

## Getting Up and Going Down

### Towards a Spatial Poetics of Jonah

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#### Abstract

This article offers a reading of the Jonah narrative using the spatial nomenclature of Edward Soja as an interpretive lens. Particular attention is given to the use of directional markers, in particular, the repeated uses of “up” and “down” with Jonah as subject. These terms carry greater significance than their simplest meanings indicate and create a way of understanding the text which goes beyond naïve ideas about the fish and judgement on Nineveh.

#### Keywords

Jonah; prophet; narrative criticism; spatial theory

#### Introduction

Amongst the Bible stories that are told at Sunday school, few are as well-loved as that of Jonah. The story contains many elements that entertain: the foolishness of a prophet who assumes he can flee the presence of God; God proving otherwise and causes a calamitous storm; the runaway prophet gets thrown overboard and is swallowed by an unusually large fish; the prophet spends three days inside the stomach of the fish; the prophet is repentant and appears to realise the errors of his ways, and calls out for salvation; the prophet is vomited out of the fish’s mouth; the prophet proclaims a message of impending judgement to an enemy city which responds in repentance and receives salvation; animals wear sackcloth in mourning; and a racist prophet is annoyed that foreigners have become the beneficiaries of God’s graciousness.

Theologically, the book also provides a great deal of material. Limburg identifies the following themes: that God created, controls and cares for the natural world; that God rescues those that call out in times of trouble; that God cares about all the people of the earth; that God is capable of changing mind; that God

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is the only true god; and that those who are recipients of God's graciousness are invited to respond in thanksgiving and praise (Limburg 1993, 33-36). These are not drawn from isolated incidents, but instead are cyclical elements which lend the narrative a cohesive framework. At some point, several of the characters of the story are in trouble (except for God and the fish); they call out, and find deliverance. Trouble is presented as a natural problem: a storm, impending judgement, or the dilemma of being trapped inside an enormous creature. In each instance, deliverance comes from God's direct intervention into the created order. The fish, ironically, moves from being an agent of judgement to an agent of deliverance, swallowing Jonah in the depths, but spewing him up onto the beach.

## Reading Directions

Commentators have noted that a narrative feature of Jonah is the repeated use of the verb *yarad*, "to go down," the use of which always has Jonah as its subject. The present paper examines the use of this term in conversation with space theory.<sup>1</sup> To where does Jonah go down? What are the "third-space"<sup>2</sup> implications of those spaces, and how do they relate to the commission of Jonah? And how are these "goings down" related to the various "comings up" which also feature in the story? Some of these "comings up" are lost in translation, so my work here relies on the directional nuances inherent in the Hebrew constructions. Through these questions, we may arrive at a spatial poetics of the Jonah story, and further appreciate the narrative artistry of this well-loved tale.

The first directional marker comes at the beginning of verse 2: *qūm lēk 'el-nînevēh*. NRSV renders this "Go at once to Nineveh," neglecting that the form *qom* has as its primary meaning, "arise" or "stand up." Coupled with *lēk*, the imperative form of *hālak* ("to go"), I propose "Get up and go" as a more accurate translation.<sup>3</sup> The NRSV attempts to capture the urgency of the imperative in the use of "Go at once" but misses the opportunity to highlight the directional aspect of getting up.

Verse 2 contains a second directional marker. The wickedness of Nineveh has "come up" before the Lord. Nineveh is described as a great city, both here and in Genesis 10. This is an unusual designation for a city in the Bible (Limburg 1993, 39). Nineveh was founded by the legendary figure Nimrod, the mighty warrior and direct descendent of Noah. He is traditionally attributed with the foundation of Babylon as well (Scurlock 2009). In Arabic tradition, this figure is thought to be Sargon II, the father of Sennacherib. This bears upon our interest here because Sargon II and Sennacherib were responsible for the development of Assyrian ascendancy, and Sennacherib made Nineveh the capital of the Assyrian empire. Sennacherib's palace there is described in inscriptions as being "without rival," the city boasting an elaborate water system of canals, levees and dams, as well as the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the nomenclature of Edward Soja (see Soja 1996). In brief summary: first space relates to the physical world. That is, a real physical location. Second space is the imagined world. That is, the things that happen in first spaces. Third space involves the ideas that we have about those spaces.

