

Jonah through the Looking Glass: Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer's Portrait of an Apocalyptic Prophet¹

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Introduction

The midrash *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* (PRE), composed most likely in Palestine in the mid-eighth century, is an imaginative retelling of the biblical stories with a unique “sense of an ending” (Frank Kermode’s term). Joseph Heinemann classically categorized it, along with many compositions of the Second Temple Period such as *Jubilees*, *Genesis Apocryphon*, and *Biblical Antiquities*—as ‘Rewritten Bible’ [*Mikra Meshukhtav*]; though elsewhere I have suggested the less problematic term—“Narrative Midrash.”² PRE shares not only a formal resemblance to many of these works, but also resonates with their keen sense of living in an epoch, on the verge of the messianic era, when the “foundations of life shook beneath their feet.”³ In fact, PRE can be characterized within the genre of “apocalyptic eschatology.”⁴ It demonstrates many of the traits of

1. This paper was originally presented at the World Congress of Jewish Studies Conference in Jerusalem, August 2009. It is part of a larger chapter on “Jonah’s Sojourn in the Netherworld” (A literary analysis of *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* Chapter 10), in my book *The Return of the Repressed: Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 193–239.

2. See my discussion of the genre of PRE in Adelman, *ibid.*, 3–21.

3. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 47.

4. These traits are characteristic of many Jewish apocalyptic works of the eighth and ninth century such as *The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel* [*sefer zerubavel*], published in *Midrashei Ge’ulah*, ed. Kaufmann (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954), 55–88. See also Martha Himmelfarb’s translation and commentary, “Sefer Zerubbabel,” in *Rabbinic Fantasies*, ed. David Stern (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 67–90; *Mysteries of Shimon Ben Yoḥai* [*nistarot rash”bi*], published in *Beit ha-Midrash*, ed. Jellinek (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1938), 3: 78–82; Midrash on the Ten Kings [*’asseret ha-melakhim*], in *Beit ‘Eked*, ed. S. Horovitz (Berditshov, 1892), 38–55; and *The Prayer of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yoḥai* [*tefilat rash”bi*], also in *Beit ha-Midrash*, ed. Jellinek (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1938), 4: 117–126. For a description of the historical

apocalypticism established by John J. Collins, most notably: an anticipation of cosmic catastrophe, a relationship between end time (the eschaton) and cosmic history, and a developed image of a future savior, be it the Messiah or a messianic precursor.⁵

The chapter on Jonah's sojourn in the netherworld (PRE 10) most notably illustrates the author's apocalyptic sensibility. Jonah, the reluctant emissary of God's word, serves surprisingly as a messianic prototype.⁶ Initially, the chapter *seems to* be addressing the conventional question:

background to these compositions, see M. Gil, *A History of Palestine 634–1099* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 61–64; and Kaufman's introduction to *Midreshei Ge'ulah*, 54–55. See also Jacob Elbaum's article on messianic themes in PRE: "Meshihiut be-Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer—Apoqalipsau-Midrash," *Te'udah* 11 (1996): 260–264 (Heb.).

5. John J. Collins suggests that apocalypse, as a genre, must be distinguished from apocalypticism as a sociological movement or belief. He proposes the following definition of apocalypse: "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world" (*The Apocalyptic Imagination* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988], 5). Apocalypticism has the following features: the acute expectation of the fulfillment of divine promises; cosmic catastrophe; a relationship between the time of the end and preceding human and cosmic history; angelology and demonology; salvation beyond catastrophe; salvation proceeding from God; a future savior figure with royal characteristics; and a future state characterized by the catchword "glory." This definition is based on Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (Naperville, IN: A. R. Allenson, 1972), 28–33, cited in Michael E. Stone, "Apocalyptic Literature," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. Michael E. Stone (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 393.

