

## Overthrowing Nineveh

### Revisiting the city with postcolonial imagination

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#### Abstract

This article brings Kwok Pui-Lan's postcolonial imagination to the blurred boundaries of the Book of Jonah. Identifying Nineveh as a marginalised character, we read with Nineveh, to see that the characteristics of the text do not align neatly with many of the assumptions brought to bear on Nineveh's identity. Fixed identity is problematized, as are the dichotomies between centre and periphery, good and evil. Seeking the gaps and fractures opens up new interpretive possibilities in the continuing dialogue of the Jonah story.

#### Keywords

Jonah; Kwok Pui-Lan; Nineveh; postcolonial imagination

#### Learning to see (again)

The Book of Jonah delighted me as a child. Back then, Jonah was all about the big fish. Returning to the story more recently, it was surprising to discover so much more. I wonder what else I had overlooked in Jonah, in other Bible stories, and in the communities where I live and work. I wonder why this one small scene of the story was highlighted, with the rest left in the shadows.

Methodology is important. The bias and foci through which we approach the Scriptures affect what we find, whether these are consciously fore-grounded or assumed unnoticed, slipping to the background of study. The Bible is used to build up and to break down, to close borders and transgress them. As Daniel Smith-Christopher observes, "We read Scriptures just like we live our lives, silencing those who confront us with the inconvenient views of strangers against whom we have drawn our border" (2007, 2). How, then, might a person of privilege within both church and wider Australian society learn to see again? Might Jonah's story help me to overthrow my own borders?

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## Postcolonial Imagination

Kwok Pui Lan offers “postcolonial imagination” as a way of approaching biblical interpretation with “a desire, a determination and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises” (2005, 2). The assumptions that have formed the study of the Bible, particularly through claims to universality and objectivity, have brought the field of biblical studies to a place where there is “a lot of unlearning to do” (4). Two key questions emerge: How can the Bible and its tradition speak into today’s questions? And, can we imagine the biblical world so as to have new horizons opened to us (Kwok 1995, 13)? In other words, can we read the Bible as living documents which speak into current situations as part of “a living continuous *process*” (Kwok 1998, 107, original italics)?

With emphasis on *imagination*, new ways of thinking about biblical texts come from finding gaps and errors in historiography and exegesis (Runesson 2011, 122). Imagination requires “a consciousness of conflict (something not fitting), a pause, the finding of a new image, the repatterning of reality, and interpretation” (Kwok 1995, 13). That is to say, there is a focus upon cracks, fissures, and openings which do not fit neatly into existing frameworks. It may sound whimsical, but imagination is both playful and hard work. To decolonise the Bible and its influence, we must be able to see, to *imagine*, alternative perspectives that make possible a change in power dynamics: “For what we cannot imagine, we cannot live into and struggle for” (Kwok 2005, 30). This process emphasises interpretations which arise on the periphery rather than the mainstream of knowledge. “Gaps” within mainstream approaches emerge, leading us beyond familiar knowledge and interpretations (30). It is in these “in between” places that new ways of thinking can emerge, messing up boundaries between disciplines and locations (Kwok 1995, 3) and opening up new interpretive possibilities (Kwok 2005, 30).

Kwok’s approach is imbued with her experiences as a doubly marginalised biblical interpreter, as non-Western and a woman. She seeks to discover how she might creatively engage these points of minoritization, through the gaps these in-between identities bring to the Bible. Minority criticism suggests that from the periphery and boundary come the possibility of radical newness, “springboards for new interpretations and critical interventions” (Bailey, Liew, and Segovia 2009, 7). Kwok engages her minoritisation in a three-fold movement. *Historical imagination* refuses to see history as owned by the dominant or winners who have been its primary storytellers and interpreters (2005, 37). It opens up silenced or muted voices within narrative and exegesis. *Dialogic imagination* recognises the importance of conversation, both listening and speaking, for making meaning (1995, 13). Some voices have power to push others to the periphery. Conversation ventures into unexplored areas simply to see where these listening paths may lead, and so that others may join in as they take up the next speech turn. *Diasporic imagination* negotiates hybrid and multiple identities, asking how “home”, “roots,” and “borders” have been constructed. The prevalence of such multiplicity makes space for alternative approaches to scripture, just as a storyteller weaves together various elements of cultural memory, refashioning stories for new generations, re-creating new identities and experiences (2005, 46).

