

“Whispered in the Sound of Silence”

Traumatising the Book of Jonah

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Abstract

The Book of Jonah is replete with narrative gaps and textual silences, silences which invite the audience to read into the indeterminacy of meaning. Too often, however, the book is interpreted as an object lesson for its intended audience, a tale designed to show the true meaning of God’s mercy and justice, warning against false nationalism or against the perils of disobeying God. Such readings read against Jonah and Jonah’s community, functioning to both silence and, we suggest, wound an already wounded community. Against the dominant trend, this paper draws on trauma theory to argue that the silences in the book can be read anew. The silences enact and speak into the traumatic memories of a community whose identity was shaped by the experiences of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, and who continued to live under the oppression of the Persian Empire.

Keywords

Jonah; trauma theory; traumatization; communal trauma

Introduction

Around the age of ten or eleven, I (Elizabeth Boase) distinctly remember hearing the Simon and Garfunkel song *The Sound of Silence* (Simon 1964). If memory serves me correctly, we were asked by our teacher to write a story or reflection based on the emotions that the song evoked. I remember being haunted by the opening

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verse; it is a verse to which I return in certain moments and in certain moods to this day.

Hello darkness my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence.¹

I do not remember what I wrote then, but I do remember my resonance with the song and the deep sense that here was something that spoke into my world. A world that was, I have always suspected, somewhat different to that of many of my classmates. I understood darkness and I understood silence.

While now is neither the time nor the place to follow this line of autobiographical thought, it is enough to alert you to my own particular sensitivities when I encounter both the book of Jonah and the vast and varied literature which constitutes the body of scholarship that forms this small and intriguing text's afterlife.² While the story is one that I "knew" from my Sunday School days, as I read and reread this text through the eyes of a fifty-one year old white Australian woman who is also a biblical scholar, I am drawn again to the sound of silence. The sound haunts this text and haunts my reading. Silence shapes my questions, frames my meaning making. What do the silences mean? Are they significant? What are they telling but not telling? Why can commentators agree so little about their significance? ("Fools," said I, "You do not know— Silence like a cancer grows.") Why does silence have the last (non)word? Why silence?

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made.
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming.
And the sign said, The words of the prophets are written on the subway
walls
And tenement halls
And whispered in the sound of silence

What is whispered in Jonah's sound of silence?

Sounding the Silences

¹ The lyrics are taken from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/simongarfunkel/thesoundofsilence.html> (accessed on 20 Apr 2015).

² Allusion is to the title of Yvonne Sherwood's book *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (2000).

Several years after the Sunday School days, we (Elizabeth Boase and Sarah Agnew) read the silences in the book of Jonah. Silences open and close the book of Jonah—gaps in need of filling, open spaces that invite readers to read into the indeterminacy of meaning. Receiving the word of God to go to the great city of Nineveh and to “cry out against it,” Jonah flees in the opposite direction to Tarshish “away from the presence of the Lord” (Jon. 1:1-3). No motivation is given for the flight, a textual silence that remains unanswered until the final chapter. And, having backfilled the opening silence with creed-like words,

“O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (4:2),

The narrative closes as it opens, with a question. The question this time is God’s, not Jonah’s or ours, but is still no less curious in the silence that surrounds it: “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jon. 4:11). God’s question is unanswered.

This book is bookended by silence.

Held between these bookends are yet more silences, silences so often identified by those who precede us in the sea of scholarly readings: what is the message Jonah is to call to Nineveh (Craig 1990, 107)? Is Jonah’s psalm in chapter 2 congruent with the flight behaviour of chapter 1? What was Jonah expecting when he sat overlooking the city (Jon. 4:5)? The list could go on—Landes (1999, 274) identifies as many as sixty-three places where the text is silent.³ What is said and what is left unsaid are equally bound in the process of meaning making.

In the history of Jonah interpretation, the silences within the book have received much attention, have been interpreted and reinterpreted as this book has been read and re-read across the ages. Too often, however, readers read against Jonah and Jonah’s community, filling the textual silences in ways that portray this prophetic figure and his community as anti-heroes—object lessons on how not to behave. For Jonah and Jonah’s community, the readings might conceivably be read as growing cancers, readings which ‘other’ Jonah and Jonah’s community as those who are nationalistic, particularistic, lacking in mercy, revengeful, blood-thirsty, sinful, petulant, peevish, irrational, narrow, hateful, nefarious, and egocentric (Frolov 1999, 86-7).

Against the dominant trend, this paper seeks to read *with* rather than *against* Jonah. Reading the silences through the lens of trauma and trauma theory, it will be argued that Jonah’s flight, anger, and his silence at the end of the book can be read sympathetically as reflective of a community whose memory and identity is shaped by its traumatic experiences.⁴ In this reading, it will be argued that the

³ The sixty-three gaps are “places where the author deliberately or inadvertently withholds information which leads to interpretive issues for the reader” (Landes 1999, 274). For the purposes of the current paper we will only be treating the opening and closing silences of the book.

⁴ The current discussion seeks to explore aspects of trauma and trauma theory in relation to the book of Jonah, in order to highlight the potential of this hermeneutical framework for the

implied audience of the text would fill the textual gaps in such a way as to understand Jonah in a more positive light than is common in the scholarly domain.