6. In a fascinating article, Yehuda Liebes suggests that Jonah, in PRE, may be figured as the "Messiah of the tribe of Joseph" (Y. Liebes "Jonah as the Messiah ben Joseph," in *Studies in Jewish Thought* 3, 1–2 (1983/4), 269–311 (Heb.). See also L. Ginzberg *Legends of the Jews* 4 (1928), 351, note 38. According to *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* (S.E.R.) 18, Jonah is associated with the Messiah, descendant of Joseph (cf. Ish Shalom's introduction to S.E.R. (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1969), 11–12). There are several such hints as to Jonah's messianic status in PRE: 1) Jonah is identified as the son of the widow of Zarephath, whom Elijah brings back to life (PRE 33, based on 1 Kgs 17:17–19), who is identified as the "Messiah of the tribe of Joseph" in *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah* 18 (Ish Shalom *ibid.*, 97–98); 2) He makes an oath to sacrifice the Leviathan in the End of Days, for the feast of the righteous. However, Liebes' identification of Jonah in PRE with the tribe of Joseph is problematic, since the Palestinian tradition suggests that Jonah is either a descendant of Zebulun or Asher (coastal tribes), not of Benjamin at all. In *y. Sukkah* 5:1 (55a), and *Gen. Rab.* 98:13 (Theodor-Albeck, 1965: 1261), Jonah is also identified as the widow of Zarephath's son, without reference to his messianic status. Furthermore, in PRE 19 the messianic figure is named "Menahem ben Amiel ben Yosef" not

Given God's omniscience, why does the prophet presume to flee from the divine presence? The midrash, however, ignores the theological issue and presents the reason for Jonah's flight in terms of an ideological resistance to the mission. The prophet's defiance against the call to Nineveh is a means of discovering his 'true' mission. Commanded to rise up and go to Nineveh ["...*kum lekh 'el ninveh*"], Jonah defies the divine word, resolutely sailing westward, sea-bound to Tarshish, rather than eastward and overland to Nineveh. Instead of 'rising up,' he undergoes a series of descents—to Joppa ("va-yered yafo" v.3), into the ship ["va-yered bah" v. 3], and down to the recesses of it ["yarad 'el yarketey ha-sefinah" v. 5], where he falls into a deep slumber ["va-yeradem" v. 5], and eventually he is thrown into the sea and swallowed by the great fish. For Jonah, the deep sleep is an extension of his flight from God's presence. It is not only a retreat from consciousness, but also, as Ackerman points out, "an unconscious pursuit of death,"⁷ and, according to the midrash, leads to an inadvertent discovery of his alternative, esoteric call. In this paper, I propose to explore both the mode of discovery and destiny of Jonah's other mission.

Part I: Why Jonah flees

The chapter on Jonah is found in the context of the narrative expansions on Cosmogony (PRE 3–12), and follows elaborations on the fifth day of Creation (PRE 9; Gen 1:20–22). On that day, all living creatures swarmed forth from the waters, including the fish and the great sea monsters (*taninim*), linked in midrashic lore to the Leviathan.⁸ The fifth day, in chapter 10, is also identified as the day Jonah fled from the presence of God and the day the great fish was designated to be swallowed by the Leviathan, thus anticipating the role Jonah will play, both as victim (i.e. fodder for the fish) and vanquisher (of the Leviathan) in his encounter with the Sea.

Jonah. In principle, I agree with Liebes that Jonah, while he may not be "the Messiah of the tribe of Joseph," serves as a messianic prototype along the lines of Elijah *redivivus*.

7. J. S. Ackerman "Satire and Symbolism in the Song of Jonah," in *Traditions in Transformation*, eds. B. Halpern and J. Levenson (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake Inc., 1981), 230

8. The classic midrashic literature and Talmud identify the *taninim* with the Leviathan (cf. *b. Bava Batra* 74b–75a; *Gen. Rab.* 7:4 [Theodor-Albeck, 1966: 52], and Tg. Ps.-Jon. on Gen. 1:21). PRE 9, however, identifies the *taninim* as the great fish destined to be eaten by the Leviathan—the fish that swallowed Jonah was one of those.

Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 109

The fifth day of the week was also the day on which Jonah fled from God's presence. And why did he flee? Because the first time, He (God) sent him to restore the borders of Israel and his words were fulfilled, as it says: "It was he (Jeroboam) who restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the promise that the Lord, the God of Israel, had made through His servant the prophet Jonah son of Amitai from Gath-hepher" (2 Kgs 14:25).

The second time, the Holy One Blessed be He sent him to Jerusalem to destroy it, {but because they repented}¹⁰ God took pity on them, and changed His mind about the decree of doom and did not destroy it. And the Israelites called Jonah a false prophet.