Kwok's feminist approach seeks to locate scriptural interpretation in a community of dialogue, so that interpreters learn to see and acknowledge the ways in which their social location informs their reading and offers mutual opportunity to challenge prejudice and bias: "We have the challenge to turn the postcolonial 'contact zones' into places of mutual learning, and places for trying out new ideas and strategies for the emancipation of all" (2005, 99). There is a place even for those from within dominant/dominating cultures to bring their positions of power to read alongside what has been marginalised. Seeking to see *with* marginalised characters disrupts the power dynamics in their characterisation, opening new conversation which disturbs dominant interpretations. As Koenig suggests, the attention we offer to characters we meet in texts has the power to "similarly condition our response to the human 'characters' we meet in the world" (2011, 6).

## Why Nineveh?

"Jonah is everywhere" (Limburg 1993, 9). Yet, while the Book of Jonah has featured prominently in research (and beyond), the focus has tended to be upon the eponymous protagonist or the character of God, leaving aside the city of Nineveh and its inhabitants. In popular and ecclesial imagination, the Book of Jonah is often reduced to images of a man inside a fish, with little space left to explore other areas of the story. What is a multi-faceted and complex story is rendered one-dimensional. Perry observes, "We have become too fixed in our own ways, too convinced that we already know what the book says" (2006, xvi). The character and characterisation of Nineveh bears scrutiny, for neither the label of repentant gentile nor evil empire adequately describe what is found within the text itself. Reading Jonah with postcolonial imagination offers a framework for thinking our way into the characterisation of Nineveh. Nineveh is able to become a powerful site for unlearning and re-patterning, when this so called "minor" character is offered a "major" focus.

Beginning with an interpretive process that seeks to read with what has been marginalised, so as to disrupt power structures in text and interpretation, I can almost hear the murmurs and shouts: what could Nineveh possibly have to do with the marginalised? This article foregrounds the ambiguities surrounding identity. It seems likely that Nineveh takes its place in the imagination of the text's probable original readers as a symbol of empire and violence (see Ben Zvi 2003). Yet the text itself is ambiguous in such a characterisation. As a white middle-class educated western woman living as a member of a dominant/dominating culture in the former British colony of Australia, I am (at least partially) aware of my privilege and the violence of systems within which I am complicit; I do not deny historical Assyria their own guilt and complicity. Yet in the Book of Jonah, Nineveh is at best a marginalised centre. Strict identity is problematized. The characteristics of the text do not seem to conform with the assumptions we have brought with us. Mieke Bal writes that a character repressed within a text requires a reader who "helps it return, and perhaps, creates it" (1988, 239). Sharon Ringe notes that as critique works to "jar" interpretation at any point, the whole interpretative system "moves" (1998, 140). In other words, if the Nineveh of the Book of Jonah has been marginalised, then reading along with this character works to open up new imaginative borderlands, fracturing fixed dichotomy between centre and periphery, dominant and marginal, good and evil. Our

interpretation jarred at this juncture, we are confronted with the need to look afresh at other biblical texts and characters we are also so sure we know and understand. In reading again with Nineveh, we recognise that we still have a lot of unlearning to do. And we open new cracks for learning, compassion, alongside new possibilities to seek out justice. For those, like me, who read from a position of religious confession, my unlearning and re-patterning also allows me a deeper appreciation of the character of God.

## Messing Up Boundaries

The Book of Jonah has an affinity to the blurring of boundaries and the possibility of re-imaginings. It defies its classification among the Book of Twelve, the only narrative within its group and the only prophet sent to a non-Israelite city. The very placement of the Book among the prophets, despite its different style and content, raises the question of how it makes meaning, and what meaning-making it disrupts. Located in biblical borderlands, this book messes up boundaries simply in its existence and canonical location(s): “it is the ideal book for raising the question of what we mean by (and can possibly entertain in the context of) the ‘biblical’, and what expectations scholars and general readers alike project onto a biblical book” (Sherwood 2000, 4).