In keeping with our hermeneutical framework (see below) it will be argued that past interpretations have functioned to traumatize Jonah and Jonah's community by, ironically, failing to take into account the impact of both past and current traumatic memory within the community. In failing to take seriously the ongoing impact of the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile and life under Persian occupation, Jonah and Jonah's community have been wounded throughout the ages.⁵

Traumatizing Silence

In order to argue for a traumatic reading of Jonah, it is necessary both to explore the possible traumatic location of the book of Jonah, and to consider trauma theory as a hermeneutic lens.

The Traumatic Location of Jonah

The current reading assumes that the intended audience of the book of Jonah lived in the region of Judah under Persian occupation.⁶ Locating the book within this period and setting provides an important clue to the rhetorical context into which the book enters. For this community, the events of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportations were past events, and construed as a watershed in their life. The return from exile did not, however, constitute a return to statehood and independence, but rather to life under occupation and empire.

The book was, to use Ben Zvi's language (2000, 7-9), read and reread into the context of life lived in the reality of the Persian Empire. There is a paucity of information about life under Persian rule; however, it is known that during the Achaemenid period, local peoples were able to live according to traditional social and religious practices. Despite this seeming autonomy, the Persians did maintain strict control over their regions. According to Perdue and Carter (2015, 109), the Persians promoted a dual propaganda in which religious tolerance was set alongside the projection that the Persian monarchs had been chosen to rule by the gods of the conquered colonies. Local religious language and beliefs were thus utilised in the promotion of empire. As a colonized people, oppression was an ongoing reality, and as identified by Havea (2013, 48), this reality would have shaped the way the intended audience of the book heard its message. For people living under empire, questions of God's justice would have been alive and active, and doubt may have existed as to God's commitment to God's people.

interpretation of the book. A full discussion of the book and all possible aspects of trauma theory are beyond the scope of this article.

⁵ This project is arguably in keeping with Sherwood's discussion of mainstream biblical readings of Jonah (2000, 60-87). Whilst Sherwood does not use trauma theory as such, much of her language suggests that Jonah's is a traumatic afterlife. Sherwood argues that the book of Jonah has been subjected to acts of violence, coercion and colonization through its dominant (Christian) readings.

⁶ Ehud Ben Zvi (2000, 7-9, especially n. 19) offers an extensive overview on the scholarship dating Jonah to the Persian period.

Taken together, exile and empire form the reading/hearing location for the book of Jonah. In the reading that follows, Jonah is read as a text whose intended audience is understood as having been shaped by trauma past and present.

Trauma as Reading Lens

In her book *The Silence*, Ruth Wajnryb states:

I want to suggest that there is something about the experience of trauma that defies communicability, that constrains the person involved in the trauma from using language to give voice to experience in a way that authentically or even adequately captures its horror. And sadly, I also want to suggest that unless the survivor is able to satisfactorily represent the nature of the trauma suffered, attempts at communication will neither serve nor satisfy. (2001, 84)

As identified by Wajnryb, one of the defining features of trauma is its incommunicability. Experiences of trauma frequently defy expression, lying at the limits of the adequacy of language. In the failing of words and the limits of language, textual silences may be more than gaps in need of filling, more than open spaces that invite readers to read into an indeterminacy of meaning. Silences may, in fact, be expressive of incommunicability itself. If this is so (see below), then reading through a lens of trauma might thus make a dual contribution to our understanding of the book of Jonah. Trauma, as a hermeneutical lens, might contribute to an understanding of the silences in Jonah as mimetic of the community's experience of trauma, and in interpreting the silence as mimetic we might also consider anew the communicative power of the book.

Reading biblical texts through the lens of trauma and trauma theory is an emerging field. As a hermeneutical framework, trauma theory provides one means by which some of the difficult texts of the Hebrew Bible might be re-read and re-interpreted in new and helpful ways. The application of trauma as a heuristic tool for reading can shed light on possible textual receptions for audiences both past and present, helping to bridge cultural and historic gaps that at times might seem insurmountable barriers to meaning.

Trauma is a multi-disciplinary term used in medical, psychiatric, psychological, sociological, literary, and historical disciplines, to name a few (see, for example, Becker, Dochhorn and Holt 2014). Derived from the Greek word meaning 'wound', trauma is, in its contemporary usage, applied to a range of experiences from every day, often mundane, disruptions to our sense of wellbeing through to major disruptive and catastrophic events. In his discussion of the contribution of trauma to Old Testament studies, Christopher Frechette identifies that:

social scientific discussions of trauma locate it at the catastrophic end of this range and explain it in terms of three related phenomena as these affect both individuals and collectives: events that pose an extreme threat and overwhelm ordinary means of coping; the profound and long-lasting injurious psychic and social effects that

these events have; and strategies for surviving, and to some extent, recovering from such effects. (2015, 22)

For current purposes, trauma refers to the impact of violence and suffering upon individuals and communities (O'Connor 2011, 3). Traumatic experiences impact all aspects of a person's being. According to Judith Herman (1992), trauma occurs when one is overwhelmed, rendered helpless. Trauma results in feelings of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control and threat of annihilation: "Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation" (51). Further, Irene Smith Landsman states:

Trauma and loss are experiences that push us to our limits. By definition, trauma overwhelms our usual abilities to cope and adjust, calling into question the most basic assumptions that organise our experience of ourselves, relationships, the world, and the human condition itself. The crisis of trauma is pervasive, altering emotional, cognitive, and behavioural experience, and the subjective experience of trauma not infrequently includes a crisis of meaning at a deep level of experience. (2002, 13)

Trauma challenges core assumptions about safety, control, and justice. Lasting effects of trauma can include feelings of anxiety, fear, helplessness, and shame. These feelings occur in connection with beliefs about the self as being utterly abandoned, worthless, and in cases where the trauma occurs at the hands of a perpetrator, deserving of, or somehow responsible for, the mistreatment (Frechette 2015, 24).