The third time, he was sent to Nineveh to destroy it. Jonah deliberated to himself, "I know that these gentiles are close to repenting. Now when they repent, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will be filled with mercy towards them and transfer His fury [onto the enemies of Israel] {onto Israel}.¹¹ Is it not enough that the Israelites call me a false prophet, must the nations of the earth call me a false prophet as well?"

According to the midrash, Jonah was sent on three missions though only two are recorded in the biblical text. After his success with Jeroboam II, of the Northern Kingdom, he is sent on a second mission to call upon Jerusalem, perhaps with the same words he would decry to the Ninevites: "In another forty days, *Jerusalem* will be destroyed." Presumably the Israelites repent¹² and the city is saved from doom. His own people then accuse Jonah of being a "false prophet," conveying a misunderstanding of the original prophecy as unconditional and, inadvertently, making a farce of their

9. This translation is based on the En866 manuscript, supplemented with reference to the printed editions and six alternative manuscripts. In the printed editions and most manuscripts, the chapter is the tenth, while in Ca2858 (Higger's), P, and W it is the ninth. For a critical Hebrew edition, see my book, *The Return of the Repressed*, Appendix I, 299–302. The midrash is copied, almost verbatim, in *Tanhuma Vayikra* 8. In fact, the Mantova version cites PRE in the margins. It also appears as part of *Midrash Yonah* (in Jellinek's *Beit Midrash* 1939 1:96–105), and *Yalkut Shimoni* on Jonah.

10. Added from the Ci75 and the printed editions.

11. The manuscript, En866, uses couched language (*lashon sagin nahor*)—"transfer His fury onto the enemies of Israel." The literal meaning is that Israel will 'take the brunt' of God's wrath when the gentiles repent. This is reflected in the printed editions and many of the manuscripts which simply read: "transfer His fury onto Israel."

12. Not all the manuscripts (including En866) state this explicitly.

atonement. That is, they assume the fulfillment of the prophecy of doom to be independent of their repentance. Apparently a prophet's reputation, like a weatherman's, hinges on his predictions of the future, not on his ability to effect spiritual transformation. In the words of Elias Bickerman, by interpreting prophetic statements as irrevocable truths—*fata denunciativa* (declaratory destiny) rather than *fata conditionalia* (conditional fate)—Jonah's office is misconstrued. A prophet is simply a herald not a watchman (like Ezekiel), "who blows a horn to warn his people of coming danger."¹³ When the *fata denunciativa* fails to materialize, the Israelites essentially dub the prophet "a self-deconstructing fool."¹⁴ Jonah, based on this experience, comes to misunderstand the nature of prophecy. Harbinger of unequivocally predictive statements, he takes their accusation of false prophecy to heart and flees, fearing further blemish on his reputation.

The midrash conjectures yet another motive for Jonah's flight, which reflects an earlier, seemingly contradictory, exegetical tradition found in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*. If the prophecy is *not fulfilled* upon the people of Nineveh it will be transferred onto his own nation: "Jonah thought: I will go abroad, where the *Shekhinah* does not reveal itself. For since the gentiles are inclined to repent, I might cause Israel to be condemned" (*Mek. Bo* 1, ed. Horovitz-Rabin 1960: 3–4). This tannaitic midrash suggests that Jonah rejects his mission to Nineveh because the repentance of the Ninevites "is bad for the Jews"—it makes them look *unrepentant* by contrast. According to the *Mekhilta*, his protective, zealous stance is characteristic of the prophets who are "claimants on behalf of the son's honor, not on behalf of the father's [*tav'a kavod ha-ben ve-lo tav'a kavod ha-'av*]" (ibid.). Jonah thus defends the nation *against* God's conjectured judgment. As R. Nathan suggests, he is willing to "drown himself in the sea" on behalf of his people in his diligent flight from the divine word, "as it says, 'And he said to [the sailors]: Heave me overboard into the sea... ' (Jonah 1:2)" (*Mek. Bo* 1, ibid.). The *Mekhilta* essentially presents a defense of Jonah's particularistic stance and does not assume an ironic perspective on Jonah's understanding of the nature of prophecy. Instead, he is praised as being on par with the

13. E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 33, 40.

14. This is Terry Eagleton's expression, "J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah," in *The Book and the Text*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Oxford: Basil & Blackwell, 1990), 235.

patriarchs and other prophets willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the nation.