This is a narrative where God, people, animals, and inanimate objects (such as the thinking ship in 1:4) do not act as might be expected. God doesn’t do what God wants (to destroy Nineveh) and acts with characteristics not often associated with God (repenting). God doesn’t do what Jonah wants (let him die, destroy Nineveh). Jonah does neither what he wants (he is badgered to go to Nineveh and is then unable to die), nor what God wants (he flees towards Tarshish and is angered by God’s response to Nineveh). The people of Nineveh do not respect their hierarchies (they repent before the King and his great ones) and the Ninevite animals act as humans (joining the repentant fast). While the book begins clearly with the word of YHWH coming to Jonah, it ends ambiguously with a confounding unanswered question that seems to equate God’s compassion with numerical value (4:10). The story of the book is mixed up, its ending offering no neat closure. In the midst of the confusion, fissures appear over the identity and role of Nineveh, and God’s action upon the city.

The anecdote of a ministry colleague opens up one such fissure. Working as a university chaplain, he asked a new student where she came from. After a moment of hesitation, she spoke of being from Nineveh. She said that if Jonah had not come to her city then she and her family would not today be alive. She traced her family heritage to a Scriptural text in a story that intertwined her faith and life experiences. Yet her story serves to highlight one of the dilemmas of the Book of Jonah and Nineveh’s place within it: who is the real Nineveh? Is Nineveh the city of repentance, spared by God, and example to all who would seek to serve this God? Or is Nineveh the city destroyed by Babylon in 612 BCE, who Nahum and Zephaniah gloat over? Gaps and fractures appear, with the question emerging of how we ought to understand this strange (fictional?) character whose name leads us to a (factual?) place archaeologists dig and explore. The idea of a single, coherent Nineveh across Scripture is illusory. The patterns of truth, fiction, and reality are questioned by the disconnection between the truth of Nineveh’s fairy tale ending in Jonah and the truth that is recorded in other sources. Yet, does one

Nineveh undermine or override the other? Does history undermine (the book of) Jonah, or does (the book of) Jonah undermine history?

For Christian interpretation, where Jonah is better known than Nahum and Zephaniah, the spared Nineveh is likely to be understood as the “real” Nineveh. The way that Nineveh is used in Jesus’ speech within the gospels of Matthew 12 and Luke 11 intensifies the spared Nineveh as real for Christian readers. While there are some slight differences in expression, both share in common an utterance of Jesus affirming the repentance and sparing of Nineveh. Nineveh is praised because of the way its people responded to Jonah’s prophecy: “The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32). The image of Nineveh portrayed within these gospels is as a city spared and now greater than those to whom Jesus is speaking (in Luke 11:29, “the crowd”; in Matthew 12:38, “some of the scribes and Pharisees”). For Christian interpretation, Jesus is “the ultimate strong” reader, whose scriptural interpretation matters to others as well as to himself (Sherwood 2000, 12). There is a deep authority given to the way Jesus presents the Jonah story and its characters. Yet Jesus was praising as righteous a city long since destroyed, and one deemed to be the enemy of God’s people within other portions of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The boundary between fact and fiction in the character of Nineveh is a rich interpretive borderland. Nineveh’s dual fates of salvation within the Book of Jonah and destruction within history ask how to hold together contradictory information and ambiguity in reading Scripture. The firm claims of the narrative that Nineveh was spared by God cuts across the contemporary non-existence of Nineveh. The fall of Nineveh to Babylon questions the temperamentality of God’s character and mind as well as the firmness of God’s word.

