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# Queer Themes in the Book of Jonah and its Contemporary Analogues

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Content Warning: discussion of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, emotional and physical abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence



## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to produce a queer reading of the book of Jonah, focusing on themes of loneliness, abuse, and oppression. This is achieved through the construction of an interdisciplinary methodology which combines literary biblical interpretation, queer theory, and sociological research on the experiences of LGBT+ people. The thesis also brings the biblical text into conversation with artefacts of queer culture dating from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in order to form a reflexive dialogue which illuminates both queer experience and the biblical narrative itself. In doing so, this thesis is intended to demonstrate that queer ways of being can be seen represented in biblical texts, even when the texts do not explicitly depict queer characters.



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## Introduction

Jonah is a strange book; it doesn't fit in. At a length of only four chapters, we find it nestled among the twelve minor prophets, but it bears little resemblance to the texts that surround it. Jonah, unlike Micah and Obadiah, does not recount any visions. Neither does he pronounce extended judgement on Israel and its neighbours in the vein of Amos and Zephaniah. The stock Hebrew phrase *כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה* (thus says the LORD), so indicative of prophecy, does not appear once. Where the other prophetic books are, unsurprisingly, mostly composed of prophecies, Jonah utters only eight words of prophecy in the NRSV; 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'<sup>1</sup> (Jonah 3:4). When we read the text in Hebrew this number dwindles to five. Instead of extensive prophesying, we find a whirlwind story incorporating sailors, a big fish, farm animals clothed in sackcloth, the mysterious shade-providing *qiqayon*, and a ravenous, crimson worm. The text is constructed under what Yvonne Sherwood describes as 'extravagantly experimental narrative conditions.'<sup>2</sup> Within the world of Jonah, Jack M. Sasson observes, 'realistic events and miraculous incidents are accorded equal space.'<sup>3</sup> This short, seemingly misplaced book spins a tale both intensely human and bizarrely fantastical. Despite, or perhaps because of this mish-mash nature, it has endured in the popular imagination for centuries, and continues to find resonance in culture both religious and secular.

What, then, is the merit of reading a strange little book like Jonah through queer eyes? Queer readings are concerned with the unusual; that which falls outside of heteronormative discourse, and challenge our assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity. Jonah, Sherwood argues, 'gives the distinct

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations of biblical texts are taken from Michael D. Coogan (editor), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version; Fully Revised Fourth Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Jack M. Sasson, *The Anchor Yale Bible: Jonah* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), x.

impression of deliberately detaching itself from the continuity of the familiar.’<sup>4</sup> For this reason the book of Jonah, and particularly the character of Jonah, is ripe for a queer reading. From the beginning Jonah defies our expectations of both a prophet and a biblical man; he does not loyally follow God’s command to go to Nineveh, but instead runs away and boards a ship to Tarshish (1:1-3). This is just the start of Jonah’s twisted journey through textual, cultural, and theological space. Jonah, as Sasson notes, ‘faces more predicaments, in a shorter time span, than do biblical heroes accorded many more lines of narrative.’<sup>5</sup> Jonah’s journey is immediately resonant for the queer reader; there is much to unpack and relate to in his experiences of community and loneliness, his relationship with authority, and his anger at the way of the world. Reading Jonah through queer eyes can thus afford a myriad of opportunities to reflect upon many facets of queer experience.

Simultaneously, employing a queer gaze allows us to uncover layers of meaning in the text which have previously gone unnoticed. Using the book as a starting point to reflect on queer experiences, we can then turn this reflection back onto the text itself to illuminate and expand our interpretation. Thus, the queer reading becomes a reflexive process, forming a dialogue between biblical text and queer experience which ultimately serves to bring about greater understanding for both participants. Such a reading of Jonah therefore promises to be both highly interesting and of social, religious, and political importance. Queer approaches to biblical literature are growing in popularity and reflect a need to read these texts in unorthodox ways which can reveal their relevance for those who have historically been marginalised and excluded, both in biblical studies and in wider socio-political discourse. According to David Tabb Stewart, ‘the queer propensity for making room for the one-not-yet-thought-of insures a widening circle.’<sup>6</sup> By forging a space for those perspectives which have been both ignored and actively denied, a queer approach at once challenges hegemonic biblical interpretations which seek to maintain patriarchy, heteronormativity, and gender binaries, and

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<sup>4</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, x.

<sup>6</sup> David Tabb Stewart, ‘LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible’, *Currents in Biblical Research*, 15 (2017), 289-314 (308).

provides ways for excluded people to read biblical texts in relation to their own lived experiences. This is of vital importance considering the historical and ongoing use of biblical texts as coercive tools to justify the victimisation of queer people, as well as other marginalised groups.

In producing a queer reading of the book of Jonah, I will make use of an unorthodox and radically diverse methodology. Judith Halberstam has described such an approach to queer studies as ‘a scavenger methodology [which] attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and [...] refuses the academic compulsion towards disciplinary coherence.’<sup>7</sup> Queer identity is, by its very nature, a rejection of the heterosexual and cisgender hegemony which seeks to suppress diversity, and as such, a queer methodology is inherently interdisciplinary. In order to squeeze queer interpretations out of biblical texts, in order to find analogies with queer experiences, it is necessary to utilise a smorgasbord of ways of reading, some of which may be distasteful in the eyes of hegemonic biblical scholars. Yvonne Sherwood, when reading Jonah, describes ‘find[ing her]self straining against a system where we are encouraged to represent our conclusions like mathematical calculations and always show our working, or to progress slowly and stealthily towards a seemingly inevitable conclusion, weighed down by footnotes that we wear like concrete shoes.’<sup>8</sup> For those who pursue queer readings of the Hebrew Bible, such a feeling is all too familiar; queer material, if there is any, is buried deep. In attempting a queer reading of Jonah, I will therefore engage in what may be termed creative reading; referred to by Stewart as ‘midrash-making’.<sup>9</sup> Using the biblical text as a springboard, I will leap into discussions of queer experiences, unconfined by a need to remain blindly faithful to the content and context of the ‘original’ Hebrew text but consistently referring back to it and using these discussion to aid its interpretation. As Sherwood suggests, ‘biblical texts are literally sustained by interpretation, and the volume, ubiquity, and tenacity of interpretation make it impossible to dream that we can

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart, ‘LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible’, 293.

take the text back, through some kind of seductive academic striptease, to a pure and naked original state.’<sup>10</sup> Being a queer reader, I have no interest in pursuing a reading faithful to the author’s intentions, but instead hope to twist, contort, and wring out the text in order to find interpretations which speak to queer experiences. Approaching a biblical book in this way may appear highly unorthodox, but only because a queer perspective does not have the support of the socio-political hegemony behind it that has justified authorities in their own contortions of biblical texts for centuries. As David Gunn and Danna Fewell suggest in critique of historical criticism, ‘claims of objectivity [are] too often an unstated defence of the status quo, [...] shoring up privilege under the guise of neutrality.’<sup>11</sup>

I will work within the literary school of biblical interpretation, reading Jonah ‘as we might read modern novels or short stories, constructing a world in which questions of human values and belief (and theology) find shape in relation to our own (and our readers’) world(s).’<sup>12</sup> I will approach the book of Jonah as a cohesive whole, with a clear narrative structure, to which literary ways of reading can be applied accordingly. Of the many approaches to reading which modern literary criticism offers, I anticipate that the deconstructive approach will be of particular use. Fewell argues that, in the field of biblical studies, deconstructive criticism ‘open[s] biblical texts to non-traditional readings, thereby “decentering” the authority of traditional interpretations, but [...] also challenges the monopoly of what have come to be the authorised and acceptable methods of study’.<sup>13</sup> The potential of the deconstructive approach as part of a queer methodology for reading the Bible therefore seems obvious. It is important to note that deconstruction, as described by Derrida, is not a method; ‘Deconstruction is not a

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> David M Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell, ‘Deconstructive Criticism: Achsah and the (E)razed City of Writing’ in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies (Second Edition)*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 115-137 (115).

method and cannot be transformed into one.’<sup>14</sup> According to Richard Beardsworth, ‘Derrida is careful to avoid this term because it carries connotations of a procedural form of judgement. A thinker with a method has already decided *how* to proceed, is unable to give him or herself up to the matter of thought in hand, is a functionary of the criteria which structure his or her conceptual gestures.’<sup>15</sup> However, whether Derrida intended it to be or not, deconstruction has clearly come to be used as a method, and so I have no qualms about using deconstruction to inform my methodology. In addition, it seems to me that utilising deconstructive approaches in a queer study is likely to avoid Derrida’s concerns about the implication of the term ‘method’. A queer approach, by nature, rebels against any ‘procedural form of judgement’:<sup>16</sup> such judgements are exactly the kind of hegemonic ways of reading that a queer study strains against.

Queer theory, clearly fundamental to any queer reading of a biblical text, will also be a significant source of information. An interesting area of queer theory, and one which biblical studies has thus far overlooked (understandably considering the very real need to find queer affirming interpretations of biblical texts) is discussion surrounding gay shame. ‘Gay pride’, argues David M. Halperin, ‘makes sense to me only in relation to shame, and it is only by returning to confront what still has the power to make us ashamed that we can meaningfully continue the work of gay pride.’<sup>17</sup> These words originate from the statement with which Halperin opened the 2003 Gay Shame conference, but more than a decade later remain intensely relevant and thought provoking. Eve Sedgwick has written extensively on shame and queer performativity, and suggests that ‘the forms taken by shame are not distinct “toxic” parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’ in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. by Wood, David, and Bernasconi, Robert (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-5 (3).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> David M. Halperin, ‘Why Gay Shame Now?’ in *Gay Shame*, ed. by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 41-46 (44-5).

identity itself is formed.’<sup>18</sup> Just as the experience of shame is integral to queer identity, shame dynamics lie at the heart of the Book of Jonah; Jonah is shamed by the sailors, the people of Nineveh are shamed by their immorality, and God shames Jonah for his anger at the death of a plant ‘for which [he] did not labour and which [he] did not grow’. (Jonah 4:10). Shame is just as essential to Jonah’s narrative as it is to queer culture, and thus bringing these distinct phenomena into conversation with each other promises to be fruitful for the understanding of both.

On a note related to the idea of gay shame, the LGBT+ community currently finds itself increasingly fractured and divided. On one side of the divide are the LGBT+ people who wish only to integrate with mainstream society, to live ‘normal’ lives resembling those of their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. On the other side are the proponents of radical queer identity, who far from wishing to integrate are fiercely anti-capitalist and anti-establishment. The latter group find themselves increasingly disillusioned with the pride movement as it stands, it mainly taking the form of what Scottee describes as ‘Patriarchal parades of slim, able-bodied zombies doing the GHB two-step’.<sup>19</sup> There is, I believe, a valuable and illuminating comparison to be drawn between this tension in the queer community over the purpose of pride, and the tension between God and Jonah over the deserved fate of Nineveh. I will also reflect on the value of queer anger, and the question of whether queer communities can be expected to forgive their oppressors and let go of anger.

In order to contextualise my reading within the experiences of queer people I will make use of the large body of sociological research concerned with queer experiences. This will include wide-ranging surveys carried out by organisations such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Albert Kennedy Trust, as well as studies of a much smaller scale which provide qualitative data on specific elements of queer experience, both in the UK and across the globe. Sociological research is valuable in pursuing a queer reading in that it reminds us

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<sup>18</sup> Eve Sedgwick, ‘Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity’ in *Gay Shame*, ed. by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 49-62 (59-60).

<sup>19</sup> Scottee, ‘Has commercialisation ruined gay pride?’, *i-D* (2016), <[https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/9kbvyd/has-commercialisation-ruined-gay-pride](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/9kbvyd/has-commercialisation-ruined-gay-pride)> [accessed 16/11/2017].

of the lived realities of queer people; it is important to me that my reading is based not only in abstract theory but also in social reality and experience. We must remember that queerness is not merely an interesting lens through which to read an ancient text but is a way of being which continues to be marginalised and suppressed. When I make use of psychoanalytic writings on the death drive to understand and to queer the character of Jonah, for example, it is vital to contextualise this theoretical approach in the fact that suicidal ideation is disproportionately prevalent in queer communities; according to the RaRE research report ‘across all comparisons both LGB and Trans\* young people were shown to have higher rates of the majority of indicators [of suicidal ideation and self harm], in some cases with double or more of the rates of their comparison groups.’<sup>20</sup>

My use of what I am calling ‘companion texts’ will also aid in grounding my reading in contemporary and historical social reality. Some of the texts which I have selected deal explicitly with queer themes. Others are less explicitly queer, but speak to queer experiences in ways similar to the book of Jonah, and may have been the subject of their own queer readings. These companion texts, some bearing a genealogical relation to Jonah and others not, or at least not directly, will enhance the creative possibility of my reflexive dialogue with the biblical book. Among the cultural artefacts I will use in this way will be the writings of Jeanette Winterson and Margie Piercy,<sup>21</sup> and the queer music of Bronski Beat. Introducing these voices to the dialogue will help to bring about a melting pot of interpretations which can be coaxed into a cohesive reading; an appropriate approach to ‘a tiny text that is virtually capsizing under the weight of interpretation’.<sup>22</sup> Why not pile an even greater load upon it, watch it sink and then see what washes up on the shore, observe the sea life that makes its home on the submerged wreckage?

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<sup>20</sup> Nuno Nodin et al., *The RaRE Research Report* (London: PACE, 2015), 71.

<sup>21</sup> I have consciously chosen to use two novels by women in constructing my argument, in order to make space for female voices in this reading. I feel that this decision is particularly important given my own position as a masculine presenting person.

<sup>22</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 3.

The Book of Jonah is, conveniently, divided into four chapters, and my reading will be structured accordingly; divided into four sections, beginning with chapter one and ending with chapter four. Each section will focus predominantly on the narrative events and their relation to queer experiences within its corresponding chapter, but of course there will be some thematic crossover between chapters, and a steady progression towards a cohesive reading. Jonah's apparent disregard for his own life is prevalent in chapter one, for example, but also rises to the surface once again in chapter four. However, the reasons behind this facet of Jonah's character change and mature between the beginning and the end of the book, and my interpretation and reflection will follow a similar progression.

In chapter one, I will begin to consider the nature of the relationship between God and his prophet. I will read Jonah's flight from God as a flight both from identity and from hostile home environments. Here, 'Smalltown Boy' by Bronski Beat will resonate as a companion text, revealing the shared motivations of queer youths and the character of Jonah. I will read Jonah's boarding of the ship as an attempt to find a community, with the all male environment of the ship suggesting homosociality and potentially homosexuality. The storm will be identified with the outside forces which often threaten queer communities, while the sailors' subsequent sacrifice of Jonah will be read alongside concerns about infighting and a lack of inclusivity in queer places. Sociological research concerning self-destructive behaviour in queer individuals will illuminate Jonah's impulse towards death.

Chapter two of Jonah differs from the rest of the book in both character and content, being occupied almost entirely by a psalm of thanksgiving. My second chapter will, accordingly, progress differently to the rest of my reading, although similar themes will of course remain prevalent. The psalm's description of a descent into darkness and death (2:3-6) resonate with queer experiences of depression and despair. More difficult to reconcile with a queer reading is Jonah's remembrance of the LORD and subsequent thanksgiving. I will argue that Jonah's emotional state here is symptomatic of systematic abuse by the deity. Alongside consideration of Jonah's psalm, a key question for chapter two will be what Jonah's time inside the fish might represent for a queer reader; could it be a

return to the womb, a voyage through the underworld, both of these things, or neither of them? The biblical text itself gives almost no description of the belly of the fish, this fantastical space apparently not being the focus of the text's author(s), but subsequent literature has devoted much time to imagining what life inside the belly of a דג גדול might be like. To conclude this chapter, I will offer my own, novel interpretation of what the fish might symbolise.

The third chapter of this reading, coinciding with Jonah's arrival in a metropolis three days' travel across (3:3), will examine the city as a place of both sanctuary and danger for the queer individual, building on chapter one's consideration of disillusionment with queer communities. Also of interest will be the performative repentance of the Ninevites. Do they really regret their improprieties, or do they wish only to avoid the destruction Jonah foretells? A consideration of the Ninevites' motivations will illuminate and be illuminated by a discussion of pinkwashing; the adoption of superficial support of LGBT+ rights by governments and corporations as a mask for the ill-treatment of other minorities.

In chapter four, my focus will return to the character of Jonah and his relationship with God. Here we find a Jonah who, upset by God's mercy towards Nineveh, is 'angry enough to die.' (4:9). We see God cruelly playing with Jonah, providing shade with the *qiqayon* before suddenly taking it away, ostensibly to teach Jonah a lesson about labour and misplaced anger. Far from providing a satisfying conclusion to Jonah's narrative, chapter four leaves us with more questions than ever. A fruitful site of investigation here will be the nature of Jonah's anger, the ways in which God responds to his anger, and the resemblances between this interaction and the ways in which queer anger is perceived and manipulated in contemporary society. We will also consider what might have become of Jonah after the Biblical narrative comes to a close, and the ways in which Jonah's possible fates speak to LGBT+ experiences.

### **A Note on Language**

The language used to talk about queer people and communities is diverse, and because many of the terms used are reclaimed slurs, linguistic choices can often be contentious. In this work, I will use the term 'queer' and the acronym LGBT+

(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans\*) interchangeably as umbrella terms for the community. Some are uncomfortable with the word queer, but I have chosen to use it here as it is commonplace in academia. LGBTQ+ is used consciously without the addition of further letters. Common additions include A for ally or asexual, and I for intersex. I have not chosen to include these letters for the following reasons; while allies are appreciated they are not in themselves queer, and they do not experience the systematic oppression that bonds the community together. Those on the asexual spectrum may be queer, but not as an inherent result of their asexuality; cisgender asexual people who experience attraction to the opposite sex or to no-one are *not* queer and, like allies, do not experience systematic oppression on the basis of their gender identity, expression, or sexuality. I have chosen not to include intersex people simply because many intersex individuals do not consider themselves to be part of the queer community. The addition of '+' indicates an awareness that any acronym is limited in its ability to consider the broad range of people who constitute the queer community, and recognises those who are part of the community without falling neatly under one of the four letters. Intersex people who *do* consider themselves queer, for example, can find inclusion in the plus sign.

# 1.

## **‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea’ (1:12)**

The opening of the book of Jonah wastes no time. The premise of the story is established within three verses; Jonah is given a mission by God, but he defies the deity and runs away. In this chapter we will consider the possible reasons for Jonah’s flight from God, and explore some of the ways in which this aspect of the narrative might evoke empathy from queer readers. We will then consider the symbolism of the ship to Tarshish, and examine both the importance and danger of community for Jonah and for LGBT+ people. We will begin to reflect on Jonah’s impulse towards death and the prevalence of self destructive behaviour in queer communities, and finally interrogate the conversion of the sailors.

### **What’s in a Name?**

The only identifying feature of Jonah given to the reader of the text, beyond his personal name, is the name of his father; Amittai (Jonah 1:1). The Hebrew name אִמִּיָּאֵי derives from אִמָּת, meaning stability, certainty, truth, trustworthiness, which in turn is derived from the verb אָמַן, meaning to support, confirm, be faithful. The proper name Amittai likely refers to these characteristics in God, a conventional formula for Hebrew names. However, when approaching the text from a queer perspective, the association of Jonah’s father, and indeed God, who is often characterised as a father, with stability and support is suggestive. Familial relationships between queer children and their parents are often fraught; a 2015 study carried out by the Albert Kennedy Trust found that ‘LGBT youth are at a significantly higher risk of exposure to a range of experiences that are associated with becoming homeless, most notably parental rejection, familial physical, sexual and emotional abuse, and familial violence.’<sup>23</sup> The parents of many queer people offer little in the way of stability and support, and for some they offer the

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<sup>23</sup> Albert Kennedy Trust, *LGBT youth homelessness: a UK national scoping of cause, prevalence, response and outcome* (London: Albert Kennedy Trust, 2015), 6.

opposite, doing real harm and causing long term psychological damage. We are not given any information about Jonah's relationship with his father, but Jonah's relationship with God, a father-like figure,<sup>24</sup> is the central relationship of the book. Does God offer the stability and support so vital for development and survival, or does God, like the parents of many queer people in contemporary Britain and elsewhere, hamper and harm Jonah's chances in life? Does God reject, endanger, and abuse Jonah? Through the course of this reading, the answer to this question will come to be seen, I believe, to be a resounding yes.