PRE, by contrast, seems to mock Jonah. In presenting two reasons for his flight—the first, as a defense of his own ego against the accusation of “false prophecy,” and the second as a defense of his nation in contrast to the repentant gentiles—a fault line can be detected. On the one hand, the prophet anticipates failure in being deemed a “false prophet,” while, on the other hand, he fears success in bringing about the repentance of the Ninevites (and the condemnation of Israel, by contrast). Is this a clumsy attempt at harmonizing two interpretative traditions, or an ironic reflection on Jonah’s attitude to prophecy? Later, in the account of the Ninevites’ ultimate fate (PRE 43), what actually occurs is a delay in the decree—instead of the Ninevites being destroyed “in another forty days”, the destruction occurs forty years later.¹⁵

Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43¹⁶

For forty years the Holy One, blessed be He, was slow to anger with them, corresponding to the forty days, which He said to Jonah: “In another forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4). After forty years, they returned to their many evil deeds, more so than their former ones, and they were swallowed up like the dead in the lowest Sheol, as says: “Men groan in the city; (the souls of the dead cry out)” (Job 24:12).

This passage may be understood as a polemic against the Christian use of “the sign of Jonah.”¹⁷ In the New Testament, Jonah’s three days and

15. Perhaps alluding to the fate of Nineveh as prophesied in Nahum and Micah (Cf. Mic 5:4–5 and Nah 2:4–3:19).

16. This translation is based on En886. See the discussion of PRE 43 in Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed*, 205–206. This may be based on a homiletical midrash (such as *Pesiqta de-Rab Kahana* 24) on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Haftarah including Hos 14:2–10 (quoted later in PRE 43).

17. The literature on anti-Christian polemics in the Talmud and Midrash is vast. See Phillip Alexander, “‘The Parting of the Ways’ from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135*, ed. J. Dunn (Cambridge 1992), 1–26. And the volume of collected essays: *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Mohr Siebeck 2003). Most recently, Peter Schäfer addressed the question in *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). For historical background on relations between

three nights prefigure the resurrection of Christ: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. 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 12:39–41, NRSV; cf. Luke 11:29–32). An *a fortiori* argument is here implied: Jonah, as a foreshadowing or “sign” of the resurrection inspired the Ninevites, why then could the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is “greater than Jonah,” not inspire the Jews? As Ephraim Urbach pointed out, in his seminal essay “*Teshuvat Anshei Nineveh*,” the Palestinian exegetical tradition portrays the repentance of the Ninevites as superficial, even false, thereby undermining the New Testament suggestion that the conversion of the gentiles (to believe in Christ) casts aspersions on the Jews.¹⁸ PRE 43 is certainly consistent with this tradition—the transformation of the Ninevites was short-lived; in the end, they were condemned to the deepest level of Sheol. The chapter ends, significantly, with a statement that the eschaton (End Time) would only be ushered in with the “great repentance” of Israel, heralded by Elijah, who (like Jonah) is characterized as a zealot for his people.¹⁹

In pointing to the inevitable destruction of Nineveh, the author of PRE betrays sympathy for Jonah’s notions about the irreversibility of prophecy. The fissure between the two reasons for Jonah’s flight is resolved by PRE’s emphasis on the prophet’s zealotry—ultimately he fears the *gentile* accusation of false prophecy *more* than the prospective condemnation-of-Israel-by-contrast: “Is it not enough that the Israelites call me a false prophet, must the nations of the earth call me a false prophet as well” (PRE 10). The question about the nature of prophecy is trumped by national reputation. In PRE 43, one must note that the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy is through a *non-literal* understanding of language; “forty days” becomes “forty years” in this idiomatic reading. Willy nilly, Jonah must be wrenched from his insistence on the surface meaning of words. The prophet’s hubris

Jews and early Christians in Palestine see Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Lands* (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 2000).

18. E. Urbach, “The Repentance of the People of Nineveh and the Jewish-Christian Dispute,” *Tarbiz* 29 (1949): 118–122 (Heb.).

19. See Adelman, *ibid.*, 185–208.

will ultimately be undermined by a deeper descent into the other world, and a revelation of his eschatological purpose in the End of Days. In this way, he is transformed from a logical positivist into a mystic of sorts. We now plunge below the surface to discover the nature of Jonah's alternative, *true* mission.