The question of fact and fiction helps to raise the myriad borderlands which Nineveh inhabits. Gaines reminds us that this is a Hebrew book written for a Hebrew audience (2003, 131). Here, Nineveh, as non-Israelite, stands in the periphery, outside the community, culture and language of the writers and recipients of the narrative. Ben Zvi also notes a process of “partial Israelitization” of Nineveh at work within the story (2003, 75). The multilingual and cross-cultural reality of Jonah’s encounter with a city from a different cultural milieu is ignored (Havea 2012, 182). Nineveh’s cultural characteristics and idiosyncrasies are flattened out: the King of Nineveh shows excellent Hebrew linguistic skills and good knowledge of Hebrew Scripture and theology (Sherwood 2000, 264). While Nineveh may have represented empire and dominance at various points in Israel’s history, the Jonah text offers a Nineveh whose language and culture are subverted.

In belonging to the canon of stories within Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the boundaries of interpretation and identity between these different communities are again blurred. While warning against the anti-Semitic readings that have too often been found in Christian interpretation history, Sherwood suggests of Jewish and Christian readings that ultimately “the boundary is unpoliceable” (2000, 74). Furthermore, the ways that Nineveh has been understood have shifted dramatically over time and space, seeped in social and political context. This is particularly in terms of how Nineveh’s evil, ambiguous and unexplained within the text, has been identified. For example, Luther suggested that only “saints” lived within Nineveh, while some of the Midrash suggested that the Ninevite

repentance was a deceptive continuation of their wicked ways (see Sasson 1990, 244). Calvin's perspective was thoroughly anti-Jewish, but just as thoroughly anti-Catholic (see Sherwood 2000, 33). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, preachers such as John Hooper and John Brentius intertwined Nineveh with a positive image of imperial England (see Staffell 2008). For some contemporary Christian readings, Nineveh's gentile status is used to suggest that "God is on our side." The evil has been banished for "the plot flows in our interests, it vindicates our position, and God, throughout, is demonstrating his love for us, his Ninevites" (Sherwood 2000, 184). Is this a text where YHWH places a city with a ruthless imperial record on notice, or where YHWH condones imperial behaviour through forgiveness?

Jonah's plot moves through a series of physical scenes. Movement through and between the physical spaces of these scenes also works to undermine fixed notions of where centre and periphery might be found, fracturing the concept. This tension is set up from the opening of the Book, where Nineveh is centre-stage, offered up in YHWH's words to Jonah (1:2). YHWH's interest in Jonah is in directing him towards the city. The physical space of Nineveh is set-up as central within the geography of the book. Yet Jonah's character undermines this central focus in turning to seek out other places. There is a tension between the way Jonah and YHWH treat the physical space that is the city of Nineveh. When Jonah eventually travels to Nineveh (3:3), it is after much duress: seeking transport to a far port in Tarshish (1:3), seeking sanctuary in the ship's inner parts (1:5), seeking death in the sea (1:12), seeking solace from inside the big fish (2:1). Nineveh is thus understood to be the last place Jonah would *choose* to go. It is an undesirable location to be avoided. It is a place where life will be difficult.

On finally arriving to offer up his prophecy, Jonah does not enter into the heart of the city. Instead he walks one day's journey inside a city which is described as requiring a three-day journey to cross (3:3, 4). Following his utterance, Jonah leaves Nineveh quickly (4:5). His actions suggest a desire to minimise time within the city bounds. While the failure to enter into the whole city suggests the possibility that it holds a negative power over him, there is also the possibility that Jonah seeks to physically minimise YHWH's attention to Nineveh through his own dismissal of its importance. Yet the city *does* remain the focus of YHWH's attention, whether for judgement (1:2) or for grace (3:10). Nineveh becomes a borderland for the dialogue and relationship between Jonah and his God. It is a location simultaneously foregrounded and forgotten.

