

# “Was This Not My Concern?": Jonah and the Problem of Theodicy

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**Abstract:** If God is truly good, then why did my grandmother die of cancer? Why did I have to bury my child? Why does the darkness overcome so many? These questions typify discussion of theodicy. What we want to know is, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The book of Jonah, however, presents us with the other side of the problem when he cries out at God because God has caused some good thing to happen to bad people in the world. Indeed, what are we to do when God forgives the evildoer? And this was Jonah’s fear from the very beginning:

But it was a great evil to Jonah, and he became angry. So he prayed to Yahweh and said, “Please! Was this not my concern when I was in my country? It is why I hastened to flee to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in covenant faithfulness, and relenting concerning the evil. And now, O Yahweh, please take my life from me, for my death is preferable to my life. (Jonah 4:1–3)

While Jonah doesn’t outright answer why God forgives evil, the book paints a clear enough picture of what it means to struggle with the reality of God’s forgiveness of those who most certainly don’t deserve it. Therefore, Jonah’s contribution to the question of theodicy is crucial for those of us who continue to struggle with the great mystery of the gospel, that God would make siblings out of enemies (Eph 2:15).

**Keywords:** Jonah, Theodicy, Suffering, Evil, Justice, Forgiveness

## INTRODUCTION

In his 1978 article, Terrence Fretheim frames well the role of the book of Jonah in the larger discussion over theodicy: “The stumbling block for the faith of Jonah is not so much some ancient counterpart to the Lisbon earthquake, the visitation of evil upon the innocent, but the Nineveh deliverance, the proffering of divine mercy to those who are evil” (Fretheim 1978, 227). That is, Jonah engages the question of God’s goodness in light of the existence of evil by coming at the question from the opposite angle of books like Harold Kushner’s immensely

popular *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Jonah's concern is not why bad things happen to good people; rather, his concern is why good things happen to bad people. Such a concern was at least common enough in ancient Israel to grant the inclusion of Jonah's wrestling in the Hebrew Scriptures, and I can attest personally to the ongoing significance of questioning God's goodness in light of the prosperity of those who do evil (as could the author of Ps 73).

The present study will tackle Jonah's contribution to theodicy in the following manner. First, it will outline the meaning of theodicy and various approaches to it in the Hebrew Scriptures. This overview is necessarily brief and will serve only to sketch the rough contours of how the authors of the Hebrew Bible sought to "vindicate God and his justice in a world in which there is apparent evil" (Cook 2019 13 n. 16). Second, this paper will examine how Jonah differs from the typical formulation of theodicy, paying particular attention to elements indicating Jonah's struggle not with evil visited upon the righteous but rather with goodness visited upon the unrighteous. This examination of the theodicy's counter-formulation will lead into a discussion of reading Jonah's formulation of theodicy in conversation with other members of the Twelve. Finally, I will conclude the paper with personal reflections on what role Jonah might play in helping modern readers to engage both their own trauma and the trauma of others.

#### THEODICY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The term "theodicy" was first used by Gottfried Leibniz in his 1710 work, *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*. Since then, scholars have proposed variations on an exact definition for the term, though the basic contours of what is meant are consistent. James Crenshaw's definition is representative: "Theodicy is the attempt to defend divine justice in the face of aberrant phenomena that appear to indicate the deity's indifference or hostility toward virtuous people" (Crenshaw 1992, 6:444).

Crenshaw's definition is consistent with what we can call the typical formulation of theodicy in the book that discussions of theodicy most often call to mind: Job.<sup>1</sup> Scholars disagree over the primary concern of the book of Job,<sup>2</sup> but it seems clear from even a cursory reading of the book that its titular character is imminently concerned with the why of his suffering.<sup>3</sup> That is, throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper I am setting aside questions of date, authorship, and composition of the biblical texts discussed and instead reading the Hebrew Scriptures in their final form and in conversation with one another as a collected body of writings. Critical issues are addressed thoroughly in the many biblical commentaries and need not be reexamined here.

<sup>2</sup> For Job's history of interpretation, one can scarcely do better than Seow 2013, 110–248.

