of the Carthage priest Deogratias, who is writing to the bishop of Hippo for intellectual ammunition he might use in his discussions with that friend.⁵⁵ The question seems to be occasioned by a representation of Jonah very much like the one described above, and other similar images in which the ocean adventure and the “gourd” scene are juxtaposed. The pagan friend wishes to be enlightened about the meaning of the gourd plant growing above Jonah, who has just been disgorged by the monster.⁵⁶ This pagan man may have heard the biblical story but more certainly he has seen Jonah represented as vomited by a monstrous sea-creature on the seaside, probably naked,⁵⁷ under the gourd. The scenes of the vomiting and the gourd could be kept apart, as in the fourth century mosaic at Aquileia, for instance. Yet there are numerous representations setting both motifs side by side. One could argue that this proximity was a function of artistic convenience alone

a sarcophagus lid in the Louvre museum: see P. Du Bourguet, *Early Christian Art* (New York: Reynal & Co.; William Morrow & Co., 1971), 39.

⁵⁵Letter 102.6; see Y. M. Duval, vol. 1, p. 28.

⁵⁶Augustine, Letter 102.6.30: *Quod sibi etiam vult supra euomitum Ionam cucurbitam natam?*

⁵⁷He mentions the incredible fact that a man could have been swallowed fully clothed by the fish. Nakedness, however, was part of the motif of the shipwrecked victim, and applied to Jason as well as to Jonah.

but it makes good sense to see in it the direct influence of the figurative Jason cycle.

A proper elucidation of the role of the Jason story in these traditions might help to explain some of the questions that ancient representations posed for early Christian interpreters and exhortative preaching. There are curious silences in early Christian teaching regarding, for instance, the treatment of the episode of the gourd, Jonah's nakedness and baldness, which stand out in contrast to the images of Jonah. The latter detail forms an interesting puzzle: compare Jason on the Cerveteri cup, bearded, with long wavy and glistening hair, hanging below him like the fleece, and Jonah. Jason's lustrous hair is also mentioned by Pindar.⁵⁸ Early pictures of Jonah, likewise, show him long-haired, occasionally bearded. An eastern Mediterranean marble figure from the second half of the third century CE, for instance, has a bearded, long-haired and naked Jonah being vomited out of a sea-monster (part whale?).⁵⁹ For the *Midrash on Jonah*, however, the heat inside the monster was so intense that Jonah lost his clothes and his hair. But in this case, it may have been the classical representations of yet another hero, namely Heracles, which brought about the theme of baldness and nakedness (though, as mentioned in a note above, nakedness seems to have been a standard component of any image of shipwrecked victims). As for the gourd usually shown above Jonah, it might have been part of the stock images used for Jason at a very early stage. In an Etruscan bronze mirror of the fifth- or fourth-century BCE, a long-haired Jason (HEIASUN, see plate) emerges from the dragon with sword in his right hand, fleece in his left, surrounded by what appears to be a broad-leafed plant having the shape of a vine and bearing fruit which look like melons.⁶⁰

These are only a few of the iconographic parallels and adaptations. A thorough study of the representations of Jason and Jonah would show in detail in what way century-old images of Jason were attached to Jonah in the first centuries CE. Eventually, though, the Christian messianic interpretations of the Hebrew story asserted their influence and slowly altered the nature and presentation of the repertory of stock images.

To conclude, I note that the persistence of these images and themes over the centuries in a wide cultural area is a striking phenomenon. The cultural bonds between Greece and Israel were stronger than has been thought sometimes, although the borrowings were made in all directions and the resulting knots are near inextricable. Yet I hope to have shown that replacing the sto-

⁵⁸ *Pyth.* 4.82-83.

⁵⁹ P. Du Bourguet, *Early Christian Art*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ *LIMC* V/2 (1990), Iason 35; see also H. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, fig. 5, p. 24.

ries of Jonah and Jason in the wider context of their Mediterranean matrix enriches their meaning and leads serendipitously to new philological observations. Still, the use of widely scattered mythological themes by the author of the book of Jonah does not necessarily mean that the influence of Greek language and institutions was very deep in Israel, even in the last centuries BCE.⁶¹ In fact, the author plays with these heroic stories very much as he questions the Hebrew prophetic accounts. The book might therefore be interpreted as a chapter in the multi-sided resistance to hellenistic culture. It is hoped that a more thorough study of the rhetoric of prophecy in Israel and Greece, together with a fully developed analysis of the iconography of Jason and Jonah, will yield even more assured results in the future.

⁶¹The book was probably written in the fifth or fourth century BCE. But as J. Sasson writes (*op. cit.*, p. 328), this book is not written “in a style favorable to historical inquiry,” and is difficult to date.



FIGURE 1 – *Jason disgorged by the dragon. Douris*