Much of the literature on trauma concerns its impact on individuals. One of the defining features of trauma is its tendency to cause an individual's sense of isolation from community. Traumatic events, however, can occur to collective entities, such as nations or cities, and can also shape the nature of community. At the communal level, Kai Ericson (1995) argues both centripetal and centrifugal forces come into play. Traumatic suffering isolates, in that it draws the sufferer away from the centre of a group, yet trauma can also lead to the formation of different types of community, centered on shared suffering (187).

The process of communal identification around trauma is discussed in the work of Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues. Alexander argues that cultural trauma occurs "when members of a collectivity *feel* they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group *consciousness*, *marking their memories* forever and *changing their future identity* in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2012, 6 italics added).

Using a constructivist model, Alexander argues that for a cultural group to define its identity as one shaped by traumatic experience, a process of social mediation or representation needs to occur. It is important to emphasise here that Alexander's focus is on cultural or collective identity, rather than on individual experience. In order for a collective identity to be defined by traumatic experience, for a group to cohere and identify themselves as traumatized, a process of cultural representation is necessary. At the level of collective identity, trauma is socially mediated, woven into communal memory through acts of representation and

meaning making. The formation of group identity involves the development of a new meta-narrative, which reflects the nature of the trauma inflicted and begins the process of redefining cultural meaning in light of the shattering impact of that trauma.

This trauma process functions to reconstruct social identity around a shared story, providing an avenue for a new form of social incorporation and the possibility of resolution of social problems (Alexander 2012, 27). A number of recent studies⁷ have argued that not only did the events surrounding the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem cause a massive disruption in the self-understanding of Judah, but that the identity of the community, and that of subsequent generations, was shaped by that traumatic experience. Boase has argued elsewhere that texts such as Lamentations function as forms of cultural representation which facilitate the re-formation of community around a new identity as a traumatised community (2014).

If, then, we understand that Jonah's community has an identity as a traumatised community, how might this impact on the texts produced by that community? Here, the understanding of trauma within literary theory comes to the fore. The origins of a literary theory of trauma emerge in the work of theorists such as Cathy Caruth (1995), and their engagement with Freud's understanding of traumatic events, their aftermath and representations in the interpretation of personal and social histories (Berger 1997, 571). Drawing on insights from psychoanalytic frameworks, central to a literary theory of trauma is the concept of latency: that an overpowering event is not (fully) experienced as it occurs because it is "unacceptable to consciousness." Traumatic events "can be forgotten and yet return in the form of somatic symptoms or compulsive, repetitive behaviours" (570). These symptoms and behaviours can occur in the individual and in collectives. Trauma theory is concerned with the representation of both latency and compulsive repetition through text. As Berger outlines:

The idea of catastrophe as trauma provides a method of interpretation, for it posits that the effects of an event may be dispersed and manifested in many forms not obviously associated with the event. Moreover, this dispersal occurs across time, so that an event experienced as shattering may actually produce its full impact only years later. This representational and temporal hermeneutics of the symptom has powerful implications for contemporary theory. In its emphasis on the retrospective reconstruction of the traumatic event (for the event cannot be comprehended when it occurs), a traumatic analysis is both constructivist and empirical. It pays closest attention to the representational means through which an event is remembered and yet retains the importance of the event itself, the thing that did happen. (572)

A hermeneutic of trauma provides a lens through which to explore the impact of past wounding—past trauma—on the cultural representations of a social group. A

⁷ See, for example, Kathleen O'Connor, *Jeremiah Pain and Promise* (2011); David Carr, *Holy Resilience* (2014); Elizabeth Boase, "The Traumatized Body," (2014) and "Fragmented Voices: Collective Identity and Traumatization in Lamentations" (2013); David Janzen, *The Violent Gift* (2012).

traumatic reading is open to the possibility that literature may encode something of the wounding of trauma, the latency of memory, and be representational of the repetitive and compulsive “symptoms” of the traumatic identity. It explores how events of the past can be embodied in the present text, recognising that the impact of past traumatic events can be equally embedded in what a text does, but also does not, say.

In exploring the application of literary theory within biblical studies, David Janzen (2012) helpfully identifies that at the core of trauma lies a void that cannot be fully assimilated in personal narrative (the trauma is unknowable), which in turns defies the ability of language to make sense of the trauma. In response to a quote by Charlotte Delbo (a Holocaust survivor) —“I am no longer sure that what I have written is true, but I am sure that it happened” —Janzen helpfully notes that “the case is not always that the authors of traumatic literature cannot recall the events that caused the massive psychic trauma . . . the impossibility that they face instead is in situating the trauma within an explanatory narrative so that they can make truth claims about it and explain and make sense of it” (37). The unassimilated void, which defies the ability of language, which resists narrativization, “is really a gap in narrative rather than narrative itself. Because trauma simply is not integrated into the worldviews people use to make sense of things, it cannot be a part of any explanatory narrative, and so it naturally moves to absence, rendering attempts to narrativize it ultimately futile” (38).