<sup>3</sup> A concern shared in the broader ancient Near Eastern culture, as evidenced by works such as the Egyptian "A Dialogue of a Man with His Ba," the Sumerian "Man and His God," and the Babylonian "The Dialogue between a Man and His God."

book Job struggles to reconcile his experience of suffering with the fact that he has lived a righteous life, a characterization with which the narrator agrees, according to the opening verse (“He was a man of complete integrity, who feared God and turned away from evil”; Job 1:1). Job’s friends, on the other hand, propose a variety of reasons for Job’s suffering, all of which seem to be offered for the purpose of justifying God. That is, God is just and would therefore not unduly cause suffering; Job is suffering, and therefore Job must be the cause of his own suffering (see, e.g., Job 4:7–11; 18:5–21; 20:5–29; 36:5–9)—a tidy theodicy (Longman 2012, 54–60, 62–63).

Job, for his part, maintains his innocence throughout; even if he does believe “it is sinners who suffer,” he is not one of them (Longman 2012, 459). After God addresses Job in the epilogue—resulting in Job’s repentance (Job 42:1–6)<sup>4</sup>—God then has strong words for Job’s friends: “After the LORD had finished speaking to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has’” (Job 42:7 CSB).<sup>5</sup> That is, their attempt at theodicy by means of retribution theology has failed, and now they must also repent.<sup>6</sup> The book of Job thus engages a theodicy that lays the blame for suffering at the feet of the sufferer, but the author indicates that this theodicy is insufficient, arguing instead—through Yahweh’s speech in chs. 38–41—that God’s ways are unsearchable.

In sum, Job’s friends valiantly defend God’s goodness in light of human suffering, but the book as a whole leaves readers with the same question as at the start: Why do bad things happen to good people?<sup>7</sup> Because God causes them to happen, it seems. Job’s readers must therefore hold in tension that Job is righteous and that God is sovereign, good, and causes great suffering to Job.<sup>8</sup> Despite

<sup>4</sup> Martin 2018 surveys how various interpreters have understood 42:1–6 and posits that it is Yahweh, not Job, who repents. This is a minority position.

<sup>5</sup> The question of how Job spoke rightly of God is a bit thorny, with commentators offering various opinions of what exactly that phrase means. For an overview of the interpretive possibilities, see Ortlund 2018, esp. 350–53.

<sup>6</sup> As Longman 2012, 459, points out, “Their retribution theology (sinners suffer; therefore sufferers are sinners) was inadequate, and they showed no sign of movement from their position. They did not change their minds at the end of the debate [as Job did]; they simply gave up.”

<sup>7</sup> On the book of Job returning readers’ questions to them, see Saur 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Brenner 1981, 131, notes, “Job never doubts God’s omnipresence or omnipotence—his ability to exercise both good and evil is not questioned.” See also Whybray 1999. Whybray argues that the whole point of the book is to demonstrate God’s sovereignty, not to answer the question of unjust suffering. Not all readers, of course, will agree that God is shown to be sovereign in the book of Job (e.g., Kushner 1979). However, this seems to read against the grain of the book of Job, which presents God as permitting the satan to attack Job in various ways in the earlier chapters of the book (see Page 2007), as supreme over creation in Yahweh’s speeches, as requiring repentance from Job and his friends, and finally as restoring Job in the book’s closing chapter.

the book leaving readers with the same questions with which we started, it makes sense that even today people go to the book of Job to wrestle with suffering. In Job we see the same sort of attempt to find some way to reconcile our perceptions of God with our experience of suffering, and in Job we see a righteous sufferer with whom we can identify—whether rightly or not. Jonah is another, similar voice in the Hebrew Bible that can help modern readers in our wrestling—spiritual and psychological—as it illuminates the prism of theodicy from a slightly different perspective and yet seems to arrive at a similar answer as the book of Job.

There is precedent for reading Jonah and Job together, as scholars have argued that they actually form part of a splinter group from theodicy: antitheodicy. Following Katharine Dell (1997), Stephen Cook (2019, 299–301) points out the “striking thematic similarities” between Jonah and the book of Job, particularly in how the books depict God’s interactions with his interlocutors (Job and Jonah). We argued above that Job’s friends sought to justify God’s actions in the book of Job by trying to convince Job that he sinned: sinners suffer, Job is suffering, ergo Job is a sinner. This theodicy—as all theodicies—is predicated on the view that God is both good and sovereign. The book as a whole, though, maintains God’s goodness and sovereignty while also refusing to legitimize the friends’ theodicy. Jonah, on the other hand, sees the Ninevites as wicked and deserving of suffering, and yet they do not suffer. His problem is not unjust suffering of the righteous (*vis-à-vis* Job); rather, Jonah’s problem is the unjust blessing of the wicked. In the end, neither book “justifies, explains or accepts as meaningful the relationship between God and the suffering of his people” (Cook 2019, 301).