### **Fight or Flight?**

We are not given a history of Jonah's relationship with God prior to the action of the book, rather the text jumps straight into the action with a divine command (Jonah 1:1-2), from which Jonah immediately flees (1:3). The verb used, בָּרוּחַ, conveys a particular sense of urgency and rush to escape, suggesting from the outset that Jonah's relationship with God's patriarchal authority is a troubled one. At first glance this might appear surprising for someone purported to be a prophet; is Jonah not God's voice on earth? As Theodore Perry notes, such conflict with God is not unique to Jonah; 'other prophets were also disinclined and argued against the Lord, but in the end they all gave in. Jonah's rebellion is more original'.<sup>25</sup> I suggest that Jonah making the decision to run away from God, rather than 'the usual arguing and trying to stay his ground,'<sup>26</sup> holds resonance for queer individuals.

The ability to argue, to engage in discussion and debate, requires a certain level of security and social support, a level which is commonly denied of queer people in contemporary society. Those queer people who engage extensively in activism, daring to speak out against injustice and to organise resistance activities,

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<sup>24</sup> Understanding of God as father is ubiquitous in Christian Theology, and I suggest that in the Book of Jonah YHWH is easily understood as a father figure due to His exercise of authority over the subordinate Jonah.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore Anthony Perry, *The Honeymoon is Over: Jonah's Argument with God* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), xi.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

are commonly afflicted by burnout: defined by Pines as ‘the end result of a process in which idealistic and highly committed individuals lose their spirit.’<sup>27</sup> Because they often do not have a strong support system in place, queer people who devote themselves to fighting for queer liberation often find themselves worn down and exhausted, unable to carry on without sacrificing their personal health and happiness. This effect is often compounded by other factors, such as disability, social class, and race. In a phenomenological study of the experiences of queer activists of colour with mental health at the University of Rhode Island, it was found that a ‘combination of [...] psychological meanings led all participants to burnout and some to more severe mental health crises such as compassion fatigue and suicidal ideation.’<sup>28</sup> One student who took part in the study, Ricardo, expressed a feeling of pressure to be secure in himself in order to help others; “I think that’s part of the challenge of leadership... being real... You need to be on top of your stuff, you need to know who you are.”<sup>29</sup>

Queer people demonstrate incredible empathy and compassion in their desire to help and uplift other members of their community, but unfortunately such endeavours are extremely demanding on the self. As such, it is not uncommon for over exhausted queer people to withdraw from activism. Recently, Lily Madigan, a young trans\* woman who applied to the Labour Party’s Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme, was viciously attacked across social media and in the mainstream press. Madigan’s critics took issue with the young trans woman applying to a programme for women (as they do not consider her a woman), and instigated a violent campaign of online abuse against her. Overwhelmed by the hate directed her way, on the 4th December 2017 this young activist tweeted;

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<sup>27</sup> Ayala M. Pines, ‘Burnout in Political Activism: An Existential Perspective’, *Journal of Health and Human Resources Administration*, 16, 381-394 (381).

<sup>28</sup> Annemarie Vaccaro & Jasmine A. Mena, ‘Its Not Burnout, It’s More: Queer College Activists of Color and Mental Health’, *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health*, 15, 339-367 (349).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

Please stop. I can't handle it anymore. I'm so mentally distressed that I can't sleep or eat or go to school. No one deserves this. There's only so many times I can read lies or my deadname or misgendering. I'm just a teenager. Please just stop. I don't want to do this anymore.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly queer people who put their voice out into their world, who dare to speak on behalf of themselves and others like them, place themselves in an extremely vulnerable position. This is dangerous considering the already precarious position of queer individuals and communities in all corners of the globe. Queer people are, effectively, denied the right to argue and debate, unless they are willing to sacrifice their own wellbeing to do so. (The question of whether queer people should be expected to argue for their own existence in the first place is another matter). It is thus not surprising that queer people, like Jonah, often flee from authority rather than trying to argue their case. When Jonah turns from God and runs, LGBT+ people can see themselves in his actions; confronted with an authority far more powerful than them (God in Jonah's case, the heteropatriarchy in theirs), running away often seems the most sensible option. To stand and fight is noble, but it cannot be expected of queer individuals, just as Jonah cannot be expected to argue with his almighty God. In fact, God and the heteropatriarchy often function as one and the same coercive force. In the West,<sup>31</sup> heteropatriarchal values are commonly asserted through the use of biblical and Christian dogmatic material. The National Organization for Marriage (NOM), a United States organisation which campaigns against marriage equality as well as opposing the right of trans\* students to use gender appropriate bathrooms, describes itself as 'is a nonprofit organization with a mission to protect marriage

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<sup>30</sup> Lily Madigan, Twitter Post, 4 December 2017, 11:48 PM, <[https://twitter.com/madigan\\_lily/status/937951896144359424](https://twitter.com/madigan_lily/status/937951896144359424)> [accessed 11/01/2018].

<sup>31</sup> While the 'West' as a concept is at best ill-defined, I find it a convenient term to refer to those societies which are economically well-developed, predominantly white, and trace their history back to the western European tradition i.e. the European Union, the USA and Canada, and Australia and New Zealand.

and the faith communities that sustain it.’<sup>32</sup> The Family Research Council states that its mission is ‘to advance faith, family, and freedom in public policy and the culture from a Christian worldview.’<sup>33</sup> On its website it claims that ‘homosexual conduct is harmful to the persons who engage in it and to society at large, and can never be affirmed. It is by definition unnatural, and as such is associated with negative physical and psychological health effects.’<sup>34</sup> These vicious hate groups explicitly claim to promote Christian values; in their view, God is on the side of their enforcement of heteropatriarchal ideals.

Popular culture has, at times, given expression to the effect of the enforcement of heteropatriarchal ideals on queer lives. ‘Smalltown Boy’, described by John Gill as the ‘first real queer record ever’,<sup>35</sup> is a 1984 song by British synthpop group Bronski Beat that addresses the familial rejection experienced by LGBT+ people.<sup>36</sup> The protagonist of the song demonstrates the very same impulse as Jonah to run away from forces stronger than himself and seek refuge elsewhere. The lyrics of this gay anthem address the listener in the second person, encouraging empathy for the plight of queer individuals in 1980s Britain. The opening lyrics, ‘You leave in the morning with everything you own in a little black case [/] alone on the platform the wind and the rain on a sad and lonely face’<sup>37</sup> paint an evocative tableau of a queer youth making the decision to leave his titular ‘smalltown’. The subject of the song has been unable to find the support they require in their familial environment; ‘the answers you seek will never be found at

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<sup>32</sup> National Organization for Marriage, *About Us* <<https://www.nationformarriage.org/about>> [accessed 14/03/2018].

<sup>33</sup> Family Research Council, *Vision and Mission Statements* <<http://www.frc.org/mission-statement>> [accessed 14/03/2018].

<sup>34</sup> Family Research Council, *Homosexuality* <<http://www.frc.org/homosexuality>> [accessed 14/03/2018].

<sup>35</sup> John Gill, *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music* (London: Cassell, 1995), 155.

<sup>36</sup> Bronski Beat, “Smalltown Boy”, *The Age of Consent* (London: London Records, 1984).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

home [/] The love that you need will never be found at home.’<sup>38</sup> Like Jonah, the subject of the song chooses to flee rather than try to explain himself. It is made apparent that any attempt on the part of the youth to defend his identity will fall on deaf ears; ‘mother will never understand why you had to leave.’<sup>39</sup> The protagonist could attempt to fight his cause, to change minds, but it is clear to do so would be both exhausting and most likely futile. The song’s chorus, a repetition of the phrase ‘run away, turn away’,<sup>40</sup> conveys a sense of desperate urgency, reminiscent of the urgency depicted by the use of the verb ברה in Jonah 1:3. Reading these texts alongside each other, I find an analogy between Jonah’s flight from the face of God and the queer youth’s flight from a small town in which he will never find acceptance. For both of these protagonists, running away seems the most promising method to find the safety and support that is so dearly needed.

### Communities in Danger

In executing his escape attempt, Jonah boards a ship sailing to Tarshish, becoming part of a small, (presumably) all-male community. An incredibly common stereotype about sailors in the Modern West is, of course, that they engage in homosexual sex. Whether such a stereotype circulated in the Ancient Near East is impossible to say, but Joe Flatman suggests that ‘Maritime archaeology not only needs to accept that variance in sexuality may have been present on board ancient ships, but also that homosexuality may have been of value to shipboard life and organization.’<sup>41</sup> We cannot know that the men on a ship like the one Jonah boards would be sleeping with each other, but history and experience suggests that groups of men separated from women have a tendency to do so. Observing Jonah with queer eyes, we may read his flight from before God and his boarding of the ship to Tarshish as an attempt to find a community of people like him, where he can

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Joe Flatman, ‘Cultural biographies, cognitive landscapes and dirty old bits of boat: ‘theory’ in maritime archaeology’, *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 32 (2003), 143-57 (146).

receive the support that familial life has failed to provide, as it does for so many queers.

However, Jonah does not find the refuge he so longs for aboard the ship to Tarshish; God will not allow Jonah to escape his presence so easily. Confronted with a runaway prophet, ‘the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.’ (1:4). Jonah’s attempt to run away from his identity and his problems is anything but successful, instead he lands himself and those around him in immediate danger. The seafaring community which once seemed a promising haven is in sudden turmoil. For the queer reader, these circumstances are painfully familiar. Queer communities, throughout history, have been attacked and destabilised by outside forces. On 6th May 1933, Berlin’s Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Science) was raided by the Deutsche Studentenschaft. The Institute, Leonidas E. Hill observes, had ‘studied homosexuality and lesbianism, advocated reform of the criminal code regarding sexuality, prepared briefs for legal cases concerning sexual crimes, and was the first German institution to provide marriage counselling.’<sup>42</sup> After the DS had wreaked havoc, the Institute was raided by brownshirts ‘who removed 10,000 books from the institute’s library. A few days later they carried the bust of Hirschfeld [the institute’s founder] on a pole in a torchlight parade before throwing it in the bonfire with the books from the institute.’<sup>43</sup> This violence represented not only the destruction of an existing queer community, but an attempt to prevent any kind of recovery; by destroying those 10,000 books, and the knowledge they contained, the Nazis robbed queer people of a part of their history, a history which was already sparsely recorded, and remains so. In addition, this destruction of queer knowledge and history hinted at the destruction of queer people that was to come; as Hill suggests, ‘there is not only a symbolic and ideological but also a strong circumstantial connection

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<sup>42</sup> Leonidas E. Hill, ‘The Nazi Attack on ‘Un-German’ Literature, 1933-1945’ in *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, ed. by Jonathan Rose (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 9-46 (15).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

between the burning of books and the burning of men.’<sup>44</sup> If burning knowledge destroys queer history, burning people destroys queer futures.

Queer communities are endangered not only by external threats, but harmful patterns of behaviour and conflict within. Stringent beauty standards are rampant in the contemporary western gay community, and extend beyond body image into racism and femmephobia. The experience of these oppressive standards causes extensive damage to the mental wellbeing of many queer people, contrary to the hope of finding an accepting community of like-minded people. Although particularly visible and prominent among men who have sex with men, such prejudices are not confined to them alone. In the documentary series *Queer Britain*, Sherelle, a black lesbian from Walthamstow describes feeling afraid upon her entry into the lesbian scene because she felt she couldn’t see other women like her.<sup>45</sup> Sherelle came out at the age of nineteen, and relates finding that ‘there was no, like whatsoever, black lesbian woman I could look at and be like yeah ... she’s on TV, I wanna be like her.’<sup>46</sup> This lack of representation is hardly surprising, and reflects the failures of wider society, but as a community bonded by experiences of oppression, queer people should strive to do better. For Sherelle, the lack of visible peers and role models led to a crisis of identity; she describes modelling herself, and particularly her hair, on the appearance of white lesbians, stating ‘it is cute, but it wasn’t me.’<sup>47</sup> Sherelle refers to shaving her head as ‘the best thing I’ve ever done.’<sup>48</sup> This may sound trivial, it’s only a haircut after all, but Cheryl Thompson observes that ‘black hair is not just about hair; it is about identity. It is about the juxtaposition of hegemonic norms and black subjectivity’.<sup>49</sup> For Sherelle to aggressively straighten her hair in order to style it

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> *Queer Britain*, ‘Preference or Prejudice’, 14:16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 18:50.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:20.

<sup>49</sup> Cheryl Thompson, ‘Black Women and Identity: What’s Hair Got to Do With It?’, *Michigan Feminist Studies*, 22 (2008-2009), 78-90 (88).

like the white women that surrounded her represented more than a stylistic choice; it was, in some ways, a denial of her identity as a black woman. Sherelle herself voices the importance of wearing her natural hair; ‘I’d got rid of this person who wasn’t me, who was making me very, very sad. It’s a very strong thing, from a black woman’s perspective, to have no hair because it’s like, ‘this is me.’<sup>50</sup> In entering the lesbian community Sherelle found herself suppressing other aspects of her identity. This indicates that, like gay communities, contemporary lesbian communities are not always so receptive to difference as we might hope, and this lack of acceptance for diversity can cause real harm to queer individuals. In these difficulties we see reflected the difficulties which Jonah experiences on the Ship to Tarshish, which we are interpreting as a queer community, as a result of his Hebrew identity.

Among queer people in the UK, substance abuse and dependency is rampant. The ‘Part of the Picture’ project found that ‘overall 22% of LGB people in [their] sample showed signs of being dependent on a substance’.<sup>51</sup> They project concluded that ‘LGB people are not only more likely to take drugs and/or binge drink alcohol compared to the wider population; they also seem more likely to be dependent on these substances.’<sup>52</sup> For better or for worse, the vast majority of explicitly queer spaces are bars and clubs, and partying forms a huge part of queer culture. This is not surprising, as people experiencing such persistent hardship understandably require the opportunity to let loose and enjoy themselves in the company of others like them. However, considering the existing predisposition to mental illness among LGBT+ people, the prevalence of drug and alcohol use in the community can easily become dangerous. In ‘Growing Up Gay’, musician Olly Alexander explores how being LGBT+ has shaped his and others’ development and mental

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<sup>50</sup> *Queer Britain*, ‘Preference or Prejudice’, 19:24.

<sup>51</sup> Jez Buffin, Alastair Roy, Heather Williams, and Adam Winter, *Part of the Picture: Lesbian, gay and bisexual people’s alcohol and drug use in England (2009-2011)*, (Manchester: The Lesbian & Gay Foundation and the University of Central Lancashire, 2012), 26.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

health.<sup>53</sup> Olly describes entering the gay scene at the age of nineteen after moving to East London, and at first finding joy in the chance to go out and become friends with people like him.<sup>54</sup> However, ‘I started going out I think too much’,<sup>55</sup> Olly says. ‘When I think back about it’, he reflects, ‘I think for it to be really focused around partying, drugs, and sex, it can really I dunno slip into a really damaging cycle [...] if you’re already a vulnerable person it can really just trap you and it’s hard to find a way out.’<sup>56</sup> Thus the shape that queer communities take can, sadly, often be the source of more harm than good. While so far as the text tells us the ship Jonah boards is not a raucous party vessel, a boat is a strikingly fragile image. Jonah seeks refuge by setting out on the water, leaving behind the safe human habitat of dry land. Just as queer people are commonly forced to seek safety in unstable and potentially dangerous environments rife with substance abuse, so Jonah must seek safety by venturing into open water and exposing himself to the elements.

The identification of Jonah as the source of the storm through the casting of lots (1:7) reflects the arbitrary scapegoating of queer individuals which originates both from outside and from within queer communities. To cite a stunningly similar (and extremely comical) example, in 2014 UKIP councillor David Silvester blamed a series of heavy storms on legislation allowing same sex marriage in the United Kingdom which had recently come into force. Silvester claimed that ‘The scriptures make it abundantly clear that a Christian nation that abandons its faith and acts contrary to the Gospel (and in naked breach of a coronation oath) will be beset by natural disasters such as storms, disease, pestilence and war.’<sup>57</sup> Unsurprisingly, Silvester’s claim was met with ridicule by mainstream society, but on a more sombre note, such scapegoating and fearmongering is far from uncommon, and when it takes less ridiculous forms it can be far more harmful.

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<sup>53</sup> *Olly Alexander: Growing up Gay* directed by Vicki Cooper (United Kingdom: BBC Three, 18/07/2017).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:31.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:38.

<sup>57</sup> BBC News, ‘UKIP councillor blames storms and floods on gay marriage’, *BBC* (18 January 2014), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-25793358>> [accessed 13/03/2018].

The internal difficulties which the ship community encounters in the Book of Jonah are, arguably, a direct result of Jonah's ethnic identity. As he so emphatically states, 'I am a Hebrew [...] I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' (Jonah 1:9). The crew of the ship does not directly discriminate against Jonah on the basis of his ethnic identity (so far as we can tell, none of the sailors' grindr profiles read 'no fats, no femmes, no hebrews'), but it *is* the primary source of their fear; 'Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.' (1:10). Jonah's status as a prophet, as a messenger of YHWH, is what makes him so dangerous for the small community of the ship, and, like Sherelle, he knows he doesn't quite fit in; 'Jonah is acutely aware that, even among this mix of mariners, he stands out, alone.'<sup>58</sup> Even so, despite Jonah's suggestion that the men throw him into the sea in order to save themselves (1:12), they try their best to avoid harming him; 'nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land' (1:13). Sherwood suggests that 'the sailors [...] as soon as they have identified the story they that they have stumbled into, [...] try to resist (or row against) the plot.'<sup>59</sup> These characters, like queer people, strain against the narrative that has been imposed upon them; they do their best to change the story. Although Jonah is the source of their immediate problems, the community is loath to sacrifice their newest member, demonstrating the kind of solidarity we see in queer communities and the desire of queer individuals to help others like them even when doing so is difficult, as discussed above. Indeed, as Sherwood reflects, 'the sailors and Jonah [...] participate [...] in [...] a certain communality of the human, as they pitch themselves against forces so much bigger than themselves.'<sup>60</sup>

Unfortunately, the sailors' attempt to save Jonah is unsuccessful; after all it is the storytellers, and not the characters, who determine where the story goes. Jonah's identity proves to be too much for the community to accommodate and survive; 'but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against

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<sup>58</sup> Mera J. Flaumenhaft, 'The Story of Jonah', *The Review of Politics*, 76 (2014), 1-19 (4).

<sup>59</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 146.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-7.

them.’ (1:13). Despite their best efforts, the power of God (and of the narrator) is too much for the sailors to overcome, just as the destructive efforts of the heteropatriarchy are so often too much for queer communities to resist. Eventually, faced with a difficult choice between the destruction of their entire community and the loss of just one member, Jonah, the sailors do what I imagine almost all of us would; they throw Jonah into the sea (1:15). The sailors are clearly very uncomfortable with this course of action, despite Jonah’s complicity (1:12), and hope to be excused of guilt; ‘Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ (1:14). We see here a deferral of responsibility upwards, to a greater authority. Such a deferral is understandable; after all the sailors can only choose between the death of one man and the death of them all. However, I believe that when approaching this text from a queer perspective we should find some discomfort in that idea that blame can be transferred in this way. If queer communities are to grow and remain strong, LGBT+ people must hold each other accountable for their actions and strive to support one another, even when doing so is exceptionally difficult and it might be easier to sacrifice the few for the many. The actions of the sailors are understandable, and we feel sympathetic towards them when reading the text, but we should not condone their choices without qualification.