In a similar vein, Irene Kacandes, in a discussion of Yvonne Vera’s novel *Under the Tongue*, argues that:

Lacunae (i.e. gaps) in the text may mirror the lacunae created in the victim-character’s psyche, but they may also be a sign of the text’s performance of trauma. Consequently, the reader is not simply “told” what happened, because the process of cognizance of the event is bound up with witnessing, which in this instance means the reader-witness registers gaps and fragments as possible traumatic symptoms. (1999, 63)

According to Kacandes, Vera’s novel creates for its reader “a trail of indirection leading the reader on a hunt for answers only to have to fall back on herself, noting what is not there and registering the demand for a new kind of listening-reading, analogous to what in the psychoanalytic framework, Caruth calls ‘the witness precisely of *impossibility* (1995, 10)’” (1999, 63).

When we apply these insights to the book of Jonah,⁸ new avenues for reading the silences embedded within the narrative emerge. In the reading that follows, the silences that bookend Jonah—the silence surrounding the reasons for Jonah’s flight (Jon. 1:1-3) and the silence in response to God’s final question (Jonah 4)—will be reinterpreted as lacunae that reflect something of the traumatic void within the life of the community. The reading intends to be evocative, opening up possible new ways of reading the narrative gaps, seeking to suggest that the intended audience of the Persian period may have understood the textual

⁸ Other aspects of trauma theory—from both the literary and the socio-cultural domains—could be considered in relation to the book of Jonah, but for present purposes, these insights provide sufficient basis for exploring the possible application of trauma theory to the book.

gaps from a different perspective than that encountered in much recent scholarship.

In order to build the case, past readings of the gaps will first be considered; readings that, in our minds at least, effectively render further trauma to a community for whom meaning is already tenuous. Interpretation of the silences in Jonah is often bound with the “message” (Green 2007, 149-56) that is identified for the book itself. Jonah has been interpreted as carrying a multiplicity of meanings,⁹ and for each of these positions, the silences in Jonah take on particular significance.¹⁰ The following discussion offers examples of ways in which previous interpretive moves have silenced Jonah and his community in their failure to consider that the silence represents a void at the centre of communal being, and the impossibility of language to give narrative shape to the void. Our aim is to offer some witness to the text’s intended audience and to hear anew their context of fractured meaning in the wake of past and present communal wounding.

Within the Sound of Silence

A significant silence occurs at the beginning of the book when Jonah, in response to the call to go and cry out against Nineveh, flees in the opposite direction (Jon. 1:1-3). In the history of the book’s reception, most interpretations of this flight read Jonah’s behaviour negatively, portraying him as concerned with his own self-preservation or as rejecting the possibility of God’s universal concern for all. Interpretation of the flight of Jonah is necessarily bound up with understandings of Jonah’s anger that occurs in the context of the reprieve of Nineveh and Jonah’s delayed identification of notions of God’s *hesed* being linked to his flight.

Jonah’s Flight as Self-preservation

Jonah’s motivation for flight may be interpreted as fear: of God or God’s wrath, or of the anger of the Ninevites.¹¹ Being a prophet is dangerous, even overwhelming (Leong 2013, 114), as God’s call “takes the messenger into harm’s way to confront the brokenness of fallen people and the injustices of empire” (113).¹² Close proximity to the displeasure of God is a danger inherent in the role of a prophet, and this is not an easy place to be (Sasson 1990, 78).¹³

Jonah’s flight for self-preservation has thus been depicted as a question of saving not only his life, but more his dignity as a prophet. As such, Jonah fled “because he knew that he would be effective, the people of Nineveh would indeed repent, and he would look like a fool” (Wohlgerlinter 1981, 132).¹⁴ Jonah is seen

⁹ See Sherwood (2000) for a detailed discussion.

¹⁰ Ben Zvi identifies a number of central meta-narratives that have formed the book’s most common readings, “involving sin and repentance, divine judgment and compassion, death and resurrection, rejection and acceptance of the divine will, God’s power over all creation, universalism and nationalistic particularism” (2003, 2).

¹¹ Sasson (1990) notes both the possibility of fear of God or God’s wrath (235) and “fearing the anger of the Ninevites” (87) as motivations for flight.

¹² When he is sent to “the centre of empire in a land of Israel’s sworn enemies . . . is it any wonder that Jonah immediately flees in the opposite direction?” (Leong 2013, 114; so Sasson 1990, 87).

¹³ Sasson is citing an argument from Ibn Ezra that compares Jonah’s flight with that of Cain in Gen 4:16.

¹⁴ See also George Fishman (2008, 308): if a prophet succeeds it is to fail, and risk being labelled a false prophet. This has been linked to Deut.18:22 and the reluctant reception of Jonah as a prophet

to care more for his public image than all the humans who just gained a new lease on life (Sasson 1990, 297). From Sasson's view that Jonah "simply will not allow heaven to dictate moves in total disregard of his own dignity" (349), to Wohlgeleit's study of Jonah's death wish in the context of his prophetic power being diminished by God's change of mind (1981, 132-3), this story is repeatedly portrayed as the tale of a petulant prophet admonished by the God of all.