#### THEODICY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

The title of this section admittedly begs the question by assuming that Jonah is about theodicy before demonstrating that it is, in fact, about theodicy. Indeed, T. Desmond Alexander has outlined four streams in the book’s history interpretation that proffer a distinct purpose for Jonah:<sup>9</sup> to urge Jewish readers toward repentance, to examine how best to navigate aspects of non-fulfilled prophecy, to urge a change in Jewish readers toward Gentiles (e.g., to evoke a missionary mindset in them or to “rebuke the grudging attitude of some Jews concerning God’s willingness to forgive Gentiles” [Alexander 1998, 93]), and, finally, to examine the issue of theodicy, “the relationship between divine justice and mercy” (Alexander 1998, 95). Alexander helps us navigate these streams of interpretation by proffering theodicy as the one theme to rule them all. To use a kinder metaphor, each of the four primary classifications for the purpose of Jonah fits

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion and bibliography on each of these streams, Alexander 1998, 88–99.

well underneath the umbrella of theodicy in Jonah.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while there are many things that *could* be said about Jonah and what the author is doing with what s/he is saying, the present discussion will follow Alexander in zeroing in on Jonah’s concerns about God’s relenting from evil against the Ninevites.

#### THE CAUSE FOR JONAH’S (ANTI-)THEODICY

Returning to Crenshaw’s representative definition above, note that it addresses theodicy from the angle of evil being visited upon “virtuous people.” Jonah addresses theodicy from a different angle. He is “angry enough to die” (Jonah 4:9), not because he has suffered unjustly but rather because God has not meted out punishment on the Ninevites. Jonah’s displeasure is evident throughout the book. He clearly does not want to preach to the Ninevites, as evidenced by at least two of the prophet’s actions. First, he attempts to flee from God by loading onto a ship headed to Tarshish. Second, once Yahweh sends the storm that threatens the ship heading to Tarshish, Jonah convinces the sailors to throw him overboard, an act that indicates his preference for death over fulfilling the mandate to deliver Yahweh’s word to Nineveh.<sup>11</sup>

While readers at this point likely have some idea as to the cause of Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh, he makes clear his reasoning in chapter 4. Chapter 3 ends with what by most accounts would be a statement of prophetic success: “God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10 CSB). Jonah has proclaimed Yahweh’s message, the people of Nineveh have heard it and repented, and God has withheld the promised disaster.<sup>12</sup> Readers familiar with the prophetic tradition are no doubt surprised at this turn of events, for prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were not met by such receptive hearts and Yahweh did not relent from disaster at the hands of the

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander 1998, 97: “Of the various proposals for the purpose of Jonah, it is apparent that there is little to choose between them; it is easy to see why no clear consensus has yet been reached. Having said this, however, the view that Jonah is ultimately concerned with justice and mercy has at least one major advantage over the others. While the other proposals rightly reflect important themes in the story, that can all be satisfactorily subsumed under the heading of theodicy.”

<sup>11</sup> This episode evinces significant irony and presents a parallel between the responses to Yahweh of the non-Israelite sailors and the Ninevites, in contrast to the Israelite Jonah’s responses to Yahweh. See, e.g., Eynikel 2011, McLaughlin 2013, and Strawn 2010. Jeremiah 2004 argues that the two groups (sailors and Ninevites) represent two separate “others” in the Israelite worldview: the nations in general (sailors) and the enemies of Israel (Ninevites).

<sup>12</sup> Walton 1992, 52–53, argues based on a comparison between Jonah’s hut in chapter 4 and the Ninevites that “the ‘repentance’ of Nineveh should be understood as being shallow and naïve, though it is certainly a positive step in the right direction.”

Assyrian and Babylonian empires.<sup>13</sup> Yahweh's relenting, however, angers Jonah:

Jonah was greatly displeased and became furious. He prayed to the Lord, "Please, LORD, isn't this what I said while I was still in my own country? That's why I fled toward Tarshish in the first place. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster. And now, LORD, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:1–3, CSB)

Readers now learn that Jonah knew all along that Yahweh very well may forgive the Ninevites, and that is what prompted his attempted flight from God's presence and plea to the sailors to toss him overboard. Now that his fears have become reality, he accosts God for doing what is in his nature to do. Further, Jonah cites Exod 34:6 as the basis for his belief in God's mercy.<sup>14</sup> In this Jonah demonstrates that he knew of God's propensity to forgive sin, a propensity with which he has no qualms when it concerns him and his sins (see Jonah 2).