Part II: The Sojourn in the Belly of the Fish

This last half of the chapter is perhaps the most poetic and fantastical of all the narrative expansions on the Hebrew Bible in this composition. It is also the most elusive, for the author seems to be referring to messianic ideas particular to his historical context, and many of the allusions are lost on the contemporary reader. The passage is replete with eschatological references, suggesting that Jonah plays a far more significant role than he has until now. Why does this recalcitrant prophet, who refuses to carry out God's mission of compassion for the gentiles, become privy to a magical mystery tour of the underworld? This seeming buffoon is indentified with the righteous, uniquely privy to the Pristine Light of Creation. He vanquishes the Leviathan and is resurrected, inspiring the conversion of the sailors. Perhaps the other world is meant to cure him of being a literalist. Alternatively the other world may very well be familiar territory for the arch advocate of 'truth', *Yonah ben Amitai* (lit. dove-man-of-truth). According to a later passage, the prophet is identified as the son of the widow of Zarephath whom Elijah resurrected from the dead (PRE 33),²⁰ and therefore, according to Yehuda Liebes, he constitutes the prime candidate for the position of Messiah of the tribe of Joseph.²¹ Jonah's sojourn and resurrection from the belly of the whale after three days and three nights, is then his second encounter with the other world.

20. In Higger's version PRE 42. The chapter revolves around examples of resurrection in the *Tanakh*; this passage is based on 1 Kgs 17:17–24. The Zohar makes the connection between the widow's words, after the boy's resurrection—"Now I know that you are a man of God and the words of the Lord in your mouth are *true* [*u-devar 'adonai be-fikha 'emet*]" (v. 24) and Jonah's namesake as *ben Amitai* (Zohar 2:197a). See the discussion in Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed*, 237–240.

21. For a list of secondary sources for this idea and the primary sources tracing Jonah's lineage to the widow of Zarephath, see footnote 5. See also the parallel aggadic sources on Elijah's role with regard to the Messiah in *b. Bava Matzi'a* 114b, *Pesiqta Rabbati* 4, and PRE 47.

Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 10 cont...²²

R. Tarfon said: the fish had been appointed to swallow Jonah since the Six Days of Creation {as it says: “And God appointed a huge fish to swallow Jonah” (Jonah 2:1)}. He entered its mouth like a man entering a great synagogue, and stood. The eyes of the fish were like shuttered windows [*afumiot*]²³ which shone, and he could see all that was in the sea and the underworld.

R. Meir said: there was a pearl which hung from within the belly of the fish that lit up all that was in the seas and in the underworld, and of this it says, “Light is sown for the Righteous” (Ps 97:11).²⁴

The fish said to Jonah, “Don’t you know that my day has come to be swallowed by the jaws [lit. mouth] of the Leviathan?” Jonah said, “Take me to him and I shall save you, as well as myself, from his jaws.”

He [the fish] took him [Jonah] to him [the Leviathan]. He [Jonah] said to the Leviathan, “It was for you that I descended to see your abode [in the sea], and I will descend again, in the future, to place a rope through your tongue, and haul you up to sacrifice you for the great feast of the Righteous in the Days to Come.” As it says: “Can you draw out the Leviathan by a fishhook? Can you press down his tongue by a rope?” (Job 40:25). And, not only that, but look at this seal of our forefather Abraham. ‘Look to the covenant (*brit*)’²⁵ and flee!’ And the Leviathan saw the seal of Abraham our forefather and fled from the presence of Jonah a distance of two days.

Jonah’s entrance into the fish’s cavernous belly is compared to one who enters a great synagogue, in a mood of awe, ostensibly to pray. The source of light for his journey is provided either by the shuttered eyes of the fish, which open for Jonah like windows onto the underworld, or, according

22. This translation is based on the En866 manuscript, supplemented with reference to the printed editions and six alternative manuscripts. See footnote 9.

23. For a discussion of this translation see Adelman *ibid.*, 240, n. 77.

24. Following this paragraph, in the En866 and Lehman manuscripts, there is an addition which is found in *Teshuvat Yonah ha-Navi* and the *Yalkut*, but it is clearly not integral to the original midrash. Tamar Kedari cogently argued that *Midrash Teshuvat Yonah ha-Navi* (composed between the ninth and tenth century) shares no overlap with our text, though that one section (8b) has slipped into a few manuscripts probably by way of the *Yalkut Shimoni* (T. Kedari, “*Midrash Teshut Yonah Ha-Navi*,” *Kovetz ‘al Yad* 16 (2002), 67–84 (Heb.).