### **Nineveh before God's face**

Nineveh is often described as unimportant within the scheme of Jonah's plot (Sasson 1990, 340). Yet the book begins with God's attention drawn forcefully to this city, this great city, this great evil city with its evil rising up to God's face, catalyst for a prophet to be commanded in an unusual direction, into "foreign space" (Ben Zvi 2003, 96). Nineveh is described as a "great city" four times in Jonah (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11), with three of these attributed to YHWH's speech. In the mention of evil and the instruction to call out against Nineveh, YHWH's perception of the (great) city appears negative. There is a sense that the evil must be very *evil*. Whatever Nineveh did or represented has captivated God. In 1:2 there is a link to those other cities of evil reputation and complete destruction, Sodom

and Gomorrah, with the language of this verse mirroring what is found in Gen. 18:21. Perhaps the evil seen by YHWH is deeper even than that of Sodom as “the wickedness of the Ninevites leaps to Yahweh’s eye quite directly (similarly Lam 1:22) and not merely (as in earlier texts) by way of a mediating cry that goes up from it (cf. Gen 4:10; 18:21; 1Sam 5:13)” (Wolff 1977, 100). Yet all this conjecture is deeply suspect, for the behaviour of the Ninevites in chapter 3 does not reflect the “evil” that God first names. The prophet is not killed, the prophet is not mocked, there is no behaviour listed or enacted that bears up the charge that is supposedly rising to God’s presence. Rather, the city that God sees in 1:2 is incongruent with the city presented in chapter 3.

There is also a question of whether God perceives Nineveh as a static block or of multiple inhabitants and peoples. Are *all* the people truly evil and culpable? Every city includes “ordinary” inhabitants. Inevitably, there exist those whose lives are lived in the under-class of any empire. What of those who have been exploited by the city of Nineveh, or perhaps by the King and his great ones? What of the poor, the workers, the children, the women, the powerless? What of the animals or even the city itself, part of the built creation? In the Midrash, the Ninevites are described as holding their children out towards the sky, calling upon God to take notice of these little ones also, those who did not have violence on their hands (Limburg 1993, 111). The complexity of Nineveh is minimised in perceiving the city as a unified whole. The vulnerable subjects of the city, those who receive rather than perpetrate its evil, are kept voiceless and unseen. Even the Nineveh described in detail by those scholars who seek to highlight the historical atrocities of the Assyrian empire would not have been so simple to pass off as a single unit. Timmer writes of the “brutal and merciless” military might of Assyria and its use of intimidation (2011, 64). LaCocque and LaCocque make the harrowing connection between Assyria’s capital Nineveh and Nazi Germany (1990, xxiv). There is a truth here that is difficult to grasp and important to state. But it is not the whole or only truth.

The harsh perception suggested in 1:2 already begins to crack in God’s second direction of Jonah towards Nineveh. לַי (‘against’) is replaced, softened; the calling out is now לָ, “to,” followed by the remark that Nineveh is not only great but great to God. The change of language suggests a subtle softening of God’s perspective. God seems to turn away from anger, instead pondering the identity of Nineveh. Is God sure of who this city is, of who these people are? It appears that Nineveh may be unknown to the god of the heavens who made the dry land and the sea. The Book of Jonah has often been understood as a story where God guides Jonah through the development of his character, leading him through different stages of learning and through various pitfalls, taking care with him and offering him multiple opportunities to engage with and even dialogue with his God. In the shifting perception of God towards Nineveh, another story can be imagined. It is this background city who acts as guide, problematizing God’s own strong perception of evil, and leading God to reconsider God’s own position. In such development, Nineveh undercuts the easy and established presumptions about its own character, but also any easy dichotomy between power and vulnerability, good and evil.

The possibility of deception on the part of the Ninevites has also been suggested. *Midrash Jonah* is one interpretation which suggests duplicity on the part of the Ninevites, who tricked God into forgiveness:

According to Rabbi ben Chalfatha the people of Nineveh carried out a deceptive kind of repentance . . . They placed calves inside their houses and mothers outside, so that the calves cried and howled inside and their mothers outside. The people said to the Holy One, blessed be He! If you do not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy on these. (cited in Limburg 1993, 111)

There is also a distinction between the portrayal of repentance within the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli*) and the Palestinian Talmud (*Yerushalmi*) (Sherwood 2000, 106). Within the *Bavli*, the repentance is recorded as superlative and presented as exemplary. The *Yerushalmi* can be seen in a manner akin to pantomime, expressing “a cynical exercise in divine blackmail (instant repentance: just add sackcloth)” (107). These multiple interpretations found within the tradition serve to heighten the power of Nineveh over YHWH, for the city can pull the wool over the eyes of an unsuspecting God who will later discover his error, change his mind again, and ensure the city’s complete destruction.