### **Wanting to Die**

While it is important we critique the actions of the sailors, we must also remember that Jonah is a willing victim. Our prophet is not only prepared to risk almost certain death, but welcomes the possibility. This facet of Jonah’s character is one that speaks extensively to queer experience. Jonah’s urge towards oblivion begins earlier in the narrative when, faced with the mighty storm, he goes down into the hold of the ship and falls asleep (1:5). ‘To some readers’, observes Flaumenhaft, ‘[Jonah’s descent] suggests a return to the beginnings of life in the womb, or the wish to end his life that he expresses at different stages of the

story.’<sup>61</sup> Rather than trying to help the ships’ crew sail the storm safely, Jonah ‘withdraw[s] in order to avoid the complex difficulties of life.’<sup>62</sup> The verb וירדם, from the root רדם, means not only to sleep but to sleep heavily, to be unconscious, and sometimes even to be as if dead. The verb is used in the niph'al stem, emphasising the passivity of Jonah’s course of action. The location of Jonah’s untimely nap, in the ירכתי (side, flank, recesses, extreme parts) of the ship further emphasises his removal from the ongoing crisis, while hinting at his soon to come sojourn in the belly of the fish. Jonah’s passivity is deliberately contrasted with what Alan Jon Hauser describes as ‘the sailors’ intense activity’.<sup>63</sup> While Jonah goes to sleep, the sailors cry out to their gods and throw cargo from the ship in a frenzied attempt to save themselves (1:5). Jonah’s desire to retire from a difficult existence is one that many queer people can empathise with. Suicide attempts are more prevalent in the LGBT+ community than in the wider population, and this difference is particularly pronounced among trans\* people; the RaRE research report found that ‘of young trans\* people [...] about half report[ed] lifetime suicide attempts and over 80% indicat[ed] lifetime suicide ideation and self-harm ideation and experience.’<sup>64</sup> Among the factors identified as relevant to this worrying trend were ‘some aspects of family support, or lack thereof’.<sup>65</sup> It is hardly surprising then that Jonah, dominated and tormented by his divine father, seeks to withdraw from the world.

Jonah’s untimely nap is promptly interrupted by the captain of the vessel; ‘What are you doing sound asleep?’, the sea captain demands, ‘Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.’ (1:5). In direct contrast with Jonah’s pessimistic passivity, the captain is willing to do anything he can to survive, and this includes motivating his companion on the open sea. The captain’s attempt at a pep talk is, however, only partially successful;

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<sup>61</sup> Flaumenhaft, ‘The Story of Jonah’, 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Alan John Hauser, ‘Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104 (1985), 21-37 (24).

<sup>64</sup> Nuno Nodin et al., *The RaRE Research Report*, 71.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

while he rouses Jonah from his slumber, Jonah does not call on his god as requested. Rather, as previously discussed, he identifies himself as a Hebrew (1:9), confesses that he has run away from YHWH (1:10), and advises the sailors to throw him into the sea (1:12). Is Jonah certain that his being cast into the ocean will save the ship? We have no real reason to believe so. We might postulate that, as a prophet, Jonah is aware of God's intentions and knows that this course of action will end the storm, but if this is the case then why did he descend into the belly of the ship rather than jumping overboard at the first sign of stormy weather? He's extremely willing to be sacrificed in this way, so why go for a nap and let the sailors continue their futile efforts rather than getting his impromptu dip over with? I suggest that Jonah's actions (or lack thereof) do not demonstrate a knowledge of God's intentions, but rather a sort of passive opportunism. Jonah is not keen to live, but he's also far too browbeaten to take an active role in ending his own life. Instead he goes into the belly of the ship to hide and wait for death, and when this plan is thwarted he sees an opportunity to have others harm him and jumps at the chance. Jonah's simultaneous desire to die and inability to take affirmative action will be familiar to many queer readers. Notably, the RaRE research report indicated that 'attempted suicide might happen more often at younger ages, later levelling out',<sup>66</sup> but 'suicide ideation remain[ed] significantly higher amongst LGB young people in [their] sample'.<sup>67</sup> It seems that while active efforts to end life diminish for many queer individuals as they grow older and forge lives for themselves, the ideation of death does not necessarily go away. Perhaps the character of Jonah is past the stage of taking action to end his existence, but continues to desire such an end, especially at times of intense stress such as those presented in this narrative.

### **The Calm after the Storm**

With Jonah cast into the sea, the sailors' troubles are over; 'the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.’ (1:15-16). Sasson interprets the events aboard the ship as a lesson ‘that the God who apportions death can also grant life and that unconditional submission to divine will can, in fact, turn fate around.’<sup>68</sup> ‘When learned under stressful conditions’, Sasson suggests, ‘such difficult lessons are especially prone to long-lasting retention.’<sup>69</sup> Apparently, we are to take these events as a positive story of conversion; a whole ship full of sailors newly fearing the Lord, and for the low, low price of just one prophet thrown into the depths! Rejoice, for following divine will can change your fate! This is all well and good, except that an omnipotent God is in control of fate anyway; the sailors wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place if God hadn’t conjured up the storm. Why does He feel it is necessary to make the sailors into murderers? (Jonah actually survives his ordeal of course, but the sailors are not privy to this information. So far as they are aware, they have killed their Hebrew passenger). As Sherwood asks, ‘is YHWH so obsessed with re-capturing one fleeing prophet that he is prepared to jeopardise and traumatise the innocent in the process?’<sup>70</sup> Apparently so. This is not a happy tale of conversion, but a cruel and violent assertion of power which mirrors the experiences of queer communities. The text makes no secret of this; the men (האנשים, derived from a root meaning ‘to be weak, sick, frail, feeble, mortal’) feel a great fear (יראה גדולה). The language used deliberately contrasts the weak men with their mighty fear of a mighty god (יהוה). These men do not come around to God’s will because they have a choice, but because they are forced to, and in doing so they are required not only to sacrifice some of their humanity, but also to then be grateful for this loss. Similarly, when queer communities tear themselves apart and sacrifice their members in order to survive, the heteropatriarchy expects them to be grateful they weren’t destroyed in their entirety. As we shall see, this is not the last time in the Jonah narrative that YHWH makes use of abusive tactics in order to establish coercive control.

What of Jonah? In the Hebrew text, chapter one ends on a cliffhanger; Jonah has been cast into the sea and his fate is unknown. Has our unwilling prophet

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<sup>68</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 142.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 247.

found the oblivion he so longs for? The precariousness of Jonah's situation, our inability to see what happens next in his story, reflects the uncertainty of the lives which many queer people are forced to lead. As we have seen, Jonah suffers a number of ordeals akin to the experiences of queer individuals; he is dominated and abused by his father figure; he runs away from home, but finds only more danger; and he longs to die and be released from what he perceives as a hopeless existence. Jonah's story, however, is not yet over, and these analogues with queer experience will continue to develop and be compounded upon in the subsequent chapters.

## 2.

### **‘You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas’ (2:4)**

Just as Jonah does not fit in with the rest of the minor prophets, so Chapter 2 does not fit in with the rest of the book. Firstly, the prose narrative form of the book is suddenly interrupted by poetry. In addition, as Sherwood suggests, ‘the thanksgiving Psalm [...] is temporally out of kilter with a plot-line in which Jonah is still very much in distress, and it offends basic assumptions of cohesion between what biblical scholars call the text’s *Gattung* (form/genre) and its *Sitz in Leben* (or ‘setting in life’).<sup>71</sup> Confined to the belly of a דג גדול (great fish) (2:1),<sup>72</sup> Jonah inexplicably delivers an impassioned Psalm of thanksgiving (2:2-9). Reading Jonah now, we expect the spectacle of a prophet trapped inside the body of a sea creature to be a major focus of the narrative, but the biblical text defies this expectation; the fish is only mentioned twice (2:1; 2:11), and no description is given of its interior. The דג גדול, so enchanting for a modern reader, functions only as a perfunctory plot device subservient to the mission of the Hebrew writer(s). However, as Sherwood observes, while ‘biblical critics may deem the fish to be an interpretive minnow, [...] for most readers it is the veritable centre (or navel) of the text, the vortex into which our attention is sucked.’<sup>73</sup> Reflecting on the story of Jonah, Julian Barnes notes that ‘even the gourd comes off better than the poor whale, who is no more than a floating prison [...] and yet, despite all this, the whale steals it.’<sup>74</sup> Interpretations and retellings of the text ranging from midrash to contemporary television have given extensive consideration to what Jonah’s ordeal in the belly of the beast might have been like, and these interpretations differ vastly; as Barnes observes ‘Jonah’s fish becomes a site of fabulous mutation,

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<sup>71</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 256.

<sup>72</sup> I’m following Hebrew numbering conventions here, this verse is 1:17 in translation.

<sup>73</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 141.

<sup>74</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ chapters*, 1989, (Reprint, London: Vintage, 2009), 177.

the perfect place for playing out fantasy and fear.<sup>75</sup> This chapter will be divided into two parts; first, a consideration of Jonah's psalm and the relationship dynamic it portrays, followed by an exploration of the symbolism of the fish, metaphors we might craft from its corpus, and the multiple ways Jonah's fantastical predicament can speak to the queer experience.

### **Abusive God**

'I called to the LORD out of my distress, and he answered me', sings Jonah (2:3). Perhaps, but what was the source of Jonah's distress, if not the Lord himself? Like the sailors after the storm, Jonah gives thanks to the deity for rescuing him from a disaster of His own design. Jonah himself is well aware of this; 'You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me' (2:4). Why, then, is Jonah thankful? I contend that the divine-human relationship here takes the shape of the relationship between an abuser and a survivor of abuse. In addition, as the biblical God is in such a position of power, His abuse of Jonah resembles the systemic abuse carried out by authorities such as the police, religious organisations, and governments against minority communities, such as LGBT+ people.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, an interrogation of experiences of domestic abuse and political terror, Judith Lewis Herman suggests that 'captivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control.'<sup>76</sup> Herman characterises the abuser who holds his victim captive as follows;

In situations of captivity the perpetrator becomes the most powerful person in the life of the victim, and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator. Little is known about the mind

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 2001), 74.

of the perpetrator. Since he is contemptuous of those who seek to understand him, he does not volunteer to be studied. Since he does not perceive that anything is wrong with him, he does not seek help - unless he is in trouble with the law. His most consistent feature, in both the testimony of victims and the observations of psychologists, is his apparent normality. Ordinary concepts of psychopathology fail to define or comprehend him.<sup>77</sup>

The characterisation of the abuser which Herman presents us with here can, without much difficulty, be read as a description of the character of God as presented in the Hebrew Bible. Who can be said to more powerful in the lives of the ancient Israelites, as portrayed in the Tanakh, than YHWH? It is He who brought them out of Egypt (Deut 26:8), and He who repeatedly sells them into the hands of their enemies (Jdg 2:14, 2 Kgs 13:3, Ps 106:41, etc.). The Lord is fully in control of the fate of the entire nation of Israel, as well as the fates of its individual members. YHWH also refuses to be understood, and He is almost always hostile towards those who try. To look on God's face is forbidden and carries the risk of death (Exod 33:20). Indignantly he asks, 'Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making"? or "Your work has no handles"?' (Isa 45:9). YHWH can hardly be said to perceive anything wrong with himself; He rarely, if ever, admits His mistakes. He cannot get into trouble with the law, because He *is* the law. The only characteristic Herman outlines which might be hard to apply to God is 'apparent normality',<sup>78</sup> as the divine is, by nature, extraordinary. However, the absolute belief in God's existence and activity in history which we see in the Hebrew Bible suggests that He is accepted as part of normality.

Jonah's captivity under God is continuously asserted in the biblical narrative. Jonah, strictly speaking, does not flee from God; he *gets up* to flee (לברח) from God (1:3). The use of the infinitive construct here indicates that Jonah *intends* to flee but is not necessarily successful. Jonah boards the ship to try to escape, but

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

the LORD holds him captive there through means of a great storm (1:3-4). In ‘the heart of the seas’ (2:4), Jonah remains in the deity’s captivity; ‘the flood surrounded me’, Jonah sings, ‘all *your* waves and *your* billows passed over me.’ (2:4, italics mine). Even in the depths of the ocean, Jonah does not find refuge from God. With the allotment of the big fish (2:1), God makes the most dramatically physical assertion of his power yet, trapping the prophet within the physiology of a sea monster. When the abuser is God, an all-powerful deity, escaping captivity becomes impossible. The inescapability of Jonah’s captivity resonates for queer people as, although many queer people experience abusive parental and romantic relationships, they are also commonly abused by higher forces; religion, the state, society. It is precisely because the abuse of LGBT+ people is institutionalised that its effects are so insidious and hard to escape. Escaping from an individual human abuser can be incredibly difficult, but escaping from institutional abuse, like escaping from an abusive deity, appears a near impossible task.

Transgender musician Anohni has confronted the abusive nature of contemporary government surveillance<sup>79</sup> in a way which may enlighten our understanding of God as abusive in the Book of Jonah. On her 2016 album *HOPELESSNESS*, she ‘takes the tragedies of our age - ecocide, drone warfare, loss of liberty - and confronts them with the aid of muscular electronic tunes.’<sup>80</sup> On the album’s third track, ‘Watch Me’,<sup>81</sup> ‘the US National Security Agency [NSA] is cast as a father figure whose attentiveness is controlling and downright sinister.’<sup>82</sup> Throughout the track, Anohni cries out to ‘Daddy’ a total of nineteen times.<sup>83</sup> The

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<sup>79</sup> Anohni targets the American National Security Agency, but ‘Watch Me’ could just as easily be addressed to similar government bodies in other countries that have also been implicated in carrying out mass surveillance, including the UK’s Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

<sup>80</sup> Kitty Empire, ‘Anohni: Hopelessness review - a radical album for a time of crisis’, *Guardian* (2016), <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/08/anohni-hopelessness-review-antony-and-johnsons>> [accessed 03/04/2018].

<sup>81</sup> Anohni, ‘Watch Me’, *HOPELESSNESS*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Secretly Canadian, 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Empire, ‘Anohni: Hopelessness review’.

<sup>83</sup> Anohni, ‘Watch Me’.

use of this term is at once childlike and disturbingly sexualised, suggesting an analogy between the NSA's surveillance of individual citizens and abusive relationships, whether they be between parent and child or romantic partners. Anohni (ironically?) entreats the abusively omnipresent figure to keep her under watch, flirtatiously requesting that he 'watch me in my hotel room / Watch my outline as I move from city to city / Watch me watching pornography / Watch me talking to my friends and my family'.<sup>84</sup> While Anohni contemplates the very much contemporary problem of mass surveillance, it is not difficult to draw an analogy between the relationship explored by 'Watch Me' and Jonah's relationship with YHWH.

'I know you love me, Daddy', sings Anohni, 'Cause you're always watching me.'<sup>85</sup> The similarities between this characterisation of the NSA and the character of God are hard to ignore. The Hebrew Bible continuously characterises God as father, as previously discussed, and both of these father figures are far more overbearing than we might hope for a parent to be. 'Daddy' watches Anohni's every move, while God, as we have seen, keeps Jonah under constant captivity. Why do these father figures, swollen with the power of patriarchy, act in this way? In the chorus of 'Watch Me', Anohni delineates the reasons given for the NSA's surveillance; 'protecting me from evil [...] terrorism [...] child molesters [...] evil.'<sup>86</sup> According to their own website, the NSA 'Saves lives', 'Defends vital networks', 'Advances U.S. goals and alliances', and 'Protects privacy rights'.<sup>87</sup>

The God of the Hebrew Bible is less explicit about his reasons for imposing a strict set of laws on the Israelite people and keeping them under constant surveillance to ensure their obedience to these laws. Ultimately the good of following the law appears to be considered self-evident; Moses relates that YHWH has issued these commandments 'לַעֲשׂוֹת אֲתָם' ('so that you do them', Ex 35:1). However, YHWH does tell the Israelites that 'if you obey my voice and keep my

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> National Security Agency, *What We Do* <<https://www.nsa.gov/what-we-do/>> [accessed 13/04/2018].

covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.’ (Exodus 19:5-6). If the people of Israel follow the law, then they will, apparently, be rewarded with prosperity and protected from harm. Both the NSA and YHWH can thus be seen, at least nominally, to claim that their extensive surveillance and enforcement of law is for the benefit and protection of their chosen peoples, whether they be the American populace or the twelve tribes of Israel.

However, as the thick irony which seeps through Anohni’s vocals suggests, these father figures may also be motivated by more sinister concerns. Mass surveillance represents a powerful threat to free speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of association; long considered essential rights for a free and equal society, and rights of which LGBT+ people often have particular need. Rainey Reitman observes that ‘people are less likely to associate with organizations when they know the government is watching and when the government can track their associations. In short, surveillance threatens free speech.’<sup>88</sup> Ian S. Thompson argues that ‘the harms of ineffective and un-American profiling - regardless of the communities it is directed against - are of clear concern and importance to the LGBTQ community.’<sup>89</sup> He urges queer people to remember the ways in which state surveillance has affected their communities in the past; ‘we know from history and experience that discriminatory surveillance and profiling by law enforcement agencies has had a disproportionately negative impact on LGBTQ people, particularly people of colour.’<sup>90</sup> As a transgender woman, Anohni is well aware of this; as Thompson relates, ‘The largest national survey of transgender people to date found 22 percent of respondents who have interacted with police reported experiencing bias-based harassment, with substantially higher rates reported by

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<sup>88</sup> Rainey Reitman, ‘Snowden’s Motivation: What the Internet Was Like Before It Was Being Watched, and How We Can Get There Again’, *EFF* (2014), <<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/10/snowden-motivated-what-internet-was-it-was-being-watched-and-how-we-can-get-there>> [accessed 25/04/2018].

<sup>89</sup> Ian S. Thompson, ‘Abusive Surveillance Is an LGBTQ Rights Issue’, *ACLU* (2014), <<https://www.aclu.org/blog/national-security/abusive-surveillance-lgbtq-rights-issue>> [accessed 25/04/2018].

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

respondents of color.’<sup>91</sup> While queer communities may not currently be the primary target of mass surveillance in the West, the normalisation of abusive surveillance threatens to infringe on their hard fought for rights. This is particularly true for those people who exist at the intersections between queerness and other marginalised minority identities.

The frightening impact of the surveillance carried out by both the biblical God and the NSA, and the power of this surveillance to maintain captivity, may be illuminated by Michel Foucault’s concept of panopticism, as expounded in *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>92</sup> Foucault observes that the Panopticon, as designed by Jeremy Bentham, ‘reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.’<sup>93</sup> By ensuring that those incarcerated within are fully visible at all times, and unable to know whether or not they are being watched at any specific moment, the Panopticon prevents any action or communication considered undesirable by the coercive power in control. ‘The crowd’, suggests Foucault, ‘is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities.’<sup>94</sup> In this way the Panopticon achieves ‘a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.’<sup>95</sup> As such, any form of rebellion against the heteropatriarchal hegemony is strongly discouraged, and the most ingenious (or terrifying) thing is that this discouragement is automated and effectively imposed reflexively by the individual. As Foucault puts it, ‘the Panopticon is a marvellous machine which [...] produces homogenous effects of power.’<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, at a time in which the internet did not yet exist, there was no social media, and mass surveillance was considerably less extensive than it is in the twenty-first century. However, Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan, and Bert-Jaap Koops suggest that ‘the Panopticon as a metaphor could still be productive to explain how surveillance works and what it does, albeit in adjusted forms.’<sup>97</sup> Under the surveillance of security agencies such as the NSA and the GCHQ we arguably find ourselves subject to a new form of panopticism, and one which, considering the prevalence of digital communication in the twenty-first century, grows more effective every day. As more and more of our personal lives take place online, governmental bodies are more and more easily able to monitor us. Before the full extent of this surveillance was known, it perhaps could not have been characterised as panoptical, since a crucial aspect of panopticism is the subject’s awareness that they may be being watched and the self-regulation which this knowledge ensures. However, the Electronic Frontier Foundation observes that ‘the US Government still considers the Program [“President’s Surveillance Program” - the NSA’s domestic surveillance] officially classified, but a tremendous amount of information has been exposed by various whistleblowers, admitted to by government officials during Congressional hearings and with public statements, and reported on in investigations by major newspapers across the country.’<sup>98</sup> In the light of such revelations, I suggest that it is now legitimate/it now makes sense to describe the current situation of mass surveillance in panoptical terms; each of us is aware that our private conversations may be read or listened to, and this awareness urges us to regulate our own behaviour to comply with the heteropatriarchal hegemony, and thus to remain within its captivity.