25. An allusion to Ps 74:20.

to R. Meir,²⁶ by a single pearl, hanging as a chandelier in the fish's belly. Through the phrase, "light is sown for the righteous [*'or zaru'a le-tzadiq*]" (Ps 97:11), PRE links this light with the Pristine Light of Creation, which was buried until the End of Days, only to be revealed for the righteous. Initially, it enabled primordial Adam to see from one end of the earth to the other.²⁷ It is the same source of light, which illuminates the ark for Noah, throughout the flood (PRE 23). That lamp is akin to the light that radiates from that "awesome crystal" at the base of God's throne of glory, which will illuminate the world in the eschaton (Ezek 1:22).²⁸ It is as if, because Jonah has rejected the compromises of external reality in *this world*, he is given an alternative light to live by—the light of a pure pearl, representative of a wholly internal, other world. The prophet now enters a *time beyond time*, the realm of the End of Days, the world of the drowned and the saved.

As soon as Jonah enters the fish's belly, his host warns him that this is his designated day to be eaten by the Leviathan. But the prophet averts disaster by challenging the monster with his ultimate mission. According to Jonah's boast, this is why he was thrown into the sea in the first place, to determine the whereabouts of the Leviathan's abode so that when the time came, he would know where to go fishing. Until now, the reader might have presumed that the prophet was cast into the sea and swallowed by the fish in order to be set back on his mission as herald to the Ninevites (Jonah 3:4). It turns out that the prophet's thwarted anti-mission is really a cover for his *true* mission—to confront the Leviathan and vow to offer him up as a sacrifice in the End of Days.

As a reward for intimidating the Leviathan the great fish takes him on a tour of the netherworld. The author of PRE presents a close reading of the verses, transforming the perplexing "hymn of thanksgiving for deliverance" (uttered while still in smelly cavern of the fish), into a prayer of praise of

26. The image, in both cases, is ascribed to R. Meir, (lit. 'teacher of light'), an example of "decorative pseudepigraphy."

27. See Adelman, *ibid.*, 152 n. 3 for the sources on this motif.

28. In the midrash, the description of the "awesome crystal" (Ezek 1:22) is also likened to "precious stones and pearls, illuminating the heavens like a lamp in the house, and like the sun which shines with such intensity at noonday..." (PRE 4). According to this passage, this light will also shine at the End of Days (Dan 12:2). See Elbaum's discussion of this motif in "*Ha-melitzah, ha-motif, ve-ha-'inyan: le-derekh 'itzuv shel ha-sipur be-Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer,*" in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 13/14 (1992), 109–110 (Heb.).

the wonders of the underworld.²⁹ In my paraphrase of this section, I call this “The Seven Stations on the Road to Resurrection” (irony intended). Jonah sees:

1. The paths along the bottom of the Sea of Reeds [*yam suf*], which the Israelites had walked upon, as it says: “...the weeds [*suf*] entwined around my head” (Jonah 2:6);
2. The Great River [*nahar*] of Oceanus, as it says: “...the floods [*nahar*] engulfed me” (v. 4);
3. The origins of the breakers and waves of the sea, as it says: “...all your breakers and billows swept over me” (v. 4);
4. Gehenna, as it says: “From the belly of Sheol I cried out” (v. 3);
5. The nethermost underworld of Sheol, as it says: “You brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God” (v. 7);
6. The foundation pillars of the earth, as it says: “I sank to the base of the mountains” (v.7); And then, he saw:
7. The Foundation Stone (of the world), set in the depths.