God’s interest in Nineveh offers a counter-point to God’s seeming lack of interest in the sailors of Chapter 1. Caught up in the storm YHWH hurls upon the sea, the sailors each cry out to their gods (1:5). However, once they have heard Jonah speak of worshipping YHWH (1:9), and see the changes wrought by throwing Jonah to see the sea, they feared YHWH with a great fear, they sacrificed a sacrifice to YHWH and they vowed vows (1:16). Their response is to YHWH, whom Jonah has identified as the *’ēlōhîm* of the heavens who made the sea and the dry land (1:9). Their actions are directed specifically to YHWH, without ambiguity (even though there is little indication within the story that YHWH is concerned with the sailors other than eliciting their hurling of Jonah into the sea). In contrast, the Ninevites in Jonah never refer to or respond to YHWH, only to *’ēlōhîm*. That is to say, while they are responding to god(s), they are not necessarily responding to Jonah’s God. Jonah never tells them he is a prophet of YHWH (or any other god) or whose word he speaks to them. There is ambiguity in their response.

There is a deep irony here. On the one hand, the sailors *see* YHWH and direct their actions towards him, yet there is no indication that they are seen. They see but are not seen. YHWH does not direct his speech or actions towards them; he is unconcerned with these mariners who do not want to throw a fellow human being into the storming seas. There is no sense that YHWH would have relented the storm to spare the sailors if they had refused to commit what their prayer suggests is the spilling of innocent blood (1:14). These sailors are seemingly invisible. On the other hand, YHWH *sees* Nineveh’s evil rising and pursues the city through Jonah. YHWH repents of the evil that was to be done to Nineveh. Yet YHWH is not *seen* by Nineveh. They deal solely with *’ēlōhîm*. As the people respond (3:5) it is to a grammatically indefinite *’ēlōhîm* that we might suppose to be YHWH, but who might just as well be another god. It is not until the speech of the king that *’ēlōhîm* becomes *hā’ēlōhîm* (3:9). Limburg suggests that this distinction in language is an obvious choice, given the setting “in Assyria where the people do not know anything about the Lord (Yahweh)” (1993, 78). Yet if the city is so important to God, then why would YHWH not seek to be known by the

power of his name? If YHWH will not reveal his name, then how important could the great city be?

## Nineveh under Jonah's Gaze

Jonah's character shapes much of what the reader sees and experiences through the Book of Jonah. We have already noted that Jonah's first response to Nineveh is to avoid it (1:3). Fleeing from YHWH, in the opposite direction to Nineveh, he does not want to view, enter, or proclaim against the city. He has perhaps already assumed that he knows what he will find. Jonah is not willing to genuinely encounter Nineveh, preferring to rest with the unnamed stereotypes he holds. The only information the reader has been given at this stage is of "great" Nineveh's "evil" rising up to YHWH's face; Jonah's reaction to YHWH's command serves to confirm this concept of the evil city. Such generalisations of places and their inhabitants are difficult to sustain. Labelling a city "evil" does not open up the myriad situations of inhabitants, the power differences between the later mentioned king and his subjects, even the way the animals are drawn into the story. In refusing to acknowledge that there might be those within Nineveh who do not engage in "evil," those who may be trapped within a system of domination, Jonah himself becomes a figure of domination, for the memory of Nineveh preserved becomes one-sided: it is *all* evil. In an ironic twist, while Assyria may have dominated/colonised Israel, it is the naming of Assyria by this story which has become dominant through biblical history.