In interpreting Jonah's flight as self-preservation, and a self-preservation that is understood as a more or less calculated or conscious decision to "look after number one," readers read with God and against Jonah. Jonah is wounded with shaming words, labelled as racist, xenophobic, non-universalist, and morally corrupt. In the afterlife of this book, Jonah himself is wounded repeatedly by the words of others about him. Such readings also wound the community who, by extension, are viewed as the addressees of the book's message and understood as a community that shares the negative qualities attributed to the prophet.

The Conflict between Universalism and Particularism

One of Ben Zvi's suggested meta-narratives for the book concerns "universalism and particularism" (2003, 2). For this meta-narrative to be understood, Jonah's response to the lack of divine action against Nineveh must be taken into account. In Jonah 4, after Jonah has prophesied to Nineveh and they have repented (Jon. 3), and God has changed God's mind about the calamity, Jonah becomes angry (4:1). Justifying his flight, Jonah recites the first half of God's self-attribution of Exod. 34:6 (ignoring the judgment aspect of 34:7), arguing that he fled his prophetic task because of his certainty that God's graciousness, mercy and steadfast love would lead to the very lack of punishment that occurred. In light of this, Jonah is described as fleeing the call of God because he is unwilling or unable to fathom the possibility of forgiveness for Nineveh because of their status outside Israel (Leong 2013, 125; Hauser 1985, 37; Shulman 2008, 345),¹⁵ rejecting the notion that "God loves us all" (Green 2007, 150). Jonah is portrayed as vengeful, petty, and withholding love from the nations (Hauser 1985, 37).¹⁶ Such readings reduce the story to a teaching moment between God and the prophet/nation, reducing Nineveh to a pawn in God's plot to teach Jonah/Israel a lesson (24).¹⁷

For Shulman, Jonah flees "from being an agent in what Jonah sees as Nineveh's undeserved survival and divine rescue" (2008, 345). Though Shulman hears Jonah's struggle – "knowing what he should be feeling, what he should be

through the generations (Blumenthal 2007, 103). Such readings assume that Jonah immediately understands God's message of impending destruction as an invitation or opportunity to repent. Others claim that Jonah understands God's message to be simply an announcement of destruction, and his anger in Jonah 4 therefore results from unmet expectations and feelings of dented prophetic dignity when God changes God's mind without letting Jonah be a part of it (Sasson 1990, 87; Person 1996, 42). On this point, there is a sustained discussion of the phrase "Nineveh will overturn."

¹⁵ Blumenthal claims that Jonah "did not want to interfere with the forthcoming destruction of Nineveh, because its people was the one which later would destroy ten tribes of Israel" (2007, 105).

¹⁶ Hauser also describes Jonah as unrepentant, obedient under duress (33), and "fearing a world in which God's wrath does not come to bear equally on all who are guilty" (27).

¹⁷ Such a didactic tendency to interpretations of Jonah is also noted by Ellen Martin (1993, 70). Martin herself, however, still views God in the book of Jonah as playing with Jonah, albeit as a mother-nurturer guiding a child along the developmental path (71), in a reading of the narrative through a tenuous Oedipus-complex lens.

doing” in response to God’s call – he does not ask *why* “Jonah is . . . filled with anger and self-righteousness” (359) enough to turn him away from his responsibility as a prophet. This failure to listen for the story behind Jonah’s flight fails to acknowledge the gap, and thereby the trauma hinted at by the narrative, a gap perhaps intended to be filled with the silent sound of emotion from an audience’s communal experience of trauma.

Readings according to this meta-narrative of universalism and particularism¹⁸ may give limited voice to the reading community, who are understood to be like Jonah in their closed-heartedness towards the nations (Hauser 1985, 37; Leong 2013, 128; Spina 2005, 112). For example, Leong listens for the audience, who receive a reminder of “the complex meaning of *hesed*” in the “dramatic reframing of Nineveh as deserving of God’s mercy.” This is God’s wish for Israel, to “extend this same mercy to its pagan neighbours” (128). Hauser, too, brings the community into the conversation to an extent on this point, with his discussion of the use of reversal and the element of surprise to make “the readers vulnerable and therefore receptive to the writer’s basic point that Jonah’s anger and vindictiveness are inappropriate in the light of the forgiving nature of God” (37).¹⁹

However, when this book is seen to hold “Jonah’s bigotry up to the light of day so that its readers see how ludicrous that bigotry appears against God’s desire to reconcile with all” (Nogalski 2011, 406; also Leong 2013, 128), what is not heard is the reason for the hard-heartedness of either Jonah or the original receptive community.

Once again, however, these readings, including those that give limited voice to the audience, continue to wound Jonah and Jonah’s community. In failing to listen for the story *behind* the closed-heartedness, these readings still silence both Jonah and the community. Instead of asking what trauma has made the boundaries between Israel and the nations more rigid, when God has called them to be holy for the sake of all the world, such readings function to judge and moralise, to an extent that they become imperialistic or anti-Jewish. This promotes the growth of a different kind of silence, as the community are named in the conversation, but not heard with compassion.