Can God, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, be said to implement a form of panopticism similar to that instituted by the NSA and the GCHQ? It seems to me that the way in which God watches over his chosen people bears striking

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<sup>97</sup> Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan, and Bert-Jaap Koops, ‘Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation’, *Philosophy & Technology*, 30 (2017), 9-37 (26-7).

<sup>98</sup> Electronic Frontier Foundation, *NSA Spying: How it Works*, <<https://www.eff.org/nsa-spying/how-it-works>> [accessed 25/04/2018].

similarities to the observation of citizens carried out by surveillance programs. In Chronicles, we are told that ‘the eyes of the Lord range throughout the entire earth’ (2 Chr 16:9). According to the book of Proverbs, ‘The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.’ (Prov 15:3). In YHWH’s own words: ‘my eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight.’ (Jer 16:17). Clearly the biblical character of God is able to observe the behaviour of his people in a manner even more comprehensive than modern surveillance agencies; seeing all they do and hearing all they say without the need for cameras or internet monitoring. In fact, YHWH’s surveillance goes even further: ‘Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely’ (Ps 139:4). God seems to know what his people will say before they even say it, and presumably this prescience extends to other actions as well as speech. Considering the above quotations are found in the Hebrew Bible it is clear that the extensive nature of YHWH’s surveillance is common knowledge in the textual world of the Bible, or at least among the Israelites as depicted in the text. Biblical characters such as Jonah are aware that God is watching their every move and are thus influenced to regulate their own behaviour accordingly, just as the knowledge of ever-present government surveillance influences the behaviour of people living in the twenty-first century. For this reason, I find it no stretch of the imagination to suggest that God’s surveillance as depicted in the Tanakh, including the book of Jonah, can be described as a form of panopticism which functions to keep God’s chosen people captive and maintain coercive control.

As well as the institution of panopticism, the biblical God utilises the infliction of trauma as a means of coercive control. When, through means of his constant surveillance, He perceives his covenant to be broken, He is quick to inflict brutal punishment. In the Book of Judges, for example, YHWH repeatedly sells his people into the hands of their enemies as punishment for idolatry (Jdg 2:1-3, 2:11-14, 3:7-8, 4:1-2, etc.). Jeremy Young argues that ‘[God] appears only to care for [Israel] to the extent that she meets his needs, attempting to coerce her into compliance with threats, and quickly turning nasty when she shows any

signs of noncompliance.’<sup>99</sup> The swiftness with which God deals out punishments when his laws are broken suggests that they are an expression of his absolute power over his people. The traumatic events he inflicts on his chosen people whenever they break his many rules may or may not be intended to guide them in a better direction, but God’s intentionality is, at least to some extent, besides the point. According to David R. Blumenthal, ‘God, as portrayed in our holy sources and as experienced by humans throughout the ages, acts, from time to time, in a manner that is so unjust that it can only be characterized by the term “abusive.”’<sup>100</sup> He observes that, in cases of abuse, ‘the victim usually has not wronged the perpetrator at all; however, even if the victim has wronged the abuser, the abuser’s reaction is out of all proportion to the wrong committed.’<sup>101</sup> Applying this understanding of abuse to God’s actions, he argues that ‘our sins - and we are always sinful - are in no proportion whatsoever to the punishment meted out to us. Furthermore, the reasons for God’s actions are irrelevant, God’s motives are not the issue. Abuse is unjustified, in God as well as in human beings.’<sup>102</sup> If we accept Blumenthal’s characterisation of God’s behaviour, which I am inclined to do, then the intentions behind YHWH’s punishments become unimportant. What matters is that his infliction of trauma is not proportional (if any such infliction could ever be said to be so), and that it thus constitutes abuse.

Herman argues that ‘traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others.’<sup>103</sup> The shattering of the self leaves survivors of trauma vulnerable, allowing abusers to assert control over them. ‘Wounded soldiers and raped women cry for their mothers, or for God,’<sup>104</sup> observes Herman. ‘When this

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<sup>99</sup> Jeremy Young, *The Violence of God and the War on Terror* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007), 34-35.

<sup>100</sup> David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 247.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

cry is not answered,' she suggests, 'the sense of basic trust is shattered. Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life.'<sup>105</sup> By swiftly inflicting trauma on his chosen people as soon as he perceives them to have strayed, YHWH shatters any illusion of existential safety they may have had. In this way, he prevents them from becoming confident in their continued survival and thus ensures that they continue to need Him and accept their captivity.

In the Book of Jonah, YHWH unashamedly demonstrates his abusive tendencies, this time directing them against one individual, by placing Jonah's life in extreme danger. According to Sasson, 'this segment focuses on a Hebrew who knew much about his deity, but who now needs to be reminded of what it means to be committed to God.'<sup>106</sup> This reading attempts to characterise YHWH in a favourable light, but considering our understanding of the deity as an abuser, the phrase 'needs to be reminded' positively oozes sinister undertones. Jonah must be 'reminded' that he is not so free as he thinks, and that disobedience necessarily entails extreme punishment in the form of inflicted trauma. If, as Herman suggests, 'traumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible',<sup>107</sup> then being tossed into the ocean and swallowed alive is surely a paradigmatic example of a traumatic event. Jonah's experience is one no ordinary human being could reasonably dream of surviving, and is specially formulated by his abuser, God, to reassert the oppressive reality of coercive control.

While Jonah's traumatic experience at the hands of the deity is fantastical, involving a divine storm and a sea monster, the message it conveys (that disobedience towards higher powers will be punished with threats to existence and the subsequent infliction of trauma), resonates with LGBT+ experiences. The infliction of trauma continues to be used as a coercive tool against LGBT+ people

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 158.

<sup>107</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34.

in many corners of the globe; according to a 2015 UN report, ‘in addition to “street” violence and other spontaneous attacks in public settings, those perceived as LGBT remain targets of organized abuse, including by religious extremists, paramilitary groups and extreme nationalists.’<sup>108</sup> Individuals and institutions inflict trauma on vulnerable people, such as members of the queer community, in order to maintain and consolidate their vulnerability. In early 2017, a brutal campaign of homophobic violence was initiated in the Chechen Republic, a subject of the Russian Federation located in the North Caucasus. According to Amnesty International, ‘the Russian independent daily newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, reported that over a hundred of men believed to be gay [were] abducted [...] as part of a coordinated campaign. The men were reportedly tortured and otherwise ill-treated, and forced to disclose other LGBTI individuals known to them. Novaya Gazeta claimed to have verified information about at least three men who had been killed by their captors, but its sources claim that there have been many more killings.’<sup>109</sup> Shocking as this violence is, Amnesty International observe that is neither unheard of nor surprising in the Chechen Republic: ‘Men who may be seen as having “tarnished” the family’s “honour”, by being gay or believed to be gay, face a very real risk of being killed by members of their own families [and] perpetrators of “honour killings” often enjoy impunity for their crimes.’<sup>110</sup> The exact role of Chechen authorities and the Russian Government in these abductions and killings is unclear, but Amnesty reports that ‘reactions from Chechen officials to this information [...] varied from denial, to dismissing it as joke, to further thinly veiled threats.’<sup>111</sup> As of April 2018, ‘Russia has failed to conduct any meaningful investigations into the appalling abuses that took place. Nobody has

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<sup>108</sup> UN Human Rights Council, *Discrimination and violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (A/HRC/29/23)* (4/05/2015), <[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/29/23&referer=/english/&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/29/23&referer=/english/&Lang=E)> [accessed 13/04/2018], 7-8.

<sup>109</sup> Amnesty International, *URGENT ACTION: Men suspected gay abducted, tortured or killed* (4/04/2017), <<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4660232017ENGLISH.pdf>> [accessed 13/04/2018], 1.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

been brought to justice.’<sup>112</sup> We cannot be sure if Chechen and Russian authorities deliberately instigated this violence, but it is clear from their inaction that they are, at best, apathetic about the infliction of such trauma on men who have sex with men. In the face of such cruelty we must, I suggest, condemn their silence and inaction as complicity.

While the events in Chechnya represent a particularly brutal case of violence against LGBT+ communities, such campaigns of abuse are far from exceptional and remain an ever present threat to the safety and security of LGBT+ individuals worldwide. In the United Kingdom, for example, it has been observed that ‘the number of homophobic attacks more than doubled in the three months after the Brexit vote, with toxicity fostered by the EU referendum debate spreading beyond race and religion’.<sup>113</sup> Just as Jonah is abused by a controlling God, so LGBT+ individuals and communities are continuously traumatised by heteropatriarchal forces in order to assert control.

To come back to a question posed earlier, in light of our understanding of God as an omnipotent abuser, why is Jonah thankful? Such gratitude and forgiveness towards an abuser, in spite of their horrific behaviour, is symptomatic of surviving trauma. Examining the coping methods of childhood abuse survivors, Herman observes that;

When it is impossible to avoid the reality of the abuse, the child must construct some system of meaning that justifies it. Inevitably, the child concludes that her innate badness is the cause. The child seizes upon this explanation early and clings to it tenaciously, for it enables her to preserve a sense of meaning, hope, and power. If she is bad, then her parents are

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<sup>112</sup> Matt Beard, ‘We must get justice for gay and bisexual men murdered in Chechnya’, *Guardian* (2018), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/06/we-must-get-justice-for-gay-and-bisexual-men-murdered-in-chechnya>> [accessed 13/04/2018].

<sup>113</sup> Mark Townsend, ‘Homophobic attacks in UK rose 147% in three months after Brexit vote’, *Guardian* (2016), <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/08/homophobic-attacks-double-after-brexit-vote>> [accessed 18/04/2018].

good. If she is bad, then she can try to be good. If, somehow, she has brought this fate upon herself, then somehow she has the power to change it. If she has driven her parents to mistreat her, then, if only she tries hard enough, she may some day earn their forgiveness and finally win the protection and care she so desperately needs.<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps Jonah expresses gratitude towards God, despite his awareness of the deity's authorship of his horrendous ordeal, in an attempt to rationalise and justify his suffering. The reality of Jonah's abuse is certainly inescapable; as previously discussed, no one could hope to escape an all-powerful deity. Through the course of the Psalm, we can see a shifting of blame away from the deity. Near the beginning of the poem, the use of the second person clearly assigns responsibility for Jonah's ordeal to the Lord; '*you* cast me into the deep [...] all *your* waves and *your* billows passed over me' (2:4, italics mine). However, later in the Psalm, Jonah appears to shift responsibility onto himself; '*I* went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.' (2:7, italics mine). Here Jonah describes his descent into the depths of the ocean as if it were an act of his own volition. The second person is used to address the deity once more but this time it is contrasted with the first person, and suggests that God's actions have been wholly positive, saving Jonah from himself. The shift from blame to thankfulness is compounded by Jonah's emphatic promise that '*I* with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.' (2:10). By reasserting his commitment to God, in contrast to his previous attempt to flee, Jonah endeavours to rationalise the extreme abuse which he has endured. Such rationalisation suits the abuser's purposes perfectly, allowing them to maintain control and also, at least in the eyes of their chosen victim, absolving them of moral responsibility for their actions.

We might expect, and even perhaps hope, that Jonah would be angry at God, rather than rationalising his abuse by being thankful. However, such anger is not

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<sup>114</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 103.

always available to survivors of abuse. In *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, David R. Blumenthal shares correspondence between himself and a colleague, Diane, ‘who is herself a survivor of child abuse’.<sup>115</sup> Diane observes that ‘the person abused as child does not feel righteous anger, either at the time or later. [...] There is anger, of course, but the anger is diffuse, non-focussed, in part directed at the self.’<sup>116</sup> Although the character of Jonah is not a child, and we have no suggestion of what his childhood might be like, humans are arguably in a permanent state of childhood in comparison to God, considering his omnipotence. It is therefore not surprising that Jonah is unable to direct his anger towards the deity, and that, as we will see later, he turns it in on himself and towards others (i.e. the Ninevites) instead. Jonah’s experience resonates with that of LGBT+ people in that prolonged abuse at the hands of higher powers, such as governments, religious organisations, and deities, more often than not geminates anger directed towards the self, rather than towards the abusive powers. Queer people do not, of course, universally experience childhood abuse (although many do). However, bullying from peers can begin early on, especially for those whose queerness is apparent from a young age, and wider societal prejudice is not hidden from children. As such, even for those LGBT+ people who do not experience familial abuse, childhood is often far from safe and supportive. The higher rates of mental illness, and particularly self destructive behaviours, among LGBT+ demonstrate the devastating impact these early experiences can have.

Reflecting on the way in which her experiences of abuse have impacted her faith, Diane writes that ‘for the ordinary person I can have righteous anger, but not for “Father.” Having experienced justice from ordinary people, I have expectations; having not experienced it from “Father,” I have none. Righteous anger requires expectations.’<sup>117</sup> As Diane so knowledgeably observes, the expectation of non-abusive behaviour is required to generate righteous anger. If Jonah has no expectation of the LORD to act differently, which seems likely considering the deity’s constant assertions of captivity and power, then he cannot

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<sup>115</sup> Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*, xx.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

be expected to be angry about his treatment. Similarly, when queer people are born into and develop in a world in which they are routinely marginalised, humiliated, abused, and murdered, it is difficult for them to direct their anger righteously against the hegemonic powers that treat them this way, as there is no reasonable expectation of change. For the victim of child abuse, for the queer individual, and for the prophet entombed within a fishy prison, anger and resistance appear futile, and it is for this reason that the survivor might feel thankful for even a modicum of kindness despite prolonged abuse.

### **A Very Slippery Fish**

The monster that swallows up our prophet is an exceedingly slippery fish; it slips defiantly through the grasping fingers of its readers and wriggles its way into the minds of Jonah's interpreters. This is a fish which never finds itself out of water, is never seen flopping around on the deck of a boat, gasping for air. On the contrary, it is sustained by its ability to feed off the imaginations in which it is so ingrained, and its already considerable size continuously increases. The big fish's status as little more than a convenient plot device in the Hebraic text, far from limiting its importance, allows it to become the object of wide ranging and miraculous interpretation. The body of the sea monster is the textual element into which interpreters are most readily able, as we shall see, to insert their own emotions, ideas, and ideologies.

### **Hell Bodies / Bodily Hell**

Probably the most common approach to Jonah's ordeal (and arguably the interpretation closest to what being swallowed by a sea monster would *actually* be like), is to read the belly of the fish as a sort of personal, living hell. For many interpreters, the runaway prophet is deserving of this terrifying ordeal; being swallowed alive is seen as a just punishment for Jonah's disobedience, and YHWH does no wrong in subjecting Jonah to this experience.

While there are Jewish interpretations which understand the fish as a sort of hell,<sup>118</sup> such interpretations are more often a side effect of reading Hebraic literature through Christian eyes. As Sherwood observes, ‘rather like the snake in Eden, the fish is swelled and fattened by theology until it assumes monstrous, devilish proportions.’<sup>119</sup> The fish becomes ‘the Devil, [...], Time (that consumes all things), the Carnal Nature, that destroyed the First Adam, and, of course, a huge bodily incarnation of Death and Hell.’<sup>120</sup> One important strand of Christian interpretation, drawing on texts in the New Testament, finds in Jonah a precursor of Christ. According to Sherwood, such readings obscure the actual character of Jonah: ‘as the text becomes a gigantic and accommodating receptacle for Christ’s truth and Christ’s sufferings, Jonah’s outline begins to melt; he loses his own voice and script and outline and becomes a ventriloquist for Christ.’<sup>121</sup> Jonah’s three day long incarceration in the fish is easily analogised to Jesus’ three days in the tomb. In the gospel of Matthew, for example, a group of Pharisees are told that ‘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.’ (12:40). Moreover, the Christian idolisation of suffering serves to absolve God of moral responsibility for His behaviour in the Jonah narrative, and indeed praises him for it.

If we entertain the idea of the fish as a personal hell intended to correct Jonah’s errant disobedience, then how can this facet of the text speak to queer experiences? LGBT+ people have long been subjected to horrible treatment in an attempt to change their perceived deviant identities and behaviour. One example of such treatment, which continues to occur, is conversion therapy, also known as sexual reorientation therapy. Flentje, Heck, and Cochran describe conversion

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<sup>118</sup> Sherwood discusses *Sefer-ha-Zohar*, for example, which ‘reads Jonah as a sign of the soul/body in purgatory, clearly imbib[ing] large doses of the medieval Christianity with which it co-exists.’ *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 105.

<sup>119</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 17.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-8.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

therapy as ‘interventions that are designed to change someone’s sexual orientation from lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) to heterosexual’.<sup>122</sup> They observe that ‘these interventions are controversial and possibly iatrogenic, as most major mental health organisations have noted while criticizing the practice.’<sup>123</sup> In examining the motivations for seeking conversion therapy, Flentje et al’s study found that all participants ‘were driven by religious and heteronormative beliefs. Specifically, religious beliefs and desires to have or maintain a heterosexual lifestyle, which includes marriage and children, were the most commonly cited reasons for entering reorientation therapy’.<sup>124</sup> In addition, ‘the most frequent providers reported by participants were individuals with a religious affiliation, while very few psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers were identified as the participants’ providers of reorientation therapy.’<sup>125</sup> While participants did report some limited positive outcomes from conversion therapy, they also reported ‘increased psychological distress that centred on depressed mood, increased anxiety, and suicidality. Many of the responses resonated with a theme of “shame, guilt, and self-hatred.”’<sup>126</sup>

Conversion therapy, I suggest, can be understood as an immersion of LGBT+ individuals in a personal, living hell as an attempt by religious organisations to change behaviour they deem unacceptable. In this way, conversion therapy resembles the experience of Jonah in the belly of the big fish. In both cases, trauma is deliberately inflicted on individuals by religious authorities. The fetishisation of suffering in Christianity legitimises the character of God’s treatment of Jonah and the practice of conversion therapy. In the Christian imagination Jonah deserves to undergo unimaginable suffering, and so do LGBT+ individuals. By drawing this analogy between the fish as personal hell and the

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<sup>122</sup> Annesa Flentje, Nicholas C Heck, and Bryan N Cochran, ‘Experiences of Ex-Ex-Gay Individuals in Sexual Reorientation Therapy: Reasons for Seeking Treatment, Perceived Helpfulness and Harmfulness of Treatment, and Post-Treatment Identification’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61 (2014), 1242-1268 (1243).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 1261.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 1262.

experience of conversion therapy, we are able to find resonance between queer experiences and the Jonah narrative, as well as continuing to challenge the textual behaviour of the deity which we have already demonstrated to be characteristic of emotional abuse.

## 20,000 Leagues Under the Amniotic Sea

The idea of being trapped inside the belly of a fish is terrifying, but it can also hold a strange attraction. For some readers, Jonah's confinement has represented a return to the womb; a finding of perverse comfort in the most unlikely of places. Sasson observes that the term used for the particular bodily cavity where Jonah find himself (מַעֵה) is diffuse in meaning, 'referring to any internal [...] organ, be it of digestion or procreation; it is only our imagination that finds for Jonah a specific niche within the fish.'<sup>127</sup> Perry expands on this ambiguity, suggesting that 'the "loins" to which Jonah descends have, in addition to the negative reference to ingestion, the positive sense of procreation.'<sup>128</sup> As well as digestive organs and the womb, the Hebrew term can also refer to the bodily place of emotions, including distress and love. In fact the place of procreation and the place of death may not be so separate after all, at least in the ancient Israelite imagination; the tortured character of Job declares that 'naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away' (Job 1:21). Jonah describes himself as crying out from 'the belly of She'ol' (2:3), figuratively conflating בטן (the belly, womb) with שאול (the grave, pit, underworld), suggesting an affinity between birth and death.