Jonah's concern that Yahweh would forgive the "other" also hints that he may have some knowledge of God's inclusion of the other in the rest of Hebrew Bible. For example, included among the Israelites whom Yahweh delivered from Egypt were a "mixed multitude" (עַרְבֵי רַבִּים) (Exod 12:38).<sup>15</sup> From its very inception God's people included those who were children of Abraham and those who were not. As Aaron Sherwood (2012, 153) puts it,

The mixed multitude of [Exod] 12:38 thus marks an implicit instance of the nations being unified with Israel to be God's people, and one that is unargued, unexplained, and unassuming. The narrator simply supplies as a given that God's prize of Israel was made up of both Israelites and non-Israelites who were united in and as worship of him.

Those who were once outside of God's covenant community are now included within it, and this glorifies Yahweh, the God who is much more than a tribal deity.

As the newly established people of Israel continued their journey out of slavery and into the promised land, God would continue to show his propensity for

<sup>13</sup> Again, setting aside for our purposes the questions of dating and reading the Hebrew Bible canonically and from the vantage point of a completed body of literature—the Tanak—in conversation with each other and its readers.

<sup>14</sup> This key passage is repeated throughout the Hebrew Bible, indicating its importance for the community's understanding of God and his nature (e.g., Num 14:18; Ps 86:5, 15; Neh 9:31; Joel 2:13). On the use of this passage as a didactic device in Jonah and the Book of the Twelve, see Boda 2011 and Barriocanal 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Stieglitz sees this group as the reasoning behind Torah legislation that provided justice for foreigners in Israel. However, the biblical text offers its own explanation: the Israelites were foreigners in Egypt (Exod 22:21; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19). See Stieglitz 1999.

extending mercy to those outside of the covenant community.<sup>16</sup> The narratives of Rahab and Achan, which bookend the account of Jericho’s fall, illustrate well the paradox of God’s *hesed*—his unending, faithful love for and commitment to his people—and the value he places on covenant faithfulness (Lockwood 2010). Joshua 2 tells of the spies sent to Jericho and Rahab’s faithfulness in defecting to the Israelites. Rahab acknowledges both Yahweh’s giving of the land to the Israelites and Yahweh’s supremacy, then she requests that the spies return to her and her family the *hesed* she has shown them (Josh 2:9–14). The spies assure her that they will show *hesed* to Rahab, indicating again that Yahweh—and, at times, his people—extend *hesed* to those outside of the covenant community, like the Ninevites.

Israel conquers Jericho, keeps its word to Rahab (Josh 6:22–23), and is then routed by Ai, for they “were unfaithful regarding the things set apart for destruction” (Josh 7:1). It turns out that the Israelite Achan rebels against Yahweh and is thus treated as if he—along with his entire family—were a Canaanite. Yahweh shows mercy to Rahab, a covenant outsider, who acts faithfully toward Yahweh, and he destroys Achan, an Israelite from the tribe of Judah who rebelled against Yahweh (Spina 2001).

A final example rounds out the evidence Jonah could draw on in his anticipation that Yahweh would forgive the Ninevites. Ruth, like Rahab, was an outsider, not least as a Moabite.<sup>17</sup> As a Moabite, descended from Lot’s incestuous relationship with his daughter, she was barred from the “assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:3 ESV) because of the Moabites’ refusal to aid Israel on its journey out of Egypt and because of their failed attempt to curse Israel in Num 23–24.

Ruth’s story takes place “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1 ESV), a period well known for the blatant covenant unfaithfulness of God’s people: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25).<sup>18</sup> This Moabite widow contrasts sharply with the Israelites who raped, murdered, and trafficked women during the period of the judges (see Judg 19–21).<sup>19</sup> Ruth demonstrated *hesed* to Naomi by leaving her own homeland and hopes for provision and traveling with her mother-in-law to Israel.<sup>20</sup> There, of course, Ruth met Boaz, who acted as her kinsman-redeemer and extended *hesed* to her and thus to Naomi as well.<sup>21</sup> The book of Ruth ends with David’s genealogy, putting a sharp point on the contrast between the events recounted

<sup>16</sup> Hawk 1996 explores this issue as it relates to the Gibeonites, Rahab, and Achan.