In reading against the scholarly grain, Chesung Justin Ryu in his article “Silence as Resistance” (2009) identifies with the colonized Jewish community through the experiences of his own colonized Korean community. Ryu argues that as a people living under the oppressive power structures of empire, the audience of Jonah would have identified *with* Jonah’s flight and anger. Ryu suggests that established readings that “praise God’s salvific action towards Nineveh and criticize Jonah as the personification of Jewish particularism” (200) ignore the special role that the characters of Jonah (the patriotic prophet of salvation for Israel [2 Kings 14:25]) and Nineveh (the archenemy known for its brutal destruction of Israel) would have played in audience imagination (201-205). For this audience, against the historical backdrop of the brutalising actions of Assyria

¹⁸ Rabbi Shulman’s interpretation is certainly not imperialistic or anti-Jewish, but he does still read the book of Jonah as a universalist “corrective” to the book’s particularizing contemporaries in Ezra and Nehemiah, as differing approaches to Jewish life in the Diaspora (2008, 353).

¹⁹ In noting the pointed message of the book as the contrasting responses of God and Jonah, Sasson (1990, 87, 336) intimates that the community is called back to a mercy like God’s.

in destroying Israel and never repenting for their actions, the textual repentance of Nineveh would not have been seen as genuine:

A colonized audience would have thought that the character of Nineveh's repentance was *hypocritical* repentance, lacking the compensatory actions to the people that they had sinned against, or repentance only for an *internal* matter, or repentance which was *temporal* and could not last long, or even repentance of *deception*. (206-7; italics original)

For a post-monarchic audience, God's grace towards Nineveh would not be a sign of hope, but would, rather, signal doom for Israel. For the book's audience, the salvation of Nineveh would have been a miscarriage of justice. As such, Ryu argues the book does not concern God's universal love and justice, but is itself a discursive site voicing issues of theodicy and lack of justice in the covenant relationship with God. The rhetoric of God in Jonah 4 follows the rhetoric of the strong, a rhetoric in which universalism reinforces positions of power over the weak (i.e. the colonized; so Havea 2013).

Flight as Trauma Response

It is rare to find readings that are sympathetic to Jonah, and which argue that Jonah's flight and anger, aspects around which silence accrues, are legitimate. As Ryu (2009, 199) notes, even where reasons are found for Jonah's anger, few vindicate it. Exceptions, such as that of Ryu, read the book from below, taking seriously the likelihood that the book was read and reread by an audience living in the midst of the oppressive power structures of exilic and/or post-exilic empire.

In his article "When Empire Does not Strike Back: Reading Jonah in Light of Empire", Stephen Riley (2012, 120-21) claims that the book of Jonah progresses through a series of movements from isolation to engagement. The first act of isolation occurs as Jonah flees, isolating himself from God, from the people to whom he is called to prophesy and, as he enters the bowels of the ship, from the sailors. Although Riley develops his argument in a different direction, his description of flight as an act of isolation is provocative in light of trauma theory. If, as most social scientific understandings of trauma identify, trauma leads to a sense of isolation, can Jonah's flight be, in itself, a performance of trauma, an enactment of the sense of isolation from the social group and the divine other? Or, if not a performance of the sense of isolation caused by trauma, could it be a behavioural manifestation of the fear and anxiety associated with trauma and of the compulsive drive to avoid exposure to circumstances that evoke the original trauma, in this case a flight from the enemy who wounds through violence and oppression?

Can Jonah's anger (4:1-2), in which previously understood concepts of divine mercy and justice are brought into question by the ongoing wounding caused by life under empire, give voice to a communal experience of a lack of narrative coherence and meaning? We do not seek here to psychoanalyse Jonah, but to suggest that Jonah's audience may have been more sympathetic to both his flight and to his anger at God's relinquishing of punishment. In Jonah's movement away from community, away from God and towards a place where otherness

abounds, the community may have recognised their own sense of isolation from those previously supportive centres of meaning. They may have understood Jonah's anger at the divine mercy in the face of a wounding enemy as an expression of the loss of narrative cohesion in their own world. The community may, indeed, have witnessed in Jonah's story something of their own plight and woundedness.

People Talking Without Speaking

Having explored the silence surrounding Jonah's flight from the perspective of an enactment of trauma, and Jonah's anger as symptomatic of trauma, we turn now to Jonah's silence at the conclusion of the book. This particular silence has been read in a variety of different ways in past scholarship, many of which function to silence Jonah as a literary character, failing to bear witness to the traumatised identity of Jonah's audience.

God's question (4:11) can be identified as rhetorical, in need of no response because it makes a point in its own right: Jonah makes no response because none is needed. By extension, Jonah's silence is read either as an act of acquiescence or, alternatively, as stubborn resistance to the object lesson. Such readings again offer an interpretation that grows the silence over and around Jonah's community, and even Jonah himself.

Is Jonah acquiescing, acknowledging that God is right, accepting the forgiveness of the nations and returning to obedient prophetic duty (Mills 2010, 462)? Various reading strategies have been used to argue for such an understanding, including the imposition of "answers" onto Jonah. Scholars and worshipping communities have, in the past, drawn on Midrash, or Yom Kippur liturgical practice to formulate Jonah's response (see below), or have psychologized Jonah, anticipating his "healing" through the manipulations of God the therapist (Wohlgelernter 1981, 133).

Sasson (1990, 320) cites a Jewish medieval homily in which Jonah acknowledges that mercy and forgiveness belong to God. Sasson offers no other comment on Jonah's silence, dismissing its significance by simply filling it with this "answer." Wohlgelernter tells of the reading of Micah 7:18 after the Jonah narrative on the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur: "If we put these words into the mouth of Jonah at the end of the book, they become a most appropriate response from the prophet who, roused from his depression, again resumes his responsibilities, both to God and to His people" (1981, 133). For Rabbi Shulman, the reading of Jonah's story on Yom Kippur is to show audiences that we are Jonah, and for anyone there is neither escape from confronting the ways in which we have turned from God, nor exclusion from the embrace of God's forgiveness (2008, 357).