<sup>2</sup> "Third-space" is a combination of real and imagined places. See Matthews 2009; Matthews 2008, 132.

<sup>3</sup> As a point of comparison, the commission of Abram in Gen 12:1 is *lek-lēkā*, 'Go, Go', the imperative lacking the directional element which is a part of the construction in Jonah.

provision of parks within the city (Irvine 2009, 276). Nineveh was in every way, a great city.

In biblical tradition Nineveh is remembered with a great deal of contempt. In Zephaniah's oracle (Zeph. 2:14) against Nineveh he pointedly asks:

Is this the exultant city that dwelt secure,  
That said to itself, "I am and there is no one else"?

Nahum (3:1-7) is more brutal in his assessment:

Ah! City of bloodshed,  
utterly deceitful, full of booty—  
no end to the plunder!  
The crack of whip and rumble of wheel,  
galloping horse and bounding chariot!  
Horsemen charging,  
flashing sword and glittering spear,  
piles of dead,  
heaps of corpses,  
dead bodies without end—  
they stumble over the bodies!  
Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute,  
gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery,  
who enslaves nations through her debaucheries,  
and peoples through her sorcery,  
I am against you,  
says the LORD of hosts,  
and will lift up your skirts over your face  
and I will let nations look on your nakedness  
and kingdoms on your shame.  
I will throw filth at you  
and treat you with contempt,  
and make you a spectacle.  
Then all who see you will shrink from you and say,  
"Nineveh is devastated; who will bemoan her?"

So we come here to notions of third-space. Soja (1996) uses this term to cover the ideas that we hold about particular places. It is in this conceptual world that ground becomes holy, places become sacred and so on. What might we say about Nineveh? Already the Bible describes it as "great," but great in what way? In size, yes. In power, yes. But these prophetic witnesses speak of other things. God's description of wickedness in Jon. 1:2 seems to be confirmed by Zephaniah who appears to mock Ninevite pride, and Nahum who forecasts a humiliating fall for the once-great city, which was to come in 612 BCE at the hands of the marauding Babylonian army. The Nineveh presented by these voices is a city of unbridled arrogance, perhaps even deserving of the divine punishment that is to be meted out to it (Irvine 2009, 276). Nahum, in particular, seems to take some delight in his delivery of such harrowing predictions.

It is this wickedness, this Nineveh, that "comes up before the Lord" in Jon. 1:2. A literal translation is that the wickedness has come into God's presence, or

more pointedly, into God's "face." The image tells us something about ancient cosmology: that God is up, dwelling in the heavenly court. And of course, where God is, wickedness cannot be tolerated. So we have two narrative "ups": the command to Jonah to get up, and the description of the wickedness of Nineveh having come up before the Lord.

There are some complications, though. The date of Jonah tends to be pushed to the Persian period, on account of the Aramaic influences on vocabulary, and the dependence on the Exodus narrative and certain Psalms (Crawford 1988, 656). Given that Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE, Nineveh is functioning here as a symbol.<sup>4</sup> So there is a "first-space" element, insofar as Nineveh was a historical city (though a city that had been wiped from the map at the time Jonah was composed), but the emphasis here is not so much the physical entity of the city. Rather, Nineveh functions as a symbol for wickedness, so that third-space concerns are far more significant in the story world.

### More Unclear Direction(s)

A third "up" immediately follows. Jonah indeed gets up, the same form *qom* being used to describe Jonah's action, and this is again ignored in most translations. The repetition of the form gives the impression that Jonah is indeed obeying the divine command (Wolff 1986, 100) and heightens the shock that, in reality, Jonah is avoiding going to Nineveh.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, he is fleeing, to Tarshish, and from the presence of God. Or, literally, from God's face. The location of Tarshish is unknown to us. We do know that it is a city famous for its ship building (1 Kgs. 10:22), and its regional trade in silver and gold (Jer. 10:9, Ezek. 27:12). A reference to Tarshish in Isaiah 23 is rendered by LXX as "Carthage," which is to say, Northern Africa, whereas other traditions suggest a place on the Southern Coast of Spain (Manor 2009). Either way, Jonah is fleeing to Tarshish, some place in the South, away from the Northern direction of the Assyrian capital. On the way there he "goes down" to Joppa.<sup>6</sup> Joppa is a town on the Mediterranean Coast, thirty-five miles North-West of Jerusalem (Campbell 2008, 382). Its name derives from the Phoenician word meaning "beautiful" (in Hebrew, *yāfeh*). A contrast is drawn here: Jonah is supposed to be getting up and heading up to the inordinately wicked Nineveh, presumably quite an ugly place. Instead, he gets up but pops down to a town called "beautiful," on the way to a place even further away. Wolff notes that we are supposed to imagine Tarshish as being remote, and at a distance in the very opposite direction from Nineveh (1986, 100).