In *A History of the World in 10½ chapters*, reflecting on the reception of Jonah's whale, Julian Barnes asks 'does the image of pulsing blubber set off some terror of being transported back to the womb?'<sup>129</sup> The idea of such an incarceration is at once revolting and enchanting. The womb represents safety from an abusive

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<sup>127</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 152.

<sup>128</sup> Perry, *The Honeymoon is Over*, 19.

<sup>129</sup> Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ chapters*, 178.

world; newborn babies, recently released from the confines of the uterus, are swaddled in fabric to provide comfort. In the Book of Ezekiel, Jerusalem is confronted with ‘her abominations’ (Eze 16:2) and told ‘on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths.’ (Eze 16:4). Jerusalem’s lack of metaphorical swaddling is a mark of her abhorrence, and indicates the comfort that a tight wrapping in cloth, which simulates the enclosed experience of the womb, can provide. If the belly of the fish is a return to the womb, which the language of the Hebrew text and the Ancient Israelite imagination appear to allow for, then Jonah’s incarceration might represent a comforting experience rather than one of torment.

If we can interpret Jonah’s stint in the fish as a comforting return to the time before birth, then it holds a certain appeal for queer readers. The plight of Israel described metaphorically by Ezekiel resonates with the experience of LGBT+ communities. Following the verse quoted above (Eze 16:4), Israel is told that ‘No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.’ (Eze 16:5). Although queerness is rarely apparent in a baby, as previously discussed some people are visibly queer from a young age and can thus experience familial and communal rejection from very early on. As such, for many LGBT+ people, it is only the very earliest stages of life that have been without suffering. For this reason, a return to the womb, or a simulation of the womb, forms a tempting prospect. The womb represents an enclosed, individual world, free from the abuse of life in a heteropatriarchal society.

### **Jonah on the Psychiatric Ward**

We have explored two of the miraculous transformations Jonah’s whale has undergone. I now offer a new transformation, bedecking the fish’s belly with hospital beds, stocking it with SSRIs, benzodiazepines, and antipsychotics, and hiring a cohort of doctors and nurses to staff its wards. The belly of the beast has become a psychiatric ward, and Jonah has become an inpatient. This

transfiguration is fantastical, even ludicrous, but perhaps no more so than interpretations we have already encountered and is particularly fitting for a queer reading.

Psychiatric institutions are, at least nominally, intended as places where those who suffer from mental illness can receive treatment and, hopefully, recover. However, as with all institutions, psychiatric hospitals have and continue to be used as tools to assert coercive control over minorities. Robert van Voren observes that ‘there is an ongoing tension between politics and psychiatry and that the opportunity to use psychiatry as a means to stifle opponents or solve conflicts is an appealing one, not only to dictatorial regimes but also to well-established democratic societies.’<sup>130</sup> Psychiatric institutions have been - and still are - commonly used as a means to remove individuals considered undesirable from mainstream society, regardless of whether these individuals actually require medical intervention. According to van Voren, ‘using psychiatry as a means of repression has been a particular favourite of Socialist-oriented regimes.’<sup>131</sup> In the Soviet Union, for example, van Voren notes that ‘on the basis of the available data, one can confidently conclude that thousands of dissenters were hospitalized for political reasons.’<sup>132</sup> In the People’s Republic of China, Human Rights Watch and the Geneva Initiative on Psychiatry observe, ‘the Communist Party’s notion of “political dangerousness” was long ago institutionally grafted on to the diagnostic armory of Chinese psychiatry and incorporated into the key concept of psychiatric dangerousness.’<sup>133</sup> The identities of LGBT+ people have historically been among those pathologised in order to legitimate medical abuse and incarceration (homosexuality was not removed from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual until 1973), and in some corners of the globe this practice continues. It has been found in Russia, for example, that ‘despite the exclusion of homosexuality from the list of

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<sup>130</sup> Robert van Voren, ‘Political Abuse of Psychiatry - An Historical Overview’, *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 36 (2010), 33-35 (33).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>133</sup> Human Rights Watch and Geneva Initiative on Psychiatry, *Dangerous Minds: Political Psychiatry in China Today and its Origins in the Mao Era* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 4.

mental disorders, 62.5% of 450 surveyed psychiatrists in the Rostov Region consider it a disease'.<sup>134</sup>

In order to reflect upon my characterisation of Jonah's stint in the fish as psychiatric incarceration, I will now consider Marge Piercy's 1976 feminist science fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a companion text. Although this is, of course, a fictional account of queer experiences of psychiatric care, I believe that the plot of this work (which contrasts psychiatric care in the 1970s with the psychiatric care in a vision of an ideal future) proves to be a fruitful conversation partner for my interpretation of Jonah due to its emotional depiction of experiences of psychiatric incarceration in the not-so-distant past (or, in some places, now, as demonstrated by the above discussion) and its thoughtful consideration of a utopian alternative. In the novel, Mexican-American woman Consuela 'Connie' Ramos finds herself unfairly incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital after a run in with her niece's drug dealing boyfriend. Connie communicates telepathically with Luciente, a young woman from a utopian future.<sup>135</sup> Luciente shows Connie a world far removed from her native 1970s New York City, a community called Mattapoissett which M. Keith Booker describes as 'an ideal 22nd-century utopia based on tolerance, nurturing, communality, ecological responsibility, and the complete effacement of conventional gender differences.'<sup>136</sup> With regard to queer people, the life of Skip, a gay man incarcerated alongside Connie, contrasts with the lives of many of Mattapoissett's inhabitants,<sup>137</sup> but particularly the life of Jackrabbit, a young and effervescent bisexual man. On his first appearance in the novel, Skip confides in Connie that he has been incarcerated 'seven times in various spitals [sic]. One for each

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<sup>134</sup> Yu. S. Savenko and A. Ya. Perekhov, 'The State of Psychiatry in Russia', *Psychiatric Times*, 31, Issue 2 (2014) 2.

<sup>135</sup> Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: The Women's Press, 1979).

<sup>136</sup> M. Keith Booker, 'Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy', *Science Fiction Studies*, 21 (1994), 337-350 (339).

<sup>137</sup> In Luciente's society, bisexuality and polyamory appear to be the norm.

consecutive time I tried to off myself. Actually that was only five times.’<sup>138</sup>

Jackrabbit has also experienced mental health difficulties. ‘I had a warring self in me when I was thirteen’, he tells Connie.<sup>139</sup> ‘I went mad with fear. In the madhouse I met Bolivar and he was good for me in learning to say that initial “I want, I want.”’<sup>140</sup> While both characters enter psychiatric institutions, their experiences are radically different; Skip is incarcerated time after time, and no good comes of it. Jackrabbit, on the other hand, finds the support he needs and even meets a long term same-sex romantic partner, Bolivar, while receiving care.

Skip’s experience of psychiatric care is a typical example of the abuse of psychiatry discussed above. He tells Connie ‘the first man I ever had sex with was an attendant at Wynmont - that’s a private buzz farm they sent me to when I was thirteen.’<sup>141</sup> When asked why he was sent there, Skip responds: ‘My parents thought I didn’t work right, so they sent me to be fixed.’<sup>142</sup> It becomes apparent that from a young age, Skip has been institutionalised in order to address the ‘fault’ of being gay. Speaking with Connie in the following chapter, Skip relates an experiment conducted on him while in psychiatric care;

They don’t like us, you know, We’re lepers.... You know what the last experiment was they pulled on me? They stuck electrodes on my prick and showed me dirty pictures, and when I got a hard-on about men, they shocked me.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 90.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

The ‘care’ provided to Skip is a thinly (if at all) veiled attempt to control him. The experimental treatment which he describes is a clear example of the state deliberately inflicting physical and mental trauma in order to suppress queer desire. Skip’s queer identity threatens the heteropatriarchal hegemony, and so he is sequestered in an institution where he can be watched, controlled, and sexually exploited by the attendants. Jackrabbit, in contrast, is a treasured member of his community. He maintains many close relationships with his peers, his work as an artist is valued and enjoyed by the entire community of Mattapoisett,<sup>144</sup> and he mentors two younger members of the community.<sup>145</sup>

When Jonah’s whale is transformed into a psychiatric hospital, whose experience does Jonah’s ordeal more closely resemble: Skip’s or Jackrabbit’s? Does Jonah require his time in the marine psych ward, or is his incarceration an example of political (or divine) abuse? Considering our previous analysis of the psalm of thanksgiving, the answer seems obvious. YHWH incarcerates Jonah in the fish not on the basis of concern for his well being (He has demonstrated an overwhelming *lack* of concern for Jonah’s safety), but in order to manipulate the rebellious prophet back to his will. Jonah does not spend time in psychiatric care in order to recover like Jackrabbit, but is incarcerated, like Skip, in order for the hegemonic power (God) to reassert control. God does not ask Jonah why he feels the way he does, he does not enquire as to the reasons for Jonah’s attempt to flee, in fact he remains silent throughout chapter 2, apart from telling the fish to vomit Jonah up (2:11). The deity does not wish to help Jonah, rather he desires an apology and a promise of obedience, and when these are received Jonah is ejected from care.

### **Where now for Jonah?**

With Jonah’s stint on the cetacean psychiatric ward complete, the impassionately delivered Psalm of thanksgiving demonstrating that his rebellious tendencies have been quashed and coercive control reestablished, ‘the Lord

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-82.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

[speaks] to the fish, and it [spews] Jonah out upon the dry land.’ (2:11). The verb used here, קוא in the hipil, makes no secret of the means by which Jonah is returned to the shore; it definitively refers to vomiting up and disgorging. Clearly Jonah’s return to the ordinary domain of human beings is anything but graceful, and having transformed the belly of the beast into a psychiatric ward this should not surprise us. The same verb is also used figuratively to refer to a land casting out its inhabitants, for example; ‘otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.’ (Lev 18:28). In this, I find resonance with the experience of many who undergo psychiatric treatment. As a result of an underfunded National Health Service, and the ongoing stigmatisation of mental illness, psychiatric care is difficult to access and, when it is received, is too often brief and ineffective. In an article for the Guardian from 2014, Alexandra Topping relates some of the experiences mentally ill people have had with the NHS. A man named Peter, from Glasgow, shares that after being diagnosed with depression and prescribed medication that didn’t work for him, ‘finally he was given eight weeks of CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy], but just as it seemed to be working, he was told it was over.’<sup>146</sup> When the psychiatric treatment offered is so short term, it can surely feel for many as if they have been vomited up by the system and left to fend for themselves. Peter, for example, relates ‘I now feel more hopeless than before’.<sup>147</sup> When Jonah has been spewed up onto dry land, his spirit broken by his ordeal and any hint of resistance quashed, we can only imagine he feels more hopeless than ever.

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<sup>146</sup> Alexandra Topping, ‘NHS mental health care in crisis: ‘There is no hope for people like me’, *Guardian*, (8 October 2014), <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/oct/08/nhs-mental-health-care-readers-stories>> [accessed 22/05/2018].

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

# 3.

## **‘an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across’ (3:3)**

The third chapter of the Book of Jonah begins with a repetition of God’s command. Standing on the shore, having just been spewed out by the big fish and perhaps still covered in piscine digestive juices, Jonah is once again asked by the Lord to ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ (3:2). This time, rather than attempting to flee, Jonah does what he is told (3:3). The prophet’s rebellious tendencies have been expunged by his ordeal in the depths and he no longer has the strength to resist the commands of his abusive god. So Jonah goes to Nineveh, a city ‘a three days’ walk across’ (3:3), walks one day into it, and finally ‘cries out’ as commanded (3:4). In this chapter, we will consider the significance of Nineveh, and the City<sup>148</sup> as a symbolic concept, to queer communities, and the performative repentance of the Ninevites and the phenomenon of pink washing. We will also begin to interrogate the nature of queer anger and forgiveness.

### **Sin and the City**

As discussed in chapter one, many queer individuals feel it necessary to leave their family homes and search for communities of their own, and often this is done by moving to the big city. The textual location of Nineveh, a city ‘three days’ walk across’ (3:3), is sure then to be a site of symbolic residence for queer readers. Before we interrogate what the city of Nineveh might mean for LGBT+ audiences, it seems necessary to consider the symbolism of this particular city, and its citizens, in the context which produced the Book of Jonah, in historical understanding, and in the wider contemporary imagination.

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<sup>148</sup> Throughout this chapter, the word city will be capitalised (i.e. the City) when I intend to refer to cities as a general phenomenon and the symbolism of urban centres without referring to any one specific city.

From 705 BCE to 612 BCE, Nineveh was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian empire; the largest empire the world had seen up until that time, and one of many great empires that conquered Ancient Palestine. According to Genesis, Nineveh is among the first cities to be built following the great flood, and is founded by Nimrod, son of Cush, son of Ham (Gen 10:6-11). The Book of Nahum consists almost entirely of prophecy against Nineveh, with the city described as ‘a pool whose waters run away’ (Nah 2:8) and a ‘city of bloodshed’ (Nah 3:1). Having finished prophesying the destruction of the city, Nahum addresses the King of Assyria directly (Nah 3:18-19), telling him ‘all who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?’ (Nah 3:19). Clearly, the society which produced the Hebrew Bible does not hold the city of Nineveh in high esteem. Sasson observes that ‘to the prophets of Israel, even to those who lived after Assyria’s fall, the name Nineveh was enough to prompt memory of a bitter and long-lasting yoke.’<sup>149</sup> Flaumenhaft agrees, noting that ‘Nineveh was notoriously wicked; Jonah’s story does not even have to mention that it was a much-hated persecutor of the Israelites in particular.’<sup>150</sup> The selection of Nineveh by the author(s) as Jonah’s prophetic target is no accident: Nineveh represents everything the intended audience of the Hebrew Bible despise; it is a city of sin.

Nineveh is not Sodom or Gomorrah, but it seems no stretch of interpretation to put this metropolis in the same category as those famous twin cities of sin. In Genesis 18, the Lord speaks to Abraham saying, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.’ (Gen 18:20-21). The exact nature of the grievous sins of these cities, like the nature of the evil committed by the Ninevites, is unclear. However, at some point it was decided that the sinful behaviour in question in Sodom was anal sex, and it is from here

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<sup>149</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 70.

<sup>150</sup> Flaumenhaft, ‘The Story of Jonah’, 3.

that the term *sodomy* was derived.<sup>151</sup> According to Mark D. Jordan, ‘the credit - or rather, the blame - for inventing the word *sodomia*, “Sodomy,” must go [...] to the eleventh-century theologian Peter Damian.’<sup>152</sup> Jordan suggests that ‘Peter’s coining of the term is the result of long processes of thinning and condensing [...] one process thinned the reading of the Old Testament story of the punishment of Sodom. That complicated and disturbing story was simplified until it became the story of the punishment of a single sin, a sin that could be called eponymously the sin of the Sodomites.’<sup>153</sup>

Whatever the origins of the association between sinful anal sex and the biblical city of Sodom, this geographical connection serves a purpose. Jordan observes that geographical terms for sexual acts ‘suggest that the activity in question is not of local origin, that it comes from elsewhere. Its practitioners are foreigners or consorts of foreigners.’<sup>154</sup> The use of a geographical term is an effective way of othering practitioners of a certain sexual act. Once this othering is achieved, ‘these others are then easily likened to bearers of disease. A sexual practice originated elsewhere and imported is quickly enough described as a contagion, as a plague.’<sup>155</sup> By attributing anal sex, and specifically anal sex as practised by two men, to foreign influence, the heteropatriarchal hegemony is able to delegitimise such sexual practice and thus legitimise persecution of its practitioners. In late 2017, a Kenyan official stated that two lions (yes, lions) observed apparently engaging in homosexual sex in the Masai Mara game reserve

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<sup>151</sup> Many arguments have been made against homophobic interpretations of the destruction of Sodom. Michael Carden provides a particularly compelling one in *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox, 2004). However, the homophobic interpretation remains the dominant cultural narrative surrounding the Biblical story, and the name ‘Sodom’ continues to connote gay sex. As such, I will not explore these arguments in detail here.

<sup>152</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

‘must have seen a homosexual couple “behaving badly” in their park’.<sup>156</sup> On a less comedic note, in the Russian Federation ‘public figures regularly present gay rights as an alien concept, forced on Russia by the degenerate West.’<sup>157</sup> The idea that tolerance for LGBT+ people, and by extension the existence of LGBT+ people, is a foreign idea imposed by the West legitimates the persecution of queer communities in both Russia and in parts of Africa. By associating queer sexual practices with foreign locales, whether that be the biblical city of Sodom or the modern West, hegemonic powers justify their misdeeds.

If we associate Nineveh with Sodom, on the basis that both cities represent evil in the biblical imagination and are threatened with destruction by God, then we might suggest that sodomy is among the grievous sins committed by the Ninevites. In making such an association, we can bring a new level of queer interpretation to the text. If Nineveh, like Sodom, is a city in which sodomy is permitted, then it represents a different way of life, free from the restriction of biblical law codes. Under such a reading, Nineveh becomes an appealing locale for the contemporary queer reader, especially considering the common cultural perception that queer communities can flourish only in large urban centres. However, Jonah, our queer protagonist, is clearly not enamoured with the idea of a trip to Nineveh, considering he spends the first half of the book trying to avoid going to the metropolis. What might lie behind Jonah’s reluctance?

According to Bud W. Jerke, ‘it is popularly believed that queer culture and identity can only be situated in an urban geography’.<sup>158</sup> The popular culture of the United States, Jerke suggests, ‘convey[s] a simple message: rural queers face oppression and even violence while urban queers flourish. The only way for rural

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<sup>156</sup> Jeff Farrell, ‘Kenyan official says male lions who had sex ‘must have seen gay men behaving badly’ and should be separated’, *Independent* (2017), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/>

[africa/gay-lions-sex-kenya-photos-men-inspired-need-therapy-says-official-a8036016.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/gay-lions-sex-kenya-photos-men-inspired-need-therapy-says-official-a8036016.html)> [accessed 18/06/2018].

<sup>157</sup> Sarah Rainsford, ‘Does Putin’s Russia reject the West?’, *BBC* (2018) <[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/russia\\_election](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/russia_election)> [accessed 18/06/2018].

<sup>158</sup> Bud W. Jerke, ‘Queer Ruralism’, *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, 34 (2011), 259-312 (268).

queers to be happy is to migrate to the city.’<sup>159</sup> This perception in the popular imagination is not without a basis in the reality of lived LGBT+ experience; we have already explored the common need for queer youth to leave small, familial environments in search of experience in chapter one, as described by the Bronski Beat song ‘Smalltown Boy’. For many queer people, moving to a large urban centre does allow engagement with queer communities, which are not so easily found in rural environments. A major contributing factor here is surely just population demographics; considering LGBT+ are a minority in society, it is much more likely that they will form communities in areas where population density is higher and there are more members of the demographic (i.e. in urban centres). However, it is important to note that the perception that queer lives can only be lived in urban centres causes problems for LGBT+ people who exist outside of cities. Jerke observes that ‘rural queers are rendered invisible because popular stereotypes perceive queer people as solely urban’<sup>160</sup> and labels this phenomenon ‘queer metronormativity’.<sup>161</sup> While queer metronormativity accurately reflects the experience of many LGBT+ people, it also erases the experiences of others and can result in material disadvantage; for example, Jerke notes that ‘the quality of rural HIV/AIDS healthcare treatment is dismal compared to urban treatment.’<sup>162</sup> The invisibility of rural queer people, in combination with wider governmental neglect of non-urban communities, restricts their access to vital resources. We can thus observe that while the city can symbolise a certain amount of queer freedom, this notion is not without problems.