Drawing on Midrash and, interestingly, on understandings of trauma, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg suggests that in the final silence we see that Jonah finally stands still and prays, and, having expressed his deepest despair and through prayer, finds his way back to trust in God (2008, 298). In her discussion of Jonah's flight, Zornberg describes Jonah not only fleeing God but also fleeing a physical and psychological human space between life and death. She suggests that Jonah exhibits an "allergic reaction" to the idea of God's loving kindness (*hesed*), "linked as it is to the vulnerable human place between life and death" (271),

finding reason for the flight, the allergic reaction, in a midrashic filling of the gaps in Jonah's biography. She cites several midrashic texts²⁰ that identify Jonah as the child Elijah raised from death in the story of 1 Kings 17. For Zornberg, the resurrection Jonah experienced as a child is a traumatic event that he is simultaneously always trying to escape and to recreate, in order to come to terms with being unexpectedly alive (278).²¹ Zornberg's argument does identify the possibility of the text being an enactment of trauma, although it is an individual rather than communal experience of trauma. She ultimately imposes hope and resolution onto the narrative, and can thus be seen to silence the community's experience of trauma through this speculative filling of the silence.

In other interpretations listening for Jonah's mental state,²² Jonah's flight, behaviour on the ship, then descent into the sea and the belly of the great fish are described in terms of depression, the outside world reflecting the inner state of the central character, or indeed, Jonah himself seeking death right from the beginning of the story.²³ In Salberg's response to Zornberg's theory, Jonah is described as depressed at the start of the story, a state instigated by the chronic traumatizing disappointment in God after the command to take a message to Nineveh is seen as an offer of forgiveness with which Jonah cannot cope (2008, 321).

When the silence is allowed to be silent, however, a gap unfilled with words and answers, Jonah may be seen as incapable of speech as he was in the beginning. Such readings may still, however, silence the trauma of Jonah and Jonah's community. Abusch, for example, describes Jonah's recovered ability to speak (4:2–3, 8) as triggered by his anger at the mercy shown to Nineveh, and wonders if Jonah's final silence is because he cannot speak when confronted by the invitation of God into mercy (2013, 149-50). Abusch does allow the silence to remain open in his discussion, understanding this gap as an invitation to the audience. The silence is seen to invite the audience to answer the question for themselves—will you care for humans as God cares for humans?

Jonah simply disappears at the end of the text. He disappears so that the audience can take his place, for the question and message are really directed at the ancient audience and are not aimed at the literary character. The lack of answer on the part of Jonah is meant to give the audience space to decide whether and how Jonah might have responded to God's challenge and to provide its own answer to the central question of the book. (152)

Unacknowledged in this interpretation, however, is the possibility that Jonah's inability to speak, his painful silence, evokes a memory of trauma, or

²⁰ J. Sukkah 5:1; Midrash Tehillim 26; Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 33; and Yalkut Shimeoni 550 (291).

²¹ Zornberg also understands Jonah's name, a Hebrew word for "dove", as calling to mind Jonah's elusive nature, his perpetual flight (277).

²² Notably, the articles written in response to Zornberg's for the special edition of *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*. Of these, one is of particular interest here: Jill Salberg, "Jonah's Crisis. Commentary on Paper by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg".

²³ However, as "Harold Louis Ginsberg (1969) ... asserted ... it is Jonah's impulse to flee that leads him inextricably deeper and deeper away from people, more and more isolated, more and more trapped, and ultimately enclosed within himself" (Shulman 2008, 335). This descent and isolation is thus understood as a consequence of Jonah's flight, not a symptom, alongside flight, of depression.

might be representative of a collapse of meaning associated with trauma. Abusch effectively suggests that the question is rhetorical, and that the audience is expected to fill the gap with the correct response—of course we will care for humans as God does. Paradoxically, although Jonah is accurately observed as silent at the beginning and the end of the narrative, this reading of Jonah “disappearing” itself silences Jonah, and fails to adequately listen to the very sound of silence.

Postcolonial readings, such as those of Ryu (2009), Frolov (1999), and Havea (2013), do listen for Jonah and Jonah’s community more adequately by reading with, rather than against, Jonah. Ryu and Havea provide alternate readings of Jonah’s anger in chapter 4. From the perspective of justice for the oppressed, Jonah’s anger is justified if he is recognised as being the oppressed for whom justice is not achieved. As Ryu concludes:

The only thing he [Jonah] could do was to remain silent. The silence has long been interpreted by established Christian scholars as obedience or agreement to God’s universal love for all. However, a colonized audience would have understood what the silence of Jonah meant because they were with Jonah there, in silence. Some weak, oppressed, and colonized people will continue to explore their locations of silence or resistance in the silence of Jonah. (218)²⁴

Again, however, an alternate reading of the concluding silence is possible if we read through the lens of trauma. Definitions of trauma—psychological, social, literary and cultural—all identify an element of unknowability in trauma, a resistance to representation because the normal senses are overwhelmed and overpowered by the traumatic experience. The usual ways of knowing and constructing meaning collapse. The traumatic event lies outside language. To represent trauma is to speak the unspeakable, a “looking for words to describe what originally surpassed the signifying power of words” (Kopf 2005, 244).