The second "going down" is missed in translations, and that is Jonah's action in getting into the boat. The phrase *wayyēred bāh* is translated "went on board" (NRSV) but as Tucker rightly renders it, "went down in it" (2006, 11). The idea of "going down" is repeated, and its link with the larger journey to Tarshish is significant, all the more because Jonah continues to go down in opposition to the command to get up. The "going down" into the boat is a part of Jonah's strategy of fleeing from the presence of God. "Going down" into the boat suggests a form

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<sup>4</sup> This is not an unusual practice: Babel, Babylon and Jerusalem are other cities which have a symbolic function within the Tanakh.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the Common English Bible (CEB) does capture these directional clues well.

<sup>6</sup> This marker is noted in NRSV and CEB.

of hiding, and indicates that this merchant ship appears to possess a number of levels (Brody 2009, 240). This is also the only instance in which the boarding of a vessel is described using this verb. In most instances, the action is described as “going in” (for example, the beginning of Gen. 7:1 when God says to “go into the ark”). This is confirmed by the next “going down,” which occurs in v. 5. In the midst of a terrible storm which has thrown the crew of the ship into a state of chaos, Jonah has again “gone down,” this time into the hold of the ship. The hold is the place where the cargo is stored, the inner-most part of the ship (Wolff 1986, 112). Presumably, it is a safe place where the things of value are placed for the duration of the journey. We know that the things down in this particular hold must have been valuable, because the sailors have already been described as jettisoning other items in order to lighten the ship (1:5). Again we have a sharp contrast drawn. Up on deck, chaos reigns. It is dangerous and people are fighting for survival. Jonah remains blissfully unaware of the carnage in the lower parts of the ship. Third-space ideas again become important. The hold is secure and safe. Jonah has chosen this place in the place of the immediate danger on deck (to which he remains unaware), and the danger of Nineveh. He imagines himself protected from harm: harm of nature, harm of foreigners, harm of God.

But this is just a beginning. Not only has Jonah gone down into the ship, he has also “lain down,” and further, gone to sleep. The root for “gone to sleep” (*rdm*) suggests a very heavy sleep, the same form being used to describe Adam’s sleep in Genesis 2 when Eve is created, or the trance-like state that Daniel entered when he had his visions (Dan. 8 and 10). This isn’t a nap, but some hard, deep sleeping. LXX inserts a phrase here to indicate that Jonah was snoring—such was the depth of his slumber (Tucker 2006, 23). But there is again more to this. In the formation of the verbal construction, we have *wayyērādam*. That is, we have a form that is phonetically similar to the verb *yārad*, to go down. Given that there are other words for “sleep,” it seems that the narrator has chosen this word to further highlight the downward aspect of Jonah’s response to “get up.”

In response to God’s commission to “get up and go” to Nineveh, we see in this opening chapter a quite contrarian Jonah. Yes, he does get up. But he then goes down, repeatedly, climaxing with this triptych of descent: go down, lie down, falling asleep. Perry suggests that the insistent use of *yārad* moves Jonah’s flight from a mere geographic idea to a metaphor of intent (2006, 6). In a similar fashion, Magonet sees here a descent not only of physical expression, but also in a spiritual dimension (1983, 17).