The complex relations of queer people to the City, as we observe them through the Book of Jonah, have also been explored by author Jeanette Winterson. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Winterson’s semi-autobiographical 1985 novel, charts the experiences of the author/protagonist Jeanette growing up as a lesbian in a religious community in Accrington, Lancashire during the 1960s and 70s. Accrington, as a town of approximately thirty-five thousand people, cannot exactly

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

be described as rural. However, in the historical context in which the novel takes place, and in the modern day, an industrial town in North West England can also hardly be considered a centre of LGBT+ life. Indeed, I would argue that even in the twenty-first century it is generally only large UK cities that are perceived to support significant queer communities. As Colin Crummy observes, in an article which charts the experiences of LGBT+ people who choose to return to their small home towns, ‘Cities are where gay communities were built: think of 28 Barbary Lane in Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City*, or Canal Street in *Queer as Folk*. Rural queer life has been much less visible - and largely unrepresented in queer culture.’<sup>163</sup>

in the final chapter of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette leaves her provincial, highly religious community and goes to the city. The chapter, entitled Ruth,<sup>164</sup> also presents us with a fairy tale about a young woman named Winnet,<sup>165</sup> whose story mirrors Jeanette’s (fairy tales intermingle with the primary narrative throughout the novel). At the beginning of the chapter Jeanette, having been forced to leave home by her adoptive mother in the light of her lesbianism, is working at an undertakers,<sup>166</sup> and having discovered that one of the few supportive members of the congregation she grew up in has died (and having been forbidden from attending her funeral),<sup>167</sup> moves to ‘the city’.<sup>168</sup> Meanwhile Winnet, a traveller in her fantasy world who has been through a lengthy ordeal with a sorcerer, hears tell of ‘a beautiful city, a long way off, with buildings that ran up to the sky [...] an ancient city, guarded by tigers.’<sup>169</sup> We are told that ‘Winnet lay awake many nights, trying to imagine what such a place would really be like. If

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<sup>163</sup> Colin Crummy, ‘‘I decided not to hide it’’: LGBTQ people return to their home towns’, *Guardian* (2018), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/29/not-hide-it-lgbtq-return-home-towns>> [accessed 22/01/2019].

<sup>164</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 179.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-5.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

only she could get there, she felt sure she'd be safe',<sup>170</sup> and eventually, having learned the skills required for her journey, Winnet sets out in search of the city.<sup>171</sup> What becomes of Winnet, and whether her search for safety in the ancient city is successful, is left unknown. Living in the city, Jeanette is asked 'When did you last see your mother?'<sup>172</sup> Musing on her desire not to answer this question, Jeanette reflects, 'I thought in this city, a past was precisely that. Past. Why do I have to remember?'<sup>173</sup> Although Jeanette has found a new life in the city, she cannot forget where she came from; while the big city can offer freedom for LGBT+ people, it is not the ultimate escape that many might hope for. Jeanette realises that, having left home, she can never return to her old life; she reflects that 'Going back after a long time will make you mad, because the people you left behind do not like to think of you changed, will treat you as they always did, accuse you of being indifferent, when you are only different.'<sup>174</sup> By leaving home, and congregating in large urban centres, queer people are able to form supportive communities and find happiness, but as Winterson suggests, this often involves some sacrifice of the communities they came from. Considering the abusive environments that LGBT+ are often subjected to in their youth, this is not necessarily a bad thing. However, as the ambiguity of Winnet's fate and Jeanette's reflections on her life indicate, it also cannot be said to be an unqualified good. For Jonah, a journey to the big city certainly does not bring happiness, as shall be seen, and it is unclear what he might have lost in his forced mission to Nineveh.

The City is also a political centre, and by extension represents the consolidation of hegemonic power on the part of the heteropatriarchy. It is within the city that the hegemony is most able to exert its power; cities have more extensive surveillance and a larger police presence than rural areas. In addition, the much greater population density of urban centres can enable anonymous hate

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-4.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

crime, as aggressors are much less likely to be known to victims and thus may escape prosecution more readily (and this is if prosecution for hate crimes is prevalent or even possible in the first place). In a study of LGBT experiences of hate crime in Britain carried out by Stonewall in 2017, 25% of respondents in London reported experiencing a hate crime or incident in the previous twelve months, a percentage exceeded only by the North East (35%).<sup>175</sup> For the largest (by far) urban area in Britain to also be the second most dangerous area for LGBT+ people clearly indicates that while the City can offer freedom, it does not necessarily offer safety. Indeed, our comparison of Nineveh with Sodom illuminates the precariousness of urban queer communities; Nineveh survives, but Sodom is destroyed (Gen 19:29). The heteropatriarchal hegemony may allow LGBT+ communities to survive for a time, but they may be destroyed at any moment, and the concentration of hegemonic political power in urban locations facilitates this. The neat confinement of sodomy practitioners in a single city allowed the heteropatriarchal deity to persecute them with ease, just as the concentration of queer spaces and communities in Greenwich village in mid-twentieth century New York enabled the constant police harassment which eventually led to the Stonewall riots.

Clearly then, the City is a double-edged sword; it can provide a place for queer communities, but it can also expose those communities to danger, and it is not for everyone. Jonah, who has been our queer protagonist, clearly finds no comfort in Nineveh. He never wanted to travel to the city in the first place, and when he does he spends as little time there as possible (as we will discuss imminently). Perhaps Jonah recognises the dangers of urban environments, and considering that he is an Israelite, it may be that he is unwilling to try to find community in a city that represents hundreds of years of imperial oppression of his people. As previously discussed, cities are physical sites at which hegemonic forces consolidate their political power. As such, we should be cautious of celebrating the City as a place of freedom for LGBT+ people, when that freedom often comes at a

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<sup>175</sup> Chaka L. Bachmann and Becca Gooch, *LGBT in Britain: Hate Crime and Discrimination* (London: Stonewall, 2017), 9.

cost for other marginalised people, including queer people in other corners of the globe. In 2007, Jasbir K. Puar coined the term ‘homonationalism’ in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.<sup>176</sup> Puar has described homonationalism as a ‘conceptual frame [...] for understanding the complexities of how “acceptance” and “tolerance” for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated.’<sup>177</sup> While the enshrinement of LGBT+ rights in law is, of course, beneficial, it also contributes to the legitimisation of the Western nation state as the ideal structure of society, and further allows the marginalisation of people outside of these societal structures, in particular the racialised Other. In a video on homonationalism produced by Novara Media, Shon Faye considers the example of Donald Trump’s ban on trans people in the US military.<sup>178</sup> Faye observes that in critiquing Trump’s actions, homonationalist discourse is often reproduced; ‘namely that US trans citizens are fully entitled to participate in their country’s military industrial complex, or, to put it more bluntly, that American trans people are just as good at killing brown people overseas as cis people.’<sup>179</sup> While cities are a less dramatic example of homonationalism in action, the existence of LGBT+ communities in urban centres can play into this dynamic. Considering that cities are centres of the consolidation of political power, when queer communities are located in cities they contribute to the legitimisation of these monopolies of power at the expense of those outwith privileged societal systems. If we, cautiously, apply the concept of homonationalism to Nineveh, and continue to read the biblical city as a place of potential queer freedom, we may suggest that the freedom available in the city of Nineveh comes at the expense of the societies which have been subjected to imperial persecution by the Ninevites, such as the

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<sup>176</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (London: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>177</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, ‘Rethinking Homonationalism’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45 (2013), 336-339.

<sup>178</sup> Novara Media, ‘What is Homonationalism?’, Youtube video, 6:55 (28/12/2017) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9l3shYm6Jao>> [accessed 12/07/2018].

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:09

Israelites. Perhaps then, in our creative reading of the text, it is for this reason that Jonah is repulsed by rather than attracted to Nineveh.

### Five Words

After walking one day into the city of Nineveh (half a day short of the centre, considering the city is three days' walk across), Jonah makes his prophecy. In Hebrew, this prophecy consists of a measly five words; עֹד אַרְבַּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוָה נִהְפָּכֶת (literally; 'yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown') (3:4). Jonah's prophecy is as succinct as it is short; we find here none of the vivid imagery and extended metaphors that typically characterise Hebrew prophecy, and neither are we (or the Ninevites) informed what crimes the city and its people are guilty of. In chapter 1, God says only that 'their wickedness has come up before me' (1:2), and in chapter 3 even this lackluster explanation is absent. The prophecy provides no detail, no reason, no explanation, and no suggested course of action; it gives only a promise of when the city shall be destroyed. Why is Jonah's prophecy so diminutive, in both length and content?

I suggest that there is a very simple answer to this question; Jonah's prophecy is short because he never wanted to make it. As Hauser observes, '[Jonah] does not march boldly into the heart of the city to proclaim God's word. Even though Jonah no longer has the option of fleeing, he still gives the appearance of reluctance and hesitation in carrying out his task.'<sup>180</sup> After his traumatic ordeal in the belly of the big fish, Jonah has no option remaining except to do as the deity commands. However, the brevity of his prophecy indicates that his spirit is not yet fully broken. As a final act of rebellion against an abusive God, Jonah does the bare minimum. At the risk of anachronistically applying post-industrial revolution concepts to a biblical text, perhaps we can think of Jonah as taking action short of a strike (ASOS). Of course Jonah is not really involved in a strike; there is no trade union for prophets, and even if there were Jonah's constant isolation and captivity would likely deny him access to such a support system. However, by delivering a prophecy as short as it could possibly be, in

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<sup>180</sup> Hauser, 'Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove', 32.

contrast to the lengthy speeches of most biblical prophets, Jonah demonstrates his dissatisfaction with God's activity in the narrative.

The limited action which Jonah is able to take, being confined by an omnipotent deity, resembles the limited forms of activism which queer people are often resigned to. As discussed in chapter one, safe activism requires certain levels of social support and security, which are often unavailable to LGBT+ people. For this reason, small acts of rebellion which disrupt the heteropatriarchal hegemony in even the most minor ways are of great importance. Jonah's diminutive prophecy may not be the most dramatic act of defiance in the face of YHWH, and as we shall see the prophecy is effective despite Jonah's attempt at rebellion, but the bravery of Jonah in taking this stand, no matter how minor, is something that LGBT+ people can admire and empathise with.

### **Pinkwashing and Performative Repentance**

Confronted with Jonah's (brief) prophecy, the people of Nineveh immediately initiate what Sherwood describes as 'a just-add-sackcloth performance of repentance';<sup>181</sup> 'the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.' (3:5). My use of the word performance here is not, necessarily, intended to suggest that the repentance of the Ninevites is fallacious (although this may indeed be the case), but instead acknowledges that their attempts at repentance are not confined to the mind but are deliberately physical and public in nature. From the minute Jonah's prophecy is heard, the people of the city demonstrate their repentance with their bodies. The physicality of this performance is only heightened as the narrative continues; 'when the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.' (3:6). In Sasson's analysis, 'upon hearing the news, the king of Nineveh silently prepares himself, bodily and spiritually as well, before decreeing national penitence.'<sup>182</sup> Sasson's understanding of these actions as silent is interesting. Yes, if we work with a literal

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<sup>181</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 267.

<sup>182</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 250.

understanding of ‘silently’, it can be reasonably be applied; the king does not say anything as he changes his clothes and sits in the ashes. However, as cliché tells us, actions speak louder than words, and while the king may be silent in terms of sound his actions can hardly be described as silent in meaning. The spectacle of a king ‘exchang[ing] a precious robe for a pauper’s garb’<sup>183</sup> positively screams significance, and Sasson himself acknowledges that ‘the program he follows is intricately staged’.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, the king does not carry out these actions in private. We are informed that he is in his throne room, and the issuing of a decree immediately afterwards indicates he is surrounded by his royal court. Before he even utters a word, the king of Nineveh makes a bold, bodily performance of penitence which sets the tone for the way in which the city will indicate its repentance.

Having given his Academy Award worthy performance of penitence, the king of Nineveh issues the following proclamation;

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” (3:7-9).

The responsibility of repentance, it seems, falls not only on the people of Nineveh but also on its animals. The animals, who we can only presume are usually unclothed,<sup>185</sup> are to don the same garbs of mourning and repentance as the city’s

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> With the exception of horses dressed for battle or ceremonial procession, perhaps.

human citizens, and they are also to engage in the fast. Sherwood observes that ‘a common way of legitimating the sackcloth-wearing cattle is to appeal to “similar” Persian customs reported by Herodotus’<sup>186</sup> but notes that these reported customs, which do not involve clothing, are related to mourning. In Sherwood’s view, ‘the crucial points are surely that animals being used in mourning are a long way from animals actively participating in repentance, and that - even if such customs did exist - they are totally alien to Israelite tradition and culture.’<sup>187</sup> Sherwood thus suggests that ‘an ancient Judaeen audience [...] would have seen the personification of the cattle as just another comic addition to the raging sea, the shivering ship and the human *qiqayon* plant’.<sup>188</sup> I am inclined to agree with Sherwood, and reading in the twenty-first century I find the repentant animals a comic edition to the already uncanny and bizarre world of the Book of Jonah. As Perry asks, ‘how could such lowly creatures effect the slightest improvement in the Ninevites’ lot?’<sup>189</sup> In my view, the inclusion of the animals in the acts of penitence only serves to compound our impression of performativity; if the king’s costume change was theatrical, then the clothing of the animals takes us into the high camp realm of the pantomime.

Susan Sontag describes camp as ‘unmistakably modern,’<sup>190</sup> and as such we should be cautious in imposing this aesthetic sensibility on a two-thousand-year-old text. However, I believe such an imposition is appropriate and has the potential to illuminate some of the queer resonances of the Book of Jonah. According to Sontag, ‘Camp sees everything in quotation marks [...] to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.’<sup>191</sup> The grand performance of the Ninevites then, which embraces the theatrical in order to *preserve* the being of

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<sup>186</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 267.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Perry, *The Honeymoon Is Over*, 45.

<sup>190</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp’* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 1.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

the city, seems ripe to be read as camp. The context in which we find the story of Jonah, in a collection of texts considered sacred by two major world religions and which form the foundation for much of Western and indeed global culture, also legitimises a reading which finds the sensibility of Camp in the narrative. Sontag distinguishes between ‘naïve and deliberate Camp.’<sup>192</sup> She suggests that ‘pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp (‘camping’) is usually less satisfying.’<sup>193</sup> Sontag goes on to say that ‘in naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.’<sup>194</sup> Was the Book of Jonah originally intended as a deadly serious piece of theological rhetoric? We cannot possibly know, but its inclusion in the biblical canon and its interpretation throughout history indicate that it has certainly been received as a serious text. Yet, it also seems impossible to deny that the text is filled with fantastical and over-the-top elements. According to Sontag, ‘“It’s too much,” “It’s too fantastic,” “It’s not to be believed,” are standard phrases of Camp enthusiasm’,<sup>195</sup> and we have little difficulty applying these phrases to the Book of Jonah; everything about the story is too much.

As Sontag observes, there has long been a connection between the Camp aesthetic and LGBT+ communities; ‘while it’s not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a particular affinity and overlap.’<sup>196</sup> According to Sontag, the Camp sensibility is adopted by queer people as means of finding acceptance; ‘homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.’<sup>197</sup> Here Sontag refers back to her previous assertion that;

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30. Sontag’s use of the term ‘homosexual’ sounds a little outdated and tone-deaf in 2018, but would not have done so in 1966, when the essay was originally published.

<sup>197</sup> Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp’*, 30-31.

To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized - or at least apolitical.

However, many queer theorists have strained against Sontag's characterisation of Camp as removed from political reality. Perhaps, in terms of naïve Camp, the claim of apoliticism or depoliticisation is viable, but deliberate Camp, particularly as performed by LGBT+ communities, is politically subversive by nature. The hierarchy which Sontag constructs, privileging naïve over deliberate Camp, I find unconvincing; why should we uphold the accidental manifestation of the Camp sensibility when Camp is defined by its over the top artifice and theatricality? In addition, Sontag observes that 'the androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility',<sup>198</sup> and 'allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is [...] a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.'<sup>199</sup> How can such disregard for gender boundaries and hegemonic constraints on sexuality be anything *but* politically subversive? To suggest that Camp is apolitical does a disservice to the many queer artists who have used Camp to criticise and challenge the heteropatriarchal hegemony. As David Bergman suggests, 'although in 1964, five years before the Stonewall Riots when "Notes on Camp" was first published, Sontag might understandably believe "homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense," we now can see how such a comment made her analysis a dead end.'<sup>200</sup>

Moving on from Sontag, then, and recognising that our characterisation of a Biblical text as Camp is *inherently* political, what does such a characterisation tell us about the narrative and how does it allow us to relate the narrative to contemporary queer experiences? When we read the Ninevites' repentance as a

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>200</sup> David Bergman, 'Introduction' in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. by David Bergman (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 3-16 (8-9).

Camp performance, we begin to suggest that their repentance is something less than genuine. Judith Butler suggests that ‘the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original [...] the parodic repetition of “the original,” [...] reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original.’<sup>201</sup> Here Butler is specifically discussing gender, but her insights also reveal the project of Camp (and as noted above Camp commonly plays with the construction of gender). Camp, as a sensibility centred around over the top artifice, reveals the parodic nature of the ‘original’ phenomenon it parodies. In suggesting that the Ninevites’ performative repentance, especially its inclusion of the city’s animals, is Camp in its exaggerated artifice, we suggest that all such performances of repentance are artificial.

This artificiality when it comes to addressing past atrocities, this performative virtue-signalling, is a phenomenon to which LGBT+ communities are only too accustomed. The term ‘pinkwashing’, a portmanteau of ‘pink’ and ‘whitewashing’ is used to refer to marketing and political strategies which use apparent tolerance of LGBT+ people as means to appear forward thinking, often in order to distract from other wrongdoing. As well as being directed towards corporations which can be seen to co-opt queer symbols in order to sell products and improve their public image, the charge of pinkwashing has commonly been levelled at the modern state of Israel. Sarah Schulman, writing for *Mondoweiss*, describes pinkwashing as ‘the cynical use of queer people’s hard-won gains by the Israeli government in an attempt to re-brand themselves as progressive, while continuing to violate international law and the human rights of Palestinians.’<sup>202</sup> The state of Israel deliberately appropriates the LGBT+ cause in order to appeal to Western liberals and to distract from the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people, and without actually committing to LGBT+ rights in a meaningful way and

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<sup>201</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

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<sup>202</sup> Sarah Schulman, ‘A documentary guide to ‘Brand Israel’ and the art of pinkwashing’, *Mondoweiss* (30/11/2011), <<http://mondoweiss.net/2011/11/a-documentary-guide-to-brand-israel-and-the-art-of-pinkwashing/>> [accessed 21/06/2018].

bringing about material change in the circumstances of queer communities. Schulman observes that ‘there are enclaves of Tel Aviv where being out in your complete and daily life is possible [...] however, overall, Israel is a profoundly homophobic society. The dominance of religious fundamentalists, the sexism and the proximity to family and family oppression makes life very difficult for most people on the LGBT spectrum in Israel.’<sup>203</sup> Haneen Maikey, a Palestinian queer activist interviewed by Morten Berthelsen, describes this appropriation of the LGBT+ cause by the state of Israel as ‘ridiculous, and in a sense hilarious, because there are no gay rights in Israel. There are specific court cases that, when won, allowed certain individuals for instance to adopt a child [...] you cannot build a human rights campaign on court cases that are not ratified.’<sup>204</sup> Although LGBT+ rights in Israel have progressed somewhat since Maikey’s statement in 2008, the legal conditions of queer communities remain less than ideal; for instance, in 2016, the Knesset (the legislative branch of the Israeli government) ‘scrapped five gay-friendly bills [...] which sought to recognize same-sex widowers of slain soldiers, recognize civil unions, ban conversion therapy for minors, and require medical professionals to study gender and sexual orientation prior to their licensing.’<sup>205</sup> Clearly, actual liberation for queer people in Israel lags behind the state’s presentation of itself as an LGBT+ friendly haven in the homophobic Middle East. Just as the Ninevites make a great performance of penitence but, so far as we can tell, make no material changes, so the Israeli establishment emphasises its support for LGBT+ communities in order to improve its international image without truly committing to material support for queer people.