Is it possible that the silence at the end of the book represents yet another enactment of trauma? From the perspective of plot, Jonah 4 includes Jonah’s angry response to the reprieve of Nineveh (vv. 1-5), the expectant waiting and watching over the city (v. 5), and the concluding interaction between God and Jonah centring around the provision and destruction of the shade bush (vv. 6-7), the sending of the wind and Jonah’s final death wish (v. 8), and God’s final speech (v. 9), to which there is no response.

A number of narrative elements here can be seen as mimetic enactments of communal trauma. Jonah’s displeasure and anger have been previously discussed; however, taken with the declaration of v. 2—Jonah’s retrospective explanation of his flight as being driven by the fear that God’s grace, mercy and steadfast love might result in God relenting from punishing Nineveh—the expression of anger can be read as representative of the collapse of Jonah’s/the community’s

²⁴ Citing Ronan McDonald, Maria Beville and Sara Dybris McQuaid state that “silence is ‘a symptom of a colonial condition’ but also an important ‘aesthetic strategy seeking to resist this condition.’ Silence in this way, artistically, can function as a political tool in evading articulation and thereby withholding the voice, or, it can work in a cultural space where silence on important political issues can reveal more about the position of the silenced than words can ever signify” (2012, 5).

frameworks of meaning. Jonah's plea for death represents the collapse of his worldview, an expression of the impossibility of being and knowing in a world that no longer operates in meaningful ways. While the destruction of Jerusalem and the experiences of deportation and occupation/colonisation shattered the belief that God was unwaveringly on the side of Judah/Israel and against the nations who worshipped other gods, the sustained period of occupation and the failure of God to bring about recompense against the Persian colonisers—symbolically represented by Nineveh, the archetypal enemy—within this tale could arguably be considered a further blow to an already shattered worldview.

The final episode of the bush, if read metaphorically, effectively enacts the traumatising experience. Jonah (God's chosen one) experiences God's provision of shelter and saving grace. In this, Jonah finds contentment (v. 7). The nurture, however, is withdrawn (v. 7) and through the sending of the extremities of wind and sun (violent actions on God's behalf) Jonah is left faint to the point of wanting to die (v. 8).

In the final interaction between God and Jonah (4:9-11), Jonah's two death wishes are collapsed into one, with God making reference to Jonah's anger—an emotion named only in relation to the reprieve of Nineveh—at the death of the bush. Does this represent a failure of discernment on God's behalf? Does God bully Jonah by refusing to acknowledge the validity of his response to the seeming fickleness of God—the God who should be on Jonah's side, but is on the side of the oppressive other? The God who offers and withdraws protection at whim? The God who withdraws protection and intensifies harsh conditions? The God who poses questions which articulate moral conundrums in ways that silence any possibility of response, wielding logic and reason in the face of hurt and pain?

If seen in this light, the silence at the conclusion of the book of Jonah might well be interpreted as representative of the ongoing collapse of meaning and a failure of language. If we read with Jonah and for Jonah's community, can we recognise that even in articulating the possibility of universal divine care, the assumptive world of the community is delivered further shock and dislocation? Through the lens of trauma theory, the silence can be acknowledged as symptomatic of communal trauma, not taken as grounds for condemnation and judgement. Can we, after all, read Jonah's silence with compassion, as empathetic listeners bearing witness to the pain and inarticulateness of loss?

Through the lens of trauma, Jonah's silence is less about recalcitrance or acquiescence as it is about impossibility. Words fail when the world no longer makes sense. Words fail when meaning has collapsed. Words fail for Jonah when God seems to be on the side of the oppressors; when God provides, then withdraws provision; when God intensifies suffering through the sending of extreme weather. For Jonah words become impossible, and silence is the only response. In the wake of a collapse of meaning, the loss of the assumptive world of Israel's election, of God's vindicating justice; in the light of the betrayal of God's provision and withdrawal; in the intensification of suffering through the extremity of God's sending actions, words fail. This is a silence that Jonah's audience may well have understood.

Whispered in the Sound of Silence

Too often, the book of Jonah has been understood to function as an object lesson for the community of Israel, a community understood to be inward looking and jealous of the offer of God's mercy to nations other than themselves. Too often, readers read against Jonah, assuming that through the plight of the prophet God is seeking to teach the intended textual audience a valuable lesson. In a narrative full of gaps, the textual silences are filled with words of judgment and condemnation, words that function to disempower and silence an audience already living in a context shaped by past and present trauma.

Read differently, however, through the lens of trauma theory, it is possible to understand this story anew. If we read with Jonah and for Jonah's community, it is possible to fill the textual gaps in new and different ways. To hear different echoes in the sounds of silence, echoes of a community whose frameworks of meaning have collapsed, for whom language has reached its limits, for whom words fail.

For Jonah and Jonah's community, silence speaks. There are no words to explain the flight, the anger and the final silence, for trauma itself cannot be spoken.

The trauma of the community whispers in the sounds of the silences of Jonah and his story. Their old friend, darkness, comes to talk with them again, with a vision softly creeping through narrative reticence, planting seeds through the telling and the listening. The vision that remains after the story of Jonah is told, a story whose silence cannot be filled with words or answers, is a vision unspeakable, a trauma unnameable, except with the profound sound of silence.

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