Immediately, the captain of the ship enters the scene and with great urgency yells at Jonah to “get up,” using exactly the same form used by Yahweh in v. 2. Instead of getting up and calling to the people of Nineveh, here Jonah is implored to get up and call out to God. In effect, the captain’s words form an echo to those of Yahweh (Wolff 1986, 113). The narrator is silent on Jonah’s response. Instead, he is immediately pictured in the presence of the other sailors who are suddenly very interested in this foreigner who has a peculiar ability to sleep through storms that have cast fear into their hearts. In response to questions about how to deal with the crisis, Jonah responds, “pick me up” and “throw me into the sea.”<sup>7</sup> The verb, “pick me up” is from *nāsā*, quite simply, to lift or carry. So Jonah,

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<sup>7</sup> The form that Jonah employs here (*tūl*) is the same form used to describe Yahweh’s ‘hurling’ of the storm in 1:4.

the one who has actively refused to “get up,” the one who has now three times gone down, says, “pick me up.” The sailors, despite their reservations, comply with Jonah’s instructions, and lift him, and throw him into the sea (1:15). Wolff notes another contrast. While Jonah resisted the will of Yahweh, the sailors comply exactly with that of Jonah (cited in Magonet 1983, 120).

### **Terminally Down?**

Why this wish to be thrown into the sea? Yes, Jonah’s request can be read as a response to the sailors’ question “What do we do?” Perhaps Jonah understands that this action will bring about the stilling of the sea that they seek. Commentators, following rabbinic tradition, see a death-wish here. Ibn Ezra was straightforward on this: “He desired and sought to die” (cited in Perry 2006, 3). But can we imagine some other narrative play here? Jonah has been in the hold of the ship, a place which we have characterised as safe and secure, even in the midst of danger. The sea stands as the opposite of that. The sea represents primeval chaos (Coogan 2009, 139) and carries connotations of judgement and de-creation (Klingbeil 2009, 820). Third-space ideas are brought to life here. Danger, chaos, the presence of sea-monsters and the like. The depths of the sea is no place to find one’s self. Instead of suicide, we have a plunging from safety into chaos. Instead of being protected, Jonah is exposed. He is lifted up, but plunges down, much further down than he could have possibly imagined or accomplished in his own power.

This descent is realised in the second chapter, far and away the most famous aspect of the story, when the large fish comes and swallows Jonah as he flails in the water. Jonah’s presence in the belly of the fish parallels his descent into the inner most part of the ship. Rather than being secure in the hold, the experience of being inside a fish compels Jonah to prayer. The prayer gives expression to his sense of downward motion. Jonah talks about being “in the deep” and of waves passing “over” him (v. 3). He is “closed in” and “surrounded” by the waters. None of these speak explicitly of direction, but they all can be associated with a progression downwards. Jonah claims to be crying from the “belly of Sheol” (v. 2), the imagined underworld of ANE peoples. Sheol is imagined as a cosmological extremity (Johnston 2009), as far down as it is possible to go. The irony here is self-evident. Jonah had been going down to avoid the presence of God, and yet even in the furthest downward place that one can go, the place of death, God is found, or perhaps better, God is not avoided. This cosmological extremity contrasts with the upper extremity suggested at the beginning of the story, where the wickedness of the Ninevites ascends into the dwelling place of God. At the lowest point of descent, the bars seemingly closing him in forever (2:7), Jonah’s life is “brought up,” the verb *‘ālāh* here in the *hiphil*, reiterating that this is not Jonah’s work. And again, the positive aspect of getting up in the story is enacted upon Jonah: the sailors lifted him up, and now his life is being brought up. And in one last act for which he wasn’t responsible, Jonah is spewed up by the whale onto dry land, a hint at the creation/de-creation/re-creation motif evident in the use of the sea (Sweeney 2000, 322).

## Get Up, Again!

Chapter 3 commences in almost exactly the same fashion as chapter 1. NRSV in this instance includes the directional aspect, in the rendering “get up, go to Nineveh” (3:2). This time, Jonah again follows the command to get up, and in this instance, also follows the second command to go to Nineveh and proclaim Yahweh’s message there. It seems that Jonah’s new obedience has an impact on the Ninevites. When the King hears the message, he rises from his throne. The verb *qûm* is the same verb used to direct Jonah at the beginning of chapters 1 and 3. The King isn’t directed to stand up. The people of Nineveh are given no direction, only the news that their city is to be overthrown. Yet the King’s action stands as a counterpoint to Jonah’s own inaction. The foreign King responds positively to God while the prophet resists.