### **Forgiving the Unforgivable**

As soon as the king and his nobles have issued their royal decree, God relents from his previous promise of annihilation for Nineveh. No indication of the time

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> Morten Berthelsen, ‘Stop Using Palestinian Gays to Whitewash Israel’s Image’, *Haaretz* (01/10/2009) <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.5427757>> [accessed 21/06/2018].

<sup>205</sup> Marissa Newman, ‘Day after marking LGBT rights, Knesset nixes 5 gender equality bills’, *Times of Israel* (24/02/2016) <<http://www.timesofisrael.com/day-after-marking-Lgbt-rights-knesset-nixes-5-gender-equality-bills/>> [accessed 21/06/2018].

this change of heart takes is given, we are only told that ‘When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.’ (3:10). Although we may reasonably assume that the Ninevites (and their animals) carry out the royal decree, the text itself neglects even to confirm this. As Sasson observes, ‘of the Ninevites’ reaction to this enforced piety, we have only a laconic statement inserted almost as an afterthought in v. 10.’<sup>206</sup> In reading, God’s change of mind appears almost instantaneous; Sherwood notes the ‘automaticity of God’s reaction: the Ninevites turn from their evil and God turns from his, as if Nineveh and God are connected cogs in a wheel.’<sup>207</sup> The sheer speed of God’s forgiveness compounds the artificiality of the narrative; the prophecy, the repentance, and the relenting of God all begin to seem like mere formality, and we find ourselves questioning whether the deity ever truly intended to destroy the city at all. The relenting of God is all the more confusing given his extensive mistreatment of Jonah (which will continue in the book’s final chapter). As Sherwood suggests, ‘it is virtually impossible to read Jonah chapter 3 without being struck by a sense of exaggerated disparity between Jonah’s (that is Israelite/Judaeen) victimisation and the enemy’s good fortune and strength.’<sup>208</sup> Why does YHWH, supposedly the God of the Israelites, treat their oppressors, the Ninevites, better than his own prophet? The confusion we feel with regards to God’s behaviour is a confusion, and frustration, familiar to queer readers. As already discussed in the preceding section on performative repentance and pinkwashing, more often than not higher powers express support for LGBT+ people while failing to institute positive material change, and too often in fact enabling the worsening of material conditions for queer people. As shall be seen in chapter four, Jonah’s character shares in these frustrations.

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<sup>206</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 266-7.

<sup>207</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 265.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4.

### ‘Angry enough to die’ (4:9)

At the end of Jonah’s third chapter the prophet has completed the mission first given by YHWH at the very beginning of the narrative. Jonah’s prophecy has been delivered, the Ninevites have repented, and God has changed his mind about the promised calamity. It would seem that the story is at a close, but turns out not to be the case. All the major action has surely taken place, and yet the story of Jonah does not end here. Instead, in chapter four, the text returns to the central relationship of the book; the one between Jonah and his god. Jonah, who was almost a peripheral character in chapter three, is returned to the spotlight and perhaps the most puzzling interaction in the entire narrative unfolds. According to Sherwood, ‘backwater and mainstream readers concur on one point: that the strangeness that percolates through the book of Jonah spills over in chapter 4.’<sup>209</sup> Here we find the mysterious *qiqayon*, a ravenous worm, and a very, very angry prophet. In this chapter we will return to Jonah’s impulse towards death, once again observe an abusive deity, and interrogate and celebrate queer anger. We also consider what happens next for Jonah; where does his narrative lead when the Biblical story ends?

#### Angry Jonah, Angry Jew, Angry Queer

As chapter four opens, Jonah remains dejected, but no longer is he quiet. Hauser observes that ‘Jonah’s demeanour, which heretofore has been passive, quiet, and unobtrusive, takes an emphatic, decisive turn in 4:1.’<sup>210</sup> The events of the narrative have been very displeasing and he is angry (4:1). In the Hebrew text, idiomatic constructions allow more emphasis on the intensity of Jonah’s anger than we find in translation. We are told ‘it was displeasing’ (וירע) to Jonah, a verbal form, qualified by the adjectival phrase ‘evil great’ (רעה גדולה), giving two levels to Jonah’s displeasure. The verb used to describe the prophet’s anger (ויהר) derived from חרה means literally to be hot, to burn, and figuratively to be furious, indicating the intensity of his feelings. Jonah is filled with rage, and he intends to let YHWH know about it.

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<sup>209</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 268.

<sup>210</sup> Hauser, ‘Jonah: In Pursuit of the Dove’, 35.

Having become angry, Jonah prays, saying ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.’ (4:2). At long last, Jonah’s true motivation in fleeing from God is revealed; he knew that YHWH would forgive the Ninevites, and that his prophetic mission would, essentially, be for nothing. In the eyes of many commentators, this revelation begins to materialise the central message of the Book of Jonah. According to Hauser, for example, ‘the God who had been seen as a God of wrath has suddenly revealed himself as a God of forgiveness, while the seemingly mild, passive prophet has been shown to burn with wrath.’<sup>211</sup> All along we have been rooting for the much maligned Jonah, but apparently we were mistaken. Jonah, and not YHWH, was the malicious figure. All hail the forgiving God!

According to Sherwood, this interpretation of the text had become entrenched ‘by the mid-nineteenth century.’<sup>212</sup> By this time, she argues, ‘the iconic moment of the text has moved from Jonah’s emergence from the fish-tomb to Jonah looking out over Nineveh and glowering over God’s act of forgiveness; the dominant paradigm has become (Christian) universalism versus (Jewish) particularism’.<sup>213</sup> The Book of Jonah is manipulated and maligned into antisemitism; ‘the site of monstrosity has shifted from the fish [...] to the body of the Jew, the monstrous Other’.<sup>214</sup> Jonah becomes emblematic of the perceived danger of the Other (in this case the Jewish male). It is Jonah’s anger in particular that makes him susceptible to this othering; when an individual or a community demonstrates anger it is much easier for hegemonic powers to portray them as unreasonable, irrational, and dangerous, not matter how legitimate their anger might be. No consideration is given to the fact that Jonah, as a member of a society repeatedly conquered and oppressed by more powerful civilisations, including the Ninevites, might be justified in his anger at a God who professes to be on his side but acts to the contrary. The expression of anger is seen as unacceptable when it comes from a source other than a hegemonic power. As well as Jewish people, this technique of manipulating the legitimate anger of a marginalised population in order to further Other them is often utilised against women, people of colour and, of course, LGBT+ communities.

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>212</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives*, 26.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-7.

The anger of LGBT+ people is often criticised by those who cannot understand, or more likely *refuse* to understand, where it comes from. Just as Christian interpretation has used the anger of Jonah's character as a gateway for legitimising antisemitism, so the heteropatriarchal hegemony continues to exploit righteous queer anger as means to maintain the marginalisation and oppression of LGBT+ people. In a short film directed by Adinah Dancyger and released by Dazed in 2016 (in the run up to the US presidential election), queer musician and performance artist Mykki Blanco recites 'I want a president', a poem written by artist Zoe Leonard in 1992.<sup>215</sup> Throughout the video, the anger Blanco feels is palpable as he recites lines such as 'I want a person with AIDS for president, and I want a fag for vice president'<sup>216</sup> and 'I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown, always a john never a hooker'.<sup>217</sup> Blanco's anger is well placed, as over twenty years after the poem was written by Leonard the same systemic problems remain and, with the election of Donald Trump as US president just a month after the video was released, are seeing a resurgence. Clearly the anger that Blanco channels is legitimate, but a quick glance over the video's comments will give plentiful examples of misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic abuse (thankfully outnumbered by comments echoing the sentiments of Leonard's poem and offering support). When LGBT+ people express their anger at a system which continually marginalises, oppresses, and murders them, they are ridiculed; their anger cannot be seen as legitimate because they are not seen as legitimate.

In part, people react this way to queer anger because they do not possess the same experience of constant disadvantage, and so cannot comprehend where the anger comes from. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman observes that;

The chronically abused person's apparent helplessness and passivity, her entrapment in the past, her intractable depression and somatic complaints, and her smoldering anger often frustrate the people closest to her.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Adinah Dancyger, 'Mykki Blanco recites 'I Want A Dyke For President'', YouTube video, 2:01 (04/10/2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6DgawQdSIQ>> [accessed 05/07/2018].

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 0:19.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:39.

<sup>218</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 115.

While Herman is describing the experience of the abused individual, her insights also illuminate the experiences of queer people as a whole and the perception of their experiences by heteronormative society, particularly their ‘smoldering anger’.<sup>219</sup> Cisgender, heterosexual people do not have first hand experience of the ways in which LGBT+ are continuously materially disadvantaged by heteronormative society, and because of this the anger of LGBT+ people is unintelligible to them. This lack of understanding is compounded by the lack of queer representation in popular culture and the deficit in opportunities for queer people to share their own stories. Although this is changing, with LGBT+ arguably being more visible in popular culture than ever before, the representations of LGBT+ people commonly fail to reflect the identities and experiences of the community as a whole. Often, LGBT+ people are presented only in romantic stories which are palatable and appealing to mainstream, largely white, heterosexual, and cisgender audiences.

However, to suggest that queer anger is misunderstood only out of ignorance would be far too charitable. While the everyday person is not necessarily fully aware of the struggles of LGBT+ people, the heteropatriarchy itself is well aware; those struggles are deliberately instituted. In fact, the hegemony manipulates the perception of queer anger in order to further marginalise and oppress LGBT+ people. The anger of queer people is seen as evidence that they are incapable of coexisting with heteropatriarchal society, rather than understood as a reasonable reaction to heteropatriarchal society’s refusal *to allow* them to coexist. Just as Jonah’s righteous anger has been manipulated by Christian interpreters in order to portray Jewish people as angry and unforgiving, so the anger of queer people is used against them in order to suggest that the Angry Queer poses a threat to mainstream, cisgender and heterosexual society.

Yet despite the attempts of the hegemony to minimise and ridicule it, queer anger remains both necessary and powerful. Discussing *120 BPM*, a 2017 French film directed by Robin Campillo, Caspar Salmon suggests ‘we need to rekindle some of our abrasiveness.’<sup>220</sup> Salmon observes that ‘there is still much to fight for [...] the ruling party isn’t often shy

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<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> Caspar Salmon, ‘LGBT people need to rediscover their rage in this age of protes’, *Guardian* (02/04/2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/02/lgbt-people-protest-120-beats-per-minute>> [accessed 12/07/2013].

about its disregard for the queer community’,<sup>221</sup> and he suggests that ‘the righteous outrage [120 BPM] displays, and its passionate call to arms, will always be salutary to the LGBTQ movement, and always topical.’<sup>222</sup> It is through anger that many of the victories of the queer rights movement have been achieved; to give just two examples, it was anger which sparked the Stonewall riots and it was anger at the lack of meaningful action in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis that resulted in the formation of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Clearly queer anger can be galvanised into radical action which brings about vital change in the material conditions of LGBT+ people and communities. For this reason queer communities must continue to be angry, and to direct their anger against the unjust systems that provoke it.

If queer people are able to harness their anger in order to fight against material injustice, is Jonah able to do the same? As the Biblical text stands the answer is simple; no. Why not? Where does Jonah go wrong? From its first expression it is clear that Jonah’s anger, rather than being directed at the world around him (with the potential to change the world), is directed inwards. In his prayer to YHWH, Jonah begs for death; “O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (4:3). This misdirection of anger is one that many LGBT+ people can empathise with; the anger and frustration which queer people experience can, without proper outlet, turn inwards, combining with internalised homophobia and transphobia to disastrous effect. Jonah’s anger turns inwards, I suggest, because he remains under God’s abusive captivity, as the next section will explore.

### Jonah in Torment

In the middle of chapter four, the text presents us with one of its most absurd and enigmatic sequences;

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry

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<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” (4:6-8).

The modern reader’s confusion begins with the word קיקיון. The word is a hapax legomenon, and while the *qiqayon* is clearly a plant, the identity of the species to which it belongs continues to confuse scholars, although most have ceased to believe an exact botanical identification is worth searching for. In any case, whatever the identity of the miraculously growing plant may be, Jonah immediately becomes fond of it and the shade it provides (וישמח ‘and he was glad’). Why exactly Jonah is so very pleased with the *qiqayon* is a puzzle; we were told just a verse ago that ‘Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there.’ (4:5). Perhaps Jonah’s construction skills are less than satisfactory and the small hut he built proved a feeble defence from the Near Eastern sun. Whatever became of Jonah’s booth, he clearly takes great comfort in the sudden appearance of the *qiqayon*; his previously intense anger is temporarily assuaged. According to Sasson, ‘the plant certainly gives Jonah a welcome shade from the sun [...] but he also derives pleasure from it because the plant is symbolic of God’s care when, once, he felt forlorn and abandoned.’<sup>223</sup> I agree with Sasson that the *qiqayon* seems to symbolise more than just shade from the Near Eastern sun. However, I believe Sasson goes too far by suggesting the plant symbolises God’s care; in the light of God’s continuous abusive behaviour, the plant symbolises not God’s care, but a glimmer of hope that care from God is *possible*. Just as Jonah once seemed strangely grateful for being incarcerated inside a giant fish, he now seems inordinately happy about a plant, and for the same reason; in both scenarios his abuser has demonstrated the tiniest shred of kindness, and after prolonged abuse that small amount of humanity has a disproportionate effect on his psyche.

Of course, this positive turn cannot last. Like clockwork, God takes the small comfort of the *qiqayon* away from his prophet; as soon as the sun begins to rise the next morning the LORD assigns a תולעת (a crimson grub) to ravage the *qiqayon* and it dies (4:7). Here we can see a clear return of YHWH to abusive behaviour; He gives Jonah a small source of comfort, a tiny amount of room to breathe, and then quickly snatches it back in order to reassert the prophet’s captivity under him. As if the removal of this small comfort were not sufficiently cruel, God deliberately worsens Jonah’s material conditions, making them more unpleasant than they were before he provided the *qiqayon*, by sending a wind

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<sup>223</sup> Sasson, *Jonah*, 317.

from the east and intensifying the sun (4:8). Jonah's discomfort is clearly intense, as he becomes faint and returns to his desire to die (4:8). As if Jonah had not suffered enough, having been forced into a course of action which put his life in danger several times and which ultimately proved pointless, God now decides that a little more torment is necessary.

Once again, God's abusive behaviour is justified by suggesting it is for Jonah's own good. This time, however, this justification is expounded not only by conservative interpreters of the text but by the character of YHWH Himself. He asks Jonah if it is right for him to be angry, to which he responds, "Yes, angry enough to die." (4:9). In response to Jonah's reassertion of his anger, YHWH issues a speech which closes the narrative;

"You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (4:10-11).

Apparently Jonah has no right to be angry about his treatment as he played no part in growing the *qiqayon*. In addition, his concern for the plant purportedly reveals his hypocrisy, as he does not agree with God having been concerned for the city of Nineveh. At first glance, even if we do not agree with God's teaching methods, we may understand his position. It *does* seem unreasonable that Jonah is extremely upset about the death of a plant but wished for an enormous metropolis to be destroyed. However, on closer inspection this is a distortion of Jonah's actual position and feelings. Even Sasson observes this to be the case; 'God forces Jonah to focus on the *qiqayon* plant as the source of his dejection, when his despair actually comes from a combination of circumstances, the withering of the plant being only one of them.'<sup>224</sup> Jonah does not say himself that he is angry about the death of the *qiqayon*, rather this is God's suggestion; "is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" (4:9). Jonah does respond in the affirmative, but he became angry (4:1) and expressed his desire for death (4:3) before the *qiqayon* entered the narrative. The *qiqayon* relieved Jonah's unpleasant emotions briefly, and it is understandable that he becomes even more angry when this comfort is removed, but the

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<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

assertion that Jonah's anger is a result only of the death of the short-lived plant is, I suggest, an abusive tactic. By attributing Jonah's anger to 'the bush, for which [he] did not labour and which [he] did not grow' (4:10), YHWH minimises and trivialises Jonah's legitimate feelings. Jonah is angry because he has been emotionally and physically abused by the deity for four chapters, and because God relented from punishing the city which has continuously oppressed his people, *not* because a plant withered and died. God's manipulation of Jonah's anger in order to ridicule him resembles the ways in which queer anger is manipulated in order to further persecute LGBT+ people, as discussed above.

### A Text of Terror

Unfortunately, Jonah is not given the chance to defend himself and his anger; God has the last word. After Jonah's righteous anger has been trivialised and his position distorted the book comes to a close; Jonah's character is not allotted narrative space in which to explain his anger at God's forgiveness of Nineveh. In fact he is given no future beyond the end of the text, the fate of Jonah is left to the reader's imagination. By giving YHWH the last word, the text marginalises alternative perspectives in the mind of the reader. So far as we can make any meaningful guess as to the intentions of the text's author(s), it seems reasonable to assume that it is their intention to privilege the reading that Jonah's anger is unjustified. However, we as queer readers do not need to accept the hegemonic reading of the text, even if it is the one that the text itself seems to support. In producing a queer reading of the Book of Jonah, we have made the character of Jonah our own. We have projected queer thoughts, experiences, feelings, and anxieties onto his personal narrative and to turn and accept the hegemonic reading of the text now would be to betray his character and ourselves.

According to Sasson, 'most comforting [...] are the book's final images of a kindly God who will find time to teach the mysteries even to initially unpromising learners.'<sup>225</sup> Under Sasson's conservative interpretation, the text ends on a positive note; God will teach you even if you are unwilling. In the light of our understanding of God as an abuser throughout the text, such a reading is at best blissfully ignorant and at worst carelessly harmful. Even reading the text in a far less creative and far more traditional manner than we have, to look upon the final image of the book, an image of a man so physically and emotionally worn down that he actively craves death, and to find comfort in that image is reprehensible. Instead I suggest that, having moulded Jonah into our own queer

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

protagonist, we might understand the end of his narrative as a text of terror for queer people.

In *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Trible examines the Biblical stories of Hagar, Tamar, the unnamed woman of Judges 19, and Jephthah's daughter.<sup>226</sup> Trible identifies these stories as 'tales of terror with women as victims'.<sup>227</sup> She approaches the texts from a feminist perspective which 'recounts tales of terror *in memoriam* to offer sympathetic readings of abused women.'<sup>228</sup> Such an approach, she suggests, 'interprets stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again.'<sup>229</sup> The goals of Trible's feminist project resemble those of our queer endeavour; we too hope to 'recover a neglected history'. By suggesting that the Book of Jonah can be a text of terror for queer people, we acknowledge that the text is frightening, and that the sad fate of Jonah is one all too tangible for many queer individuals and communities. However, by reading the text in this way, by queering the character and the story of Jonah, we take a stand against hegemonic interpretation which has sought to stamp out queer understanding. By making Jonah our own, and by reading the end of his narrative with empathy, we reject interpretations like Sasson's which seek only to condone absolute heteropatriarchal power (in this case embodied by YHWH). Acknowledging the terror in this ancient text allows us to move forward with greater empathy and understanding, and, as Trible suggests, 'to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again.'<sup>230</sup>

### The Death of Jonah

As the narrative comes to a close, what becomes of Jonah? Does he stay outside the city of Nineveh in self-imposed exile, does he return to his homeland, or does he venture off elsewhere in search of a better existence? If we limit ourselves to the contents of the Biblical book, then we must admit that we do not know; YHWH has the last word and the fate of Jonah is unknown. However, while Jonah's death is not included in the Biblical narrative, he is found in a state of destitution at the end of the book. The last we hear as

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<sup>226</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

readers, Jonah is stranded outside of the city of Nineveh, exposed to the elements, experiencing severe discomfort, and craving an end to life. It seems reasonable to suggest that Jonah might have passed away not long after the narrative draws to a close, and if this is the case, what kind of death does the character of Jonah experience?