There, he encounters the sons of Korah standing and praying, and he realizes that he is below the Temple of God. The fish or, as in many manuscripts, the sons of Korah urge him to pray. The words, taken from Hannah’s prayer 1 Sam. 2:6, have a very different tone when uttered by Jonah: “Master of all the Worlds, Whom we call ‘He-who-casts-down and He-who-raises-up’ [*morid u-ma’aleh*], I have gone down, now raise me up! You Who are called ‘He-who-causes-death, and He-who-grants-life’ [*memit u’mehayeh*], I have reached death, now raise me up, bring me back to life!” What compels the prophet to pray, at this point? Has he, in any way, reconciled himself to his initial mission? No reference, over the course of the prayer, is made to the original assignment to the Ninevites. In the biblical context, the psalm ends with a desire to return and to worship God in the Temple (Jonah 2:8) in order to offer sacrifices in fulfillment of a vow (v. 10). The midrash then suggests that these final verses point to the heart

29. There is a consensus among biblical scholars that Jonah’s prayer is not integral to the original composition, but was a later accretion. See Uriel Simon’s discussion of the history of exegesis on Jonah’s prayer, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), xxvii–xxviii.

of his *alternative mission*—to fulfill his promise to sacrifice the Leviathan. Upon recalling *this* promise, God resurrects Jonah yet again.

Conclusion

PRE's narrative on Jonah's sojourn in the netherworld establishes a systematic link between the primordial time of Creation (cosmogony) and eschatological time, in the End of Days. This pattern, known as *Urzeit wird Endzeit* (acts in primeval time will recapitulated in the eschaton), is characteristic of apocalyptic eschatology.³⁰ The chapter opens with an allusion to creation on the fifth day—when the *taninim* (the great sea monsters) were created (Gen 1:21). One of them was designated to be the great fish that swallowed Jonah. *On that very day*, it was also destined to be swallowed by the Leviathan. The narrative then concludes with the prophet's promise to vanquish the Leviathan in the End of Time. As satire, perhaps a critique of the Christian use of the "sign of Jonah," the midrash amplifies the ironies in the original biblical text, where the know-it-all prophet is pitted against the pious sailors and the Ninevites in his assertion of absolute 'truth' over divine mercy. While at first Jonah strikes a maudlin pose, more concerned with his reputation as "false prophet" than the divine mission, he modulates into a heroic figure once he enters the netherworld and discovers his alternative mission. In his confrontation with the Leviathan, Jonah discovers a mirror of himself. Like Alice through the Looking Glass, the midrash presents the world turned topsy-turvy, the image of the biblical prophet inverted. Instead of prevaricating over God's compassion and the dubious repentance of the gentiles, he asserts the possibility of resurrection and the defeat of the sea monster, the embodiment of chaos, unbridled evil, and will. By checking the monster's appetite, Jonah comes to question his own presumption to evade the will of God. On the surface, he succumbs to the original mission to call unto the Ninevites; while, on the deeper level, he promises to fulfill the ultimate sacrifice in the End of Days. I have outlined the process of inversion in a chart:

30. For a discussion of this pattern with regard to the Talmudic legends on the Leviathan, see M. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination in Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 41–55.

Jonah Through the Looking Glass

	The Revealed Mission (in the biblical text and the first half o the midrash)	The Concealed Mission (revealed in the second half of the midrash)
The Sender	God	God and Jonah
The Messenger	Jonah (reluctant prophet) [<i>boreah</i>]	The great fish & Leviathan, the Elusive Serpent [<i>bariah</i>] (Isa 27:1)
The Goal	To bring about the repentance of Nineveh	To sacrifice the Leviathan (as the Messiah of the tribe of Joseph?)
The Mode of Transportation	The ship—to bring it instantly to port, a distance of two days	The great fish—to make the Leviathan flee, instantly, a distance of two days
The Direction (spatial)	From dry land to sea (in flight from his mission)	From sea to dry Land (to travel <i>towards</i> his mission)
The 'Time Zone' (temporal)	'real time' or 'historical time' (biblical narrative)	'End Time' or 'eschatological time' (midrashic narrative)
The Prayer	Thanksgiving for being saved from drowning	Travel log of the wonders of the netherworld; images of death and resurrection
The Foils	The Sailors (Jonah prompts their conversion)	The Sons of Korah (they prompt Jonah to pray)

This remarkable chapter in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* marks the beginning of the transition from myth as an expression of a divine encounter with the cosmos—the defeat of the Sea, along with its allies—to myth as an allegorical representation of an internal, human, psychological experience. The narrative is not yet full-fledged allegory, as it will become in the Zohar and later mystical writing. It still follows the biblical text, preserving the semblance of an exegetical character. Nevertheless, there are hints—in

word play, parallel imagery, and plot devices—of a psychological and religious transformation, indeed a “resurrection” of the prophet after his journey through the looking glass of the sea.