Chapter 4 contains less directional markers than the previous chapters. However, in verse 5 we have a double use of the verb *yāšab*, “to sit down,” or “to settle.” It is sometimes also used for lying down and so is related to the other lying down that Jonah did in the belly of the boat. The impression is not of a brief stay, but of dwelling. This is demonstrated by Jonah’s construction of a booth. This is a temporary dwelling. I don’t want to suggest that Jonah was moving in, but it does suggest something more than a leisurely afternoon spent in the park. As Wolff suggests, Jonah is in no hurry (1986, 169). Bear in mind that the festival of booths (Lev. 23:34) was attended by people who built and stayed in booths. Jonah has situated himself to the East of the city. This makes a departure from our up-down binary, though it is in some way instructive. Jonah has been told that Nineveh has avoided judgement, and yet he settles down to see what might happen, in the East. The East is the primary point of reference for the ANE, the place where the sun rises, the place in front (Drinkard 2008, 341). The East is the direction from which comes the East wind, the destructive seasonal phenomenon sometimes associated with judgement. Jonah situates himself perfectly to see it, just in case. The wind comes, of course, but it is not quite the destructive force that Jonah hopes for, giving him a spot of dehydration, but not torching Nineveh like he had hoped.

We may see a further directional element in Jonah’s request to die in 4:8. In chapter 2, Jonah had descended to Sheol, the place of the dead. It was a traumatic experience for him, no doubt, though here at the end of the story, a return to Sheol, a return to the depths, seems preferable to Jonah than living in a world where God’s graciousness saves wicked people. That is, second and third spaces collide. The third space of death seems more inviting than Jonah’s lived experience.

## Directing Readings

So what are we to make of all this? Let’s begin with characters other than Jonah. The wickedness of the Ninevites comes up to Yahweh’s dwelling place. This ascent triggers the story into action. The result is to set up a binary between the wickedness of Nineveh and the righteousness of Yahweh. These two things should not come into contact with each other, except perhaps for the purpose of divine wrath. This is the hope of Jonah, but not only Jonah, as we have seen. Against this prophetic hope is the action of the Ninevite King, cut to the heart by the proclamation of coming judgement voiced by the prophet, who rises from his

throne, in contrast to Jonah who, though hearing directly from Yahweh, rises only in order to flee.

Now, the “ups” of Jonah. Three times Jonah is told to get up. Each time he does it, but only twice is he actually complying with the nature of the demand. Once, Jonah asked to be “lifted up,” and that request is granted, only for him to be thrown into the sea, which develops into a very serious, near terminal descent. And that “up” is a result of Jonah’s failure to get up in his own steam and do what he was supposed to do. From the darkness and depth of the lowest imaginable place, Jonah’s life is “brought up.” But as before, this is not Jonah’s doing. This time, it is a raising which is done to him.

The downs are a little more dramatic, and engaging of spatial matters. Jonah goes down to Joppa on the way to Tarshish; he goes down into the boat; he goes further down into the inner most part of the boat and lies down. This is a flight, a defiant move away from the direction to which he is commissioned to go. The geographical move downward parallels the following descent into the clutches of Sheol and the uncomfortable resting place he finds in the belly of the whale. The dry and safe hold forms a remarkable contrast to the wet, gritty innards of the sea creature. This is a geographical, physical, mental and spiritual descent of shocking proportion. The third space that is captured in the idea of Nineveh is nothing in comparison to the horror that Jonah endures in avoiding it!

And even in the end, having endured Sheol, calling out to the Lord and finding salvation; after apparently redeeming himself and fulfilling his commission, when Jonah sits down after all that, he still doesn’t quite get it right. Instead of settling down to take in the show that he hopes for, Yahweh bears down on Jonah again, teaching Jonah a lesson we never know if Jonah heeded. And so the story ends with a faint, wind-burnt and dehydrated Jonah looking over the city of wickedness that had found redemption, with us wondering if we can say the same for him. And with that, it appears that I, like Jonah, have come a long way since I learnt this story in Sunday school.

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