<sup>17</sup> On similarities between Jonah and Ruth, see Diebner 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Given the opening of Ruth, some see it as originally a conclusion to Judges (Bell 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Ignatius 2006 argues that the raped and murdered concubine of Judg 19 should be considered a survivor because of the symbolic role she takes on as a representative of those who suffer similarly. For discussion of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible, including Judges, see, among many studies, Eynikel 2005; Keefe 1993; Nidditch 2015; Scholz 2010.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the covenant relationship between Ruth and Naomi, see Smith 2007.

<sup>21</sup> For discussion of the meaning and function of כֶּסֶד in Ruth, see Koroth 1991.

in Judges and those in Ruth.<sup>22</sup> Read in conversation with the book of Judges, we see highlighted the theme of Yahweh's inclusion of non-Israelites. God repeatedly demonstrates *hesed* to those outside of the covenant community while he visits his judgment upon those covenant community members who do not keep *hesed* with him.

The Hebrew Bible includes a long history of inclusion of the other, and it seems that Jonah sought to avoid being part of that sort of inclusion. Thus, Jonah was right to be concerned that God may relent from the disaster he planned for Nineveh, and he was speaking truly about God when he said, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster."

#### YAHWEH'S RESPONSE TO JONAH'S CONCERN

While there is disagreement over exactly what is happening in Yahweh's response to Jonah, it is clear that the book ends without resolving much, just as Job ends without resolving why Job—a righteous insider—suffered as he did. Jonah is apparently still angry, and God's final words simply point out the problem. Readers do not know whether Jonah came around to seeing things God's way or whether he persisted in his insistence that Yahweh's grace should be confined to a select group. We do not know what the Ninevites' relationship with Yahweh looked like after repentance, though the book of Nahum makes it clear that they at some point returned to idolatry and injustice. Readers, like Jonah, receive no clear-cut answer to Jonah's concern, apart from what seems to be—as in Job—a reiteration of Yahweh's concern for and sovereignty over all of his creation: the plant, the storm, the sailors, the Ninevites, and Jonah. We are left to ponder Jonah's response, God's response, and, ultimately, why bad things happen to good people, with the only guiding principle to direct their thoughts seeming to be that Yahweh is sovereign and does what he wills, including, most importantly, extending his grace to those within and outside of the covenant community.<sup>23</sup>

#### JONAH'S (ANTI-)THEODICY IN CONVERSATION WITH THE TWELVE

It has been instructive to read Jonah in conversation with Job and also to consider some of the intertexts he may have had in mind when protesting Yahweh's display of *hesed* to the Ninevites. And while other passages could also be examined profitably, this essay will focus on two final intertexts (albeit briefly) from

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<sup>22</sup> For discussion of the contrasts between the actions of the characters in Ruth and those of the characters in Judges, see Raskas 2015.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of how Jonah ends and its relationship with the book of Job, see the discussion in Cook 2019, 267–68.



Jonah’s counterparts in the book of the Twelve: Micah and Habakkuk. Each of these books wrestle with the interconnection between suffering, evil, and God’s judgment and sovereignty.

Micah presents one of the more straightforward discussions of the relationship between evil and suffering in the Hebrew Bible, though it is not without its difficulties. Micah engages this conversation in two ways. First, Micah excoriates these leaders because they have failed both to love God (e.g., Mic 1:2–7) and to love people (e.g., Mic 2–3). Their covenant failure in these two aspects of life—faithfulness to Yahweh and faithfulness to people—means that the political and religious leadership of Israel has caused God’s people significant suffering. Because of these sins, Micah says, God will judge them. This first portrait of suffering and judgment brings much relief, for readers see Yahweh rebuking political and religious leadership for their mistreatment of the weak. Indeed, much of Micah comprises material in which the prophet, speaking for Yahweh, laments the sins of Israel’s leadership and promises that severe judgment would come.<sup>24</sup> Further, Micah sometimes speaks in eschatological tones, referring to a time when Yahweh would raise up a messianic figure to rule over Jerusalem and restore his righteous reign (Mic 5:2–4), not only for the covenant people but also for all nations (e.g., Mic 4–5). Micah therefore assures readers that evil will be punished, the Lord will rule from Jerusalem, and the oppressed will be restored. Micah’s first engagement with theodicy is hope-filled and encourages the book’s readers, both ancient and modern, who have suffered unjustly, particularly at the hands of corrupt authority figures.