In chapter two, we compared Jonah's experience of incarceration to the experiences of two characters in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*; Skip and Jackrabbit. Sadly, before the novel ends, both of these characters come to untimely ends. Skip, when released from the institution for a weekend, takes his own life; 'Sunday morning early, Skip had slit his throat with an electric knife in the kitchen of his parent's home.'<sup>231</sup> Jackrabbit goes on defence; that is, fighting against the few remnants of Connie's oppressive society who seek to destroy Luciente's society. Having been unable to reach Luciente for some time, when Connie finally does make contact she learns that Jackrabbit has been killed while in battle.<sup>232</sup>

The reaction of the novel's other characters to the deaths of Skip and Jackrabbit are radically different. Sybil, a friend of Connie's on the ward, tells her 'that she had heard that [Skip's] father had been angry at Dr. Redding and called him a quack. They felt it was unacceptable for the hospital to send Skip home to kill himself in their kitchen.'<sup>233</sup> A father's distress at his son's suicide is understandable, of course, but the emphasis on the physical location of Skip's death, 'in *their* kitchen' (italics my own), suggests that his father may be more upset that Skip has been allowed to tarnish their domestic environment than that he has taken his own life. Skip's father is more concerned about the way his son's desperate actions reflect on *him*, rather than the loss of his child.

The loss of Jackrabbit, in contrast, is perceived as a tragedy, and the entire community of Mattapoisett comes together in mourning to celebrate his life. The people of Mattapoisett gather to share memories, feelings, poetry, and music all night, in celebration and commemoration of Jackrabbit, before his body is buried.<sup>234</sup> The many pages of Piercy's novel devoted to this ceremony indicate the importance of remembering Jackrabbit in this way, and demonstrate his position as a highly valued member of these

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<sup>231</sup> Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 286.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 307-22.

characters' community. This is in direct contrast with Skip's death, to which less than a page is dedicated,<sup>235</sup> indicating the peripheral and inferior status and oppressive material conditions of queer men like Skip in Connie's 1970s New York City.

If we suppose that Jonah dies not long after his mission to Nineveh, then whose death might his more closely resemble; Skip or Jackrabbit? Jonah's situation differs from both in that, so far as we know, he has no family, no friends, and no community to speak of. Jackrabbit is embraced by a loving and supportive community. Skip's situation is less than ideal, interred in an abusive hospital environment and with a family who seem, at best, indifferent. However, at least he is not completely alone, and might even be said to have a friend in Connie. Jonah, in contrast to both, has no community to speak of. Jonah has only his abusive god for company. In a sense, then, the circumstances of Jonah's proposed death appear bleaker than those of either of Piercy's characters. However, Jonah's situation might be said to more closely resemble Skip's, in that for both characters the perception of a father figure is a significant element. Jonah's father figure, YHWH, is just as unsupportive as Skip's. YHWH does not take Jonah's impulse towards death seriously, but instead chastises the beaten down prophet. We might imagine that, if Jonah were to die as a result of his self-imposed exile on the outskirts of Nineveh, God's reaction would mirror that of Skip's father. The abusive deity would likely be more annoyed that Jonah had tarnished his reputation with anger and failed to learn his lesson than He would be upset that Jonah had passed, considering the blatant disregard for Jonah's wellbeing He has demonstrated throughout the narrative. In both cases, the father figures demonstrate a greater concern for how the characters' deaths reflect on them, rather than grief over the deaths themselves. This is in direct contrast to the reception of Jackrabbit's death, with Jackrabbit's life being actively celebrated and his loss communally mourned.

This consideration of how Jonah's death might compare to the deaths of queer characters in a piece of twentieth century feminist literature is, of course, an exercise of creative speculation and reflection. However, for a consideration of Jonah's death more grounded in physical reality (if any Biblical interpretation can be said to be grounded in this way), we might travel to modern day Iraq. A prominent mound of the ruins of Nineveh, located within the city of Mosul, once supported the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus (Jonah), described by *The Atlantic* as 'one of Iraq's iconic monuments [...] revered by Muslims,

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-6.

Christians, and Jews alike.<sup>236</sup> According to at least one tradition, then, Jonah remained in the area surrounding the city of Nineveh until his death. This paints a bleak picture of Jonah's life; he was not able to return to his homeland where, we hope, he might have found a happier existence. If the Mosque marks the traditional final resting place of Jonah, then the tradition suggests the prophet lived out his final days outside the city he was sent to condemn. Under this understanding, while God did not directly fulfil Jonah's death wish by striking him down where he stood, he was happy for the prophet to stay and die in his hut outside of the city he hated. For Jonah himself, then, there is no happy ending. However, perhaps the erection of a place of worship at Jonah's purported resting place, and the naming of that place in his honour, demonstrates some level of respect and reverence for the prophet, and might hint at a reception of Jonah's death more akin to that of Jackrabbit's than Skip's. According to Samuel, Farah, and Lawandow, 'the tomb was much more than a tourist destination; it was a constant, potent symbol. Overlooking the city, it reminded all Maslawis of the interconnectedness of Iraq's diverse religious populations. It was the antithesis of sectarianism.'<sup>237</sup> Despite being a prophet who did not fit in and who was characterised by his anger and depression, Jonah was able to become a symbol of social harmony and acceptance. Having read the text with queer eyes, we might take comfort in this positive appropriation of Jonah's character.

However, on July 25<sup>th</sup> 2014, 'the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus, Biblical Jonah, was completely destroyed by terrorists of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant after they had already destroyed and looted the graves of prophet Yunus (Jonah) and prophet Shayth (Biblical Seth) on July 4<sup>th</sup>'.<sup>238</sup> ISIL destroyed the structure due to a belief that 'the mosque had become a place for apostasy, not prayer.'<sup>239</sup> ISIL have destroyed many ancient monuments, but the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus, in its symbolisation of religious tolerance and cooperation, is a particularly emblematic casualty of their terror. If the positivity surrounding Jonah's mosque gives us hope as queer readers, then the destruction

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<sup>236</sup> Sigal Samuel, Sarah Farhan, and Atoor Lawandow, 'ISIS Destroyed Jonah's Tomb, but Not Its Message', *The Atlantic* (24/07/2017), <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/tomb-of-jonah-mosul-isis/534414/>> [accessed 16/07/2018].

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> Abdelhak Mamoun, 'URGENT: ISIL destroys Mosque of Biblical Jonah, Prophet Yunus', *Iraqi News* (25/07/2014), <<https://www.iraqinews.com/features/urgent-isil-destroys-mosque-biblical-jonah-prophet-yunus/>> [accessed 16/07/2018].

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

of the mosque at the hands of fundamentalist terrorists reminds us of the dangers our hope faces. Indeed, ISIS has brutally persecuted the LGBT+ community, particularly gay men. CBS News report that ‘notorious for their gruesome methods of killing, ISIS reserves one of its most brutal for suspected homosexuals. Videos it has released show masked militants dangling men over the precipices of buildings by their legs to drop them head-first or tossing them over the edge.’<sup>240</sup> This brutal persecution of queer people reminds us that contempt for symbols of acceptance and unity, such as the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus, is not merely symbolic, but comes hand in hand with violent contempt for people who deviate from the heteropatriarchal status quo. The persecution carried out by ISIL demonstrates that, for LGBT+ people, terror is not confined to texts but is ever-present in the real world. While at present the situation for LGBT+ people in Britain is far less dangerous or threatening than the danger faced in Iraq, the violence perpetrated by ISIL serves as a reminder that the position of queer people is always precarious, and that until queer liberation is achieved worldwide, no LGBT+ people are truly free.

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<sup>240</sup> CBS News, ‘Inside look at ISIS’ brutal persecution of gays’, *CBS News* (2/12/2015) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-persecution-gay-men-murder-lgbt-muslim-society/>> [accessed 19/07/2018].

## Conclusion

In producing a queer reading of Jonah, we have embarked on a lengthy journey and covered a vast amount of textual, psychological, geographical and political space. The Biblical text itself, despite its diminutive length, is expansive in range. Geographically, the text explores an area ranging across the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world; from as far west as the Iberian peninsula (depending on how we identify Tarshish) to as far east as Nineveh, in modern day northern Iraq. This is a distance of over two thousand miles, and while perhaps not gargantuan in the modern, globalised world, it would have been perceived as enormous in ancient times. Moreover, the text crosses cultural and political lines as well as geographic ones; from the Israelite Jonah, to the gentile Sailors, to the repentant Ninevites, multiple cultures are represented. But by bringing this text into conversation with the experiences of LGBT+ people we have pushed the boundaries of its expanses further than ever. In our reading, we have drawn on the perspectives of people from corners of the globe as far apart as Kenya, the United States of America, and the Russian Federation, and we have engaged with the experiences of people of different genders, sexualities, cultures, and ethnicities. As a result of this textual expansion, many questions have been raised (and only some of them definitively answered), and as such there is much to take stock of as the reading draws to a close.

In chapter one we began to consider the nature of the Book of Jonah's central relationship; the relationship between Jonah and God. Characterising this relationship as a pseudo parent-child relationship set the foundation for a comparison of the relationship to the often fraught familial relationships of LGBT+ people, a comparison which is built upon throughout the reading. We then examined Jonah's decision to flee from God, with particular attention paid to the unusualness of a Biblical prophet fleeing from the deity rather than arguing their case. Here I drew an analogy between Jonah's decision to flee rather than argue and the difficulties that often arise for queer people engaging in activism. This discussion was, I believe, illuminating of the material privilege which is required for debate, and of the fact that such material privilege is often denied to LGBT+ people. We explored the ways in which, for queer people, flight is often a more viable option than to remain and fight the heteropatriarchy, an endeavour partly informed by Bronski Beat's 'Smalltown Boy'. As well as providing an opportunity to reflect on queer experience, I believe that this exploration also brought new understanding of the Biblical text itself; scholars continue to question Jonah's motivations, and I believe that the suggestion that his character's motivations might resemble those of LGBT+ people provides a new answer to this question. We then considered the symbolism of the ship to

Tarshish. I suggested that, for the fleeing Jonah, the ship and its crew represented a new community where he might find acceptance, just as the flight of queer people from familial homes is often in search of an accepting community. Of course, Jonah's time on the ship is tumultuous, and ends with the sailors throwing him into the ocean. In this, we found space to reflect on the instability of queer communities, and the forces both external and internal which destabilise them. Finally, before moving onto chapter two, we questioned the conversion of the sailors, who sacrifice and make vows to the Lord after being forced to throw Jonah into the depths. Here I argued that God made use of abusive methods in order to bring the sailors under his control, an argument which would be supported by later divine abuse in the narrative. I also drew a parallel here between the systematic abuse perpetrated by YHWH and the systematic abuse inflicted on LGBT+ people by hegemonic powers. This discussion foreshadowed chapter two, in which the abusive character of would be a major topic.

Chapter two was divided into two separate but related sections. First, I examined Jonah's psalm of thanksgiving and, building on a discussion which had begun in the previous chapter, argued that it was symptomatic of Jonah's captivity under an abusive deity. This argument was extensively informed by Judith Lewis Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, and I made what I believe to have been an illuminating comparison between the individual traumatic experiences of Jonah's character at the hands of God and the systemic trauma inflicted on queer people by the heteropatriarchal hegemony. I observed that extensive surveillance is essential to the execution of this kind of abuse, an observation informed by the Foucauldian theory of panopticism. I here suggested that the omniscience of God in Biblical literature is analogous to the mass governmental surveillance which has become a global truth in the contemporary world. Bringing the music of Anohni into the conversation here was enlightening with regards to the potential danger such extensive observation engenders for LGBT+ individuals and communities. With the help of Herman, I analysed the content of Jonah's psalm, arguing that his thankfulness resembled a common coping mechanism of abuse survivors; directing blame inwards in an attempt to rationalise abuse. I suggested that the emotional states experienced by Jonah's character resonate with queer experiences of societal abuse, and that Jonah's inability to take a stand in the face of systematic abuse resembled the disenfranchisement of LGBT+ achieved through persecution. We then moved on to a discussion of the *גדול* גדול, and the ways in which this big fish has been interpreted. First, we considered two common interpretations; the fish as living hell, and the belly of the fish as pseudo-womb, reflecting on the ways in which both of these readings might resonate with queer experiences. I then offered my own, novel reading of the fish, choosing to interpret Jonah's piscine

incarceration as a stint on a psychiatric ward. My reading of the fish drew extensively on the novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy. Two of Piercy's characters in particular, Skip and Jackrabbit, proved fruitful to the creative consideration of what a stay in psychiatric care might be like for the character of Jonah. Although this interpretation of the דג גדול was fantastical and, perhaps, absurd, I believe that it provided a space in which to expand our understanding of Jonah's experiences of abuse when reading with a queer eye, considering the historical and ongoing misuse of psychiatry as a tool in the maintenance of coercive control over the lives of LGBT+ people.

Chapter three opened with an exploration of the symbolism of both the city of Nineveh and of cities in general. I observed that, for the original intended audience of the text (so far as we can make an educated guess as to who this audience was), Nineveh would have symbolised imperial oppression and evil. I then made what I believe to be a reasonable association between Nineveh and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, an association particularly pertinent to a queer reading considering the historical understanding of the sin of anal sex between men. I argued that the problematic nature of such an association helped to illuminate the complex relationship of queer people to the concept of the City, which we then went on to examine. We observed that, in popular perception, the city offers a haven for queer communities, and, harking back to chapter one, that is often believed LGBT+ have little choice but to leave rural areas in favour of urban ones. I suggested, however, that this perception results in the marginalisation of rural LGBT+ people, and with the help of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, challenged any assertion that this queer metronormativity could be considered an unqualified good. We also observed that cities are political centres, and represent a consolidation of hegemonic power. In light of the discussion of mass surveillance, abuse, and coercive control in the previous chapter, this observation further complicated our understanding of the symbolic meaning of the City to LGBT+ people. This contemplation of the symbolism of Nineveh was enriched further through the application of Jasbir Puar's concept of homonationalism. Focusing back in on the character of Jonah, I suggested that a combination of these factors might be behind his wariness and repulsion from Nineveh, where we might have expected our queer protagonist to embrace the freedom that the city can offer. This discussion, I believe, provided some fresh insight into the possible reasons behind Jonah's unwillingness to go to Nineveh, as well as offering a chance to reflect on the significance of urban environments to LGBT+ experience. From here, we returned to the narrative itself and examined Jonah's prophecy, in particular questioning its diminutive length. I argued that the reason behind the lack of length is simple; Jonah never wished to make a prophecy in Nineveh, and can be seen here to be doing the bare

minimum. I suggested that Jonah's actions constituted an act of queer rebellion, perhaps analogous to taking action short of a strike. Here I believe that our queer reading of the text again provided a new answer to an old question. Next we interrogated the repentance of the Ninevites, and questioned its authenticity. I argued that the exaggerated performativity of the spectacle, including the participation of animals, pushed the narrative into the realm of camp, indicating the superficiality of the purported repenting. From there I drew a comparison with the phenomenon of pinkwashing, an equally inauthentic and superficial form of repentance which has notably been utilised by the Israeli government. Finally, we questioned the speedy relenting of God from his promised punishment. I suggested that confusion at this puzzling decision in the light of Nineveh's inauthentic repentance resonates with the frustration that queer communities feel with regards to the paying of lip-service to LGBT+ issues by hegemonic powers without commitment to material change.

In the final chapter we once again narrowed our scope, focusing in on the character of Jonah as an individual and his relationship with the deity, in line with the narrowing of the Biblical narrative. First, we examined Jonah's anger. I suggested that Jonah's anger is understandable, considering his subjection by God to a lengthy ordeal which resulted in little if any change, and argued that God's dialogue with Jonah in chapter four is intended to ridicule Jonah's argument in order to distract from its legitimacy. This argument was informed by a consideration of the ways in which the heteropatriarchal hegemony attempts to delegitimise justified queer anger. This analysis challenges the hegemonic readings of the text which attempt to characterise Jonah as the Angry Jew and thus perpetuate antisemitism. We observed that LGBT+ people have, at times, been able to galvanise their anger in order to bring about material change, and I suggested that Jonah is unable to do the same due to his ongoing captivity under the abusive YHWH. We then analysed the ways in which God continues to abuse Jonah in the final chapter, through his manipulation of the weather and the *qiqayon*. I came to the conclusion that, since God gets the last word and Jonah, the last we know, lies in intense physical discomfort craving his own demise, the Book of Jonah might function as a text of terror for queer people under our reading. Although such a characterisation of the text is disturbing, it does not need to be pessimistic; by reading the text in this way we might evoke empathy for LGBT+ experiences and challenge readings which seek only to maintain the heteropatriarchal norm. As the Biblical narrative drew to a close we considered what might have happened afterwards, focusing, perhaps morbidly, on Jonah's death. First, by bringing *Woman on the Edge of Time* back into the conversation, we reflected on what Jonah's death may have been like and how his death may have been processed by those around him. I

suggested that Jonah's death would likely resemble that of the character of Skip; that is to say his passing would be the icing on the cake of his rejection from society. However, I also suggested that in producing this queer reading of the text, and in treating his character with empathy, we might have made a transition towards a reception to Jonah's death that more resembles that of Jackrabbit's community. Perhaps, in the course of this reading, the prophet who did not fit in may have finally found a place, in the LGBT+ imagination. To conclude, we reflected on the recent destruction of the Mosque of the Prophet Yunus, said to mark the grave of Jonah and once a symbol of Mosul's unity, at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as well as the persecution of LGBT+ people at the hands of that same extremist group. This reflection, I suggest, provided a final reminder that the way we read Biblical texts is never just an academic exercise, and that the potential of queer readings, like the one offered here, to challenge the heteropatriarchal hegemony is vitally important.

In the course of this reading, I have attempted to offer some new answers to some old questions, and to bring some new voices into some very old conversations. I believe I have been successful in this endeavour, particularly with regards to the way in which we, as interpreters, understand the relationship between Jonah and his God. It is my hope that, by analysing this relationship as an abusive one, I have challenged the interpretative status quo and brought into focus the difficult aspects of divine behaviour in the narrative which conservative readings have commonly glossed over. This analysis offers new answers as to the nature of Jonah's thankfulness in chapter two, the source of his anger in chapter four, and his impulse towards death which permeates the entire narrative. I also believe that my use of contemporary companion texts, which have not previously been brought into conversation with the Jonah narrative, has enabled significant progress towards a reading of Jonah which can both speak to the experiences of LGBT+ people living in the twentieth-century and be informed by those experiences.

In the process of offering up new answers, a plethora of new questions have come to the fore, and much work remains to be done. When we suggest that Biblical character of God is abusive towards his chosen people, we are left with the question of what to do next. How can abusive behaviour in scripture be reconciled with belief in a loving deity? If a Biblical story functions as a text of terror for queer people, then how should faith communities move forward with the interpretation and application of that text? If a Biblical text can be said to reflect the traumatic experiences of LGBT+ communities, then how might we make use of that text to bring about material change in the circumstances of those communities? These questions are incredibly difficult to answer, and I do not feel

well placed to attempt to do so here, but the very fact that they have arisen in the course of this reading demonstrates just how vital and valuable such readings are.

Finally, it feels crucial to say that while I hope the queer reading of Jonah I have produced is a compelling one, it cannot be the definitive one. Although I have done my best to include a diverse range of voices in this reading, as a middle-class, masculine white person living in Scotland my perspective is, as all of our perspectives are, limited. I feel that one of the most important lessons to be taken from this project is that the formation of a queer Biblical studies must be collaborative, inclusive, and international. We must continue to elevate the voices of marginalised LGBT+ people worldwide, to ensure that queer Biblical studies does not become another field dominated by a hegemony of white, Western academics, and so does not come to resemble the very structures we intend for it to struggle against.

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