When he enters the city, the prophet is lacklustre in his prophesying. His short five-word utterance is unlike any other biblical prophecy (Gaines 2003, 88). It is ambiguous and ambivalent. We are uncertain of whether Jonah or YHWH has authored this speech. Is it disrespectful to speak such a short warning to a city under threat when commanded by YHWH to proclaim against/to it? Jonah does not name from whom the message came, nor how the Ninevites ought to respond. Given that he knows the provenance of the utterance, he leverages this power of knowledge over them. He keeps the city ignorant of his knowledge, that what has come up before YHWH has been named as "evil." He maintains his distance from the people. Perhaps it is also significant that he is found among the "ordinary" people, rather than seeking out the king and great ones within the city. Of all those who may be guilty of perpetrating evil structures and systems, surely Jonah would find those who need to hear his words in positions of power. Yet Jonah speaks to those most likely victims and innocents within their own city.

Jonah's view of Nineveh is further witnessed in his utterance in 3:4: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" הפך means "to turn" or "to overturn." It is the word used to describe the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. The intertextual link with the story of Sodom is strong such that the resonance of destruction seems to overpower the multi-valence of the root word. Yet, the same form is also used to suggest a reversal, such as within the Book of Esther (9:1), or transformation (Job 3:4; Exodus 7:17; Esther 9: 22). There are also a number of passages where הפך is used to indicate deliverance, including Deut. 23:5, Ps. 66:6 and Jer. 31:13. Jonah thinks he has a grasp on language, that he has condemned Nineveh to the same fate as those other great and evil cities. However, Jonah has failed to see the breadth of interpretations Nineveh might employ. The ambiguity in הפך is symbolic of the presentation of Nineveh within the Book of

Jonah. There is a clear, loud, brash statement of character, of “evil,” which is then held up against a repentant city whose actions belie their initial characterisation:

The word that Jonah is given is a hinged word, a curse-blessing, a word that declines to fulfil its obvious referential responsibilities, a word that booms “Nineveh will be destroyed,” then, when no one is listening any longer, whispers in parenthesis, “(or restored).” (Sherwood 2000, 117)

Nineveh might also be described as a “hinged” city, whose description as evil can be turned topsy-turvy when what is seen is not mockery, not rejection, not derision of the prophet of YHWH, but action that is appropriate, good, and just.

Unhappy with all this overturning, Jonah leaves the city, to sit and watch it from the East. He knows that God has decided not to destroy Nineveh. Fiercely angry, he sits, waiting to see what would become of the city (4.5). In this way, Jonah places the city under his gaze. It is objectified in his view, under his watch. There is a power in his position: somehow he knows God’s mind; he knows God’s actions; and as the speaker of God’s words he does not communicate this information to Nineveh. When Jonah realises God has taken a compassionate view of the city, he does not continue to act as prophet and speak the word of God to the Ninevites. Rather, he removes himself from the city, taking the word of God with him and marginalising the city.

The repenting Ninevites are abandoned by Jonah. They are left uncertain of God’s action towards them. We imagine the people, the king and even the herds maintaining their fast for forty days, in fear of the consequence of God’s displeasure, betting on a “perhaps,” uncertain what “overturning” may take place. Similarly, at the end of these days, are they assured of their sparing or do they continue to live in fear of the overturning that may come? Do the Ninevites themselves recognise their repentance as an overturning of sorts? What happens to the uncertainty of the King of Nineveh, mirrored in the people (and beasts), in the face of no word from Jonah (or God) which confirms (or changes) their fate? The easy response might be that at the end of forty days (or three, for those reading the Septuagint’s time of heightened terror) all would be revealed, with the city still standing, the people still living, and the cattle still braying.

Knowing that God has changed his mind, perhaps Jonah is attempting to undermine any potential relationship between God and the people, beasts and city of Nineveh. Yet, even here, Jonah’s silence would work to diminish the standing of God in the eyes of Nineveh. Perhaps this God does not exist with his word and his prophet vanished. Furthermore, within the Hebrew Bible, the term forty days can be understood to mean “a long time,” rather than an exact timing (Gaines 2003, 89). No one tells Nineveh that God’s mind has changed. There is only silence. The city is left to wait, in a moment of perpetual wondering of when and if the prophecy would be fulfilled.