However, second, there exists a wrinkle in Micah’s presentation of Yahweh’s judgment of evil and restoration of those who suffer. Namely, the instrument of Yahweh’s judgment—exile—will itself cause significant suffering, and this without distinguishing between the righteous and unrighteous (e.g., Mic 5:3).<sup>25</sup> Both the wicked leadership of Israel and the people of Israel will suffer under Yahweh’s punishment, suffering for which Yahweh takes credit. Yahweh promises to “assemble the lame and gather the scattered, those I have injured” and to “make the lame into a remnant, those far removed into a strong nation” (Mic 4:6–7; see also Mic 7:15–20), yet it remains that Yahweh has caused the suffering—he ultimately bears the burden for the judgment that wounds both the righteous and the wicked. Yahweh will certainly preserve his people through suffering, and he will certainly judge the wicked leadership for their role in harming his people, yet it remains that suffering must come, even to those whose cause Yahweh is upholding. The solution Micah seems to offer, then, is that God will bring about restoration ultimately, though not immediately, and that ultimate hope for restoration provides his people with what is needed to endure the suffering they will experience.

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<sup>24</sup> On Micah’s confrontation of abuses of power, see Wessels 1998.

<sup>25</sup> On trauma and its communal effects in the book of Micah, see Groenwald 2017.

Micah's presentation of judgment on the wicked in Israel that also entangles the righteous in Israel is not unlike the complaint readers find in the book of Habakkuk. There, Yahweh answers the prophet's complaint of unrighteousness in Judah by promising a coming judgment. That is all fine and well until, of course, the prophet learns that it is the Chaldeans who will judge God's people. Yahweh's use of a more wicked nation to punish his people perplexes the prophet, though Yahweh promises judgment also for the Chaldeans (Hab 2:6–20; Whitehead 2016). Ultimately, the prophet decides he “must quietly wait for the day of distress to come against the people invading us” (Hab 3:16 CSB), and the book ends with Habakkuk proclaiming his trust in Yahweh (cf. Hab 2:4b). Habakkuk thus voices his theodicy in terms of the prosperity of the wicked in Israel, then in terms of the relative righteousness of those in Israel over against Yahweh's instrument of judgment, and finally concludes by voicing his trust in Yahweh after Yahweh assures the prophet that there will be ultimate judgment for *all* the wicked—including the Chaldeans—not only those in Israel. Habakkuk's contribution to theodicy in the Twelve, then, seems to be its confident assertion that Yahweh will judge wickedness, even though the timeframe for doing so remains outside of human knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, Jonah's voice in the Twelve complements voices such as Habakkuk and Micah, who present a somewhat straightforward picture of Yahweh visiting judgment upon wickedness, though those books contain their own difficulties as well. Whereas readers see just judgment against wickedness in Habakkuk and Micah, in Jonah readers take a front-row seat to the (unjustified, it turns out) anguish caused when Yahweh does not judge wickedness but rather forgives it. Alongside Micah, Habakkuk, and the rest of the Twelve, Jonah's testimony contributes to a fuller picture of the social, psychological, and religious complexities of God's dealings with humanity and humanity's struggle to understand those dealings.

#### ENGAGING TRAUMA WITH JONAH TODAY

Leaving aside the more academic context of the preceding discussion, I would like to end this essay on (anti-)theodicy in Jonah with a much more personal and autobiographical discussion of how Jonah has shaped me. This sort of deviation from academic discussion may seem jarring to some, but my hope is to demonstrate how academic engagement with the biblical text can and should interact with our daily lives.

In my own context, church leaders typically counsel survivors of trauma to forgive those who sinned against them. That is fine and good, and it certainly jibes with biblical teaching about the importance of forgiveness. It is even a primary

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<sup>26</sup> On the building tension and resolution of Habakkuk's theodicy, see Thompson 1993.

theme in the book of Jonah, as we have seen above. However, abuse is a difficult thing to process. It does things to humans that are hard to understand and hard to cope with. I am not a psychologist, I know that an anecdote is not data, and I also know that each person’s journey toward forgiveness will be different. My own story of forgiveness has meandered, often taking more steps backward than forward. So, I offer these reflections on my identification with Jonah as one way that Scripture can be appropriated in an effort to understand the mystery of God’s love toward those who we think do not deserve it.