There have been suggestions that Jonah is angry with God, rather than Nineveh: “He expresses no direct hostility towards the Ninevites” (Gaines 2003, 128); “God has become his adversary and he says it loud and clear” (LaCocque and LaCocque 1990, 142; also Timmer 2011, 119). Yet how would the Ninevites have perceived this man sitting on the hill? Would they not understand the force of his silence towards them as a confirmation of his short prophecy? We might imagine them watch him as he left the city, as he found his place to its East,

watching. Did they believe he was waiting to see his prophecy of destruction fulfilled? It is doubtful they would so easily take up the suggestion that Gaines has made, of Jonah's lack of hostility towards them. Given, as Limburg has suggested, that the listener/reader is placed through the questions of the book into the place of Jonah (1993, 25), Jonah's hostility and objectification of Nineveh becomes in turn a "natural" reading. The reader sees the city through his eyes, joining him in anger and watching for what might come next, silencing Nineveh through Jonah's silence towards them.

For Ryu, Jonah's silence is his active resistance towards YHWH, his only means of answering YHWH's injustice of forgiveness, given the power imbalance between God and creature (2009, 218). There is certainly no passivity in Jonah's silence towards YHWH, but this active silence has begun well before, with the force of Jonah's silence bringing its own destruction to Nineveh. In one of her works on the Book of Judges, Bal writes of the "cutting speech act" which has the force of killing, sacrificing, cutting its object (1988, 233): "The linguistic powerlessness of some categories of subjects is congruent to their physical objectification" (243). Here words may become s/words, powerful to the point of death (167). Jonah's silence may not be a s/word in its articulation, but it is a s/word nonetheless, in its lack of dialogue which might bring ease, comfort, relief. It is a silence that extends for the Ninevites the fear of their fate, the uncertainty of their future, and the physical effects of fast upon their bodies. Just as Bal seeks to say of Jephthah: "behold his daughter, rather than just seeing the *gibbor hayil*, the divine plan or the conquest of Canaan" (238), so might we seek to see *Nineveh* in the book of Jonah rather than simply seeing the man in the big fish, the divine plan, or a didactic tale of obedience. The cutting power of silence is underlined, as a prophet withholds words which might bring life, living out his own wish for death vicariously through the objectified city.

## Overthrowing Nineveh

Kwok's postcolonial imagination has helped to focus this reading upon those places within the Book of Jonah which do not fit neatly into existing frameworks, helping to open up new interpretive possibilities. The irony of Nineveh is that, where once historically dominant, it has not been the primary teller of its story. There is an uncertain boundary between its status as coloniser and colonised, a fragmentation of factually fictitious identity, and discomfort that what has been powerful has become what is marginalised. Here we find the borderlands inherent within the book. Many readings seek to smooth over these ambiguities to impose coherency that may not be present. For confessional readers highlighting gaps and fissures can seem jarring. Yet, this process can help to overthrow overly simplistic fixed identities that smooth over marginalisation(s). In seeking to un-smooth the text, the question emerges of who has sought to make our interpretations of Nineveh or Jonah neat and to what end? The present reading does not escape such criticism.

Postcolonial methodologies cannot be ignored by biblical scholars in Australia. They offer insight on learning to read power structures and to acknowledge where I (we) continue to minoritize others. It is my hope that this reading of Jonah has offered insight into the character of Nineveh, widening the cracks in readings of the big, bad city. If this attempt to see Nineveh has succeeded

in jarring closed, familiar readings which undermine the city's ambiguity within the Jonah story, then this reading has been fruitful. This borderland seeks out others: where are the other biblical characters we have assumed that we already know, and so have silenced? Where in our communities, of faith or otherwise, have we rested upon assumption that refuse to see with others? As a text among the prophets, even the prophetic borderlands, perhaps the authoritative socialisation and (trans)formative purpose the Book of Jonah offers to us is found in its transgressive nature, which teaches us to unlearn and reimagine.

Following the sense of movement and journey suggested by Kwok (2005, 44), this reading leaves a trace for others to pick up, continue and critique. It is an offer to others to take up the ideas and continue in conversation. I await the next speech turn, to continue the dialogue of what the Book of Jonah continues to say.

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