When I was twelve years old my mom married a deacon (“George”) at our local church. He also led a small group (a “Life Group,” we called them), was generous, evangelized fervently, and read the Bible daily. The church and local community regarded him highly for his acts of kindness and generosity toward others, as well as his faithfulness to preach the gospel to every sinner who came his way. So it is not really surprising that the pastors at the church didn’t believe me when I told them that he was full of rage, abusive, and beat my younger brother so severely as to leave welts all over his body. Never mind the fist-sized hole in the door to my childhood bedroom that remains some decades later as a dark reminder of what hell a person can bring to his family.

The worst part, for me at least, is that George was unpredictable. I could never really be sure what would set him off, and that type of uncertainty tends to scramble the brains of a young kid. I avoided home as much as possible and tried at all costs to steer clear of George, but I was not as successful as I would have liked. And anyway, there is no getting away from the yelling that came through my door when George would berate my mother for some failing at being a good Christian. I eventually mustered the courage to move in with my alcoholic father the semester before I left for college, and during college I was welcomed into another family’s home.

Even though I was able to escape physically, it has taken some time, and lots of starts and stops along the way, to heal psychologically. After I became a Christian, someone showed me the imprecatory psalms, and they helped to quell the anger that threatened to rise up at any moment (see Meek 2019). They helped, that is, until George repented to my mother for all the evil he had done.<sup>27</sup> Then I found myself looking instead to Jonah. Like him I could say, “I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” Though I knew Jonah was in the wrong in his narrative, I identified with him anyway. I viscerally understood Jonah’s anger at Yahweh’s graciousness. The Ninevites *should* be destroyed! George *should* be destroyed! From my perspective, it was not right for God to extend his grace to someone who had hurt my family and me like George had. And it did not matter much to me that the gospel message is that Christ died to reconcile sinners to

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<sup>27</sup> Repentance is a significant issue in the scholarly literature that deserves much engagement in its own right; however, there is no space for such discussion here.

himself. Out of enemies, Christ made brothers (Eph 2:11–22), sure, but I was not prepared to be the brother of my enemy.

After processing some of the rage I felt at George's repentance and seeing in Jonah myself, I was reminded of Jesus's parable of the unforgiving servant. Here Jesus picks up on the theme of grace that we see in Jonah but personalizes it in a most uncomfortable way. Jesus tells the story of a person who had been forgiven an impossibly large debt, but "when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe'" (Matt 18:28). When the second servant's pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears, the master found out and threw the first servant into prison. "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt 18:35). I am certain this message was as difficult for the original readers as for me some two thousand years later. This unforgiving servant was me.

It has been several years now since George repented. It is only he and my mother living in my childhood home now, and life has gone better for my mother since then. My own process of forgiveness has been different. I no longer identify with Jonah's anger at the Ninevites' repentance in the same way that I used to. But I still understand well where he is coming from. Some days I still feel the anger at George as fresh as the abuse just happened, but most days I do not think of my childhood in those terms. I am able to talk with George at family gatherings, but then again I do not spend much time at such gatherings. I understand the danger of withholding forgiveness, and I also understand the frustration that happens when injustice seems to reign.

It turns out that perhaps Jonah's answer to the question of God's justice is not that different from that of Job or Ecclesiastes. God's response in those two books is that he is sovereign and has all wisdom, whereas we humans have just a small part of the picture. Humans should therefore trust in him and follow him, no matter what abuses we may suffer. With Job we should say, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21 ESV). Yahweh's open-ended question that concludes the book of Jonah echoes the same sentiment—if we can care so much about something over which we have no control or influence, then should not Yahweh care for every human being, whom he created in his very own image? It is an easy truth in the abstract, but when Yahweh's care extends to the person abusing your mother, it is a bit more difficult.

This is why Jonah's narrative is so important for the concept of theodicy in the Bible. His story captures the heart of anti-theodicy, that anger and frustration we experience when good things happen to bad people. There is no easy way to extend forgiveness to an enemy, at least not one that I know of. But the book of Jonah does show us that our experience is not solitary. It should be comforting that

even God's prophet struggled mightily to accept God's extension of grace to his enemies.

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