

IS YHWH FAITHFUL TO ISRAEL?  
JOEL AND JONAH'S USE AND NON-USE OF EXODUS 34:6-7

Joseph Ryan Kelly

Introduction

Among the many texts in the Hebrew Bible that demonstrate the phenomenon of biblical intertextuality, the ancient Israelite creed of Exodus 34:6-7 stands out because of the frequency and prominence of texts that quote or make some kind of reference to it.<sup>1</sup> The use of this creed throughout the Hebrew canon has received extensive scholarly attention in the past fifty years, particularly its use in the prophetic corpus.<sup>2</sup> Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2 are exceptional among texts which reference Exodus 34:6-7 in that they share a unique relationship, not only with the Exodus creed, but also with each other.

Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2 share a nearly identical text-form of Exodus 34:6. Both texts recognize YHWH to be “gracious” (חַנּוּן) and “compassionate” (רַחֻם), reversing the order in which these attributes are recorded in Exodus 34:6.<sup>3</sup> Both texts continue with the adjectival

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<sup>1</sup>This paper assumes the priority of Exodus 34:6-7 (whether chronological, literary, or theological) to other biblical texts which quote or otherwise reference it. Lists of texts actually quoting Exodus 34:6-7 vary, largely due to the fact that no established criteria exist to distinguish between various types of intertextual references. The following list represents the most popularly recognized references among commentators: Num 14:18; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3; Neh 9:17.

<sup>2</sup>Robert C. Dentan, “Literary affinities of Exodus 34:6f,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13 no 1 (January 1963), 34-51; Thomas B. Dozeman, “Inner-biblical Interpretation of Yahweh's Gracious and Compassionate Character,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 no 2 (Summer 1989), 207-23; Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Scribal Wisdom and Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve,” In *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, Edited by Leo G. Perdue, Bernard Brandon Scott, and William Johnston Wiseman, 31-49. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Susan Marie Pigott, “God of Compassion and Mercy: An Analysis of the Background, Use, and Theological Significance of Exodus 34:6-7,” PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995; Paul R. House, “The Character of God in the Book of the Twelve,” In *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, Edited by James D. Nogalski and Marvin Sweeney, 125-45. SBL Symposium Series 15 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); Jan P. Bosman, “The Paradoxical Presence of Exodus 34:6-7 in the Book of the Twelve,” *Scriptura* no 87 (2004), 233-43; Paul R. House, “God's Character and the Wholeness of Scripture,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 23 no 1 (Spring 2005), 4-17; Nathan C. Lane, “Exodus 34:6-7: A Canonical Analysis,” PhD diss., Baylor University, 2007. [https://beardocs.baylor.edu/bitstream/2104/5070/1/Nathan\\_Lane\\_phd.pdf](https://beardocs.baylor.edu/bitstream/2104/5070/1/Nathan_Lane_phd.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>This reversal also occurs in Psalm 145:8 and Neh 9:17.

phrases “slow to anger” (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם) and “abounding in steadfast love” (בְּרַחֲמֵי רַדְדָה). Following these phrases, Joel and Jonah depart from the language of Exodus 34:6 which includes the noun “faithfulness” (אֱמֻנָה) as a second object of the previous prepositional phrase, and instead they read “relenting from evil” (עָלֵהּ מִרָעָה). Another significant similarity is the phrase “who knows he may turn and relent” (מִי יָדַע יָשׁוּב וְנָתַם) found in Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9. These similarities demonstrate not only an intertextual relationship with Exodus, but also a “mutual interrelationship” between Joel and Jonah.<sup>4</sup> This paper will explore the theological significance of the intertextual web created by these and other texts along with the new contexts in which earlier verses are brought or into which they are invited.

### Methodological Concerns

When dealing with intertextuality, it is common for modern interpreters to pursue a reconstruction of the sequence of events which led to the final form of the text. The interpreter attempts to discover which text is dependent on another, previously existing text. Determining which text is chronologically prior enables the modern interpreter to draw conclusions about the hermeneutical activities of the ancient interpreter(s). In the case of Joel and Jonah, this activity is nigh impossible to carry out. First, both texts belong to a common period in Israel's narrative and are notoriously difficult to date.<sup>5</sup> Second, there is little about the texts themselves that would aid in uncovering dependency. For example, Dozeman identifies how similar criteria for determining dependency based on literary structure have resulted in opposite conclusions with these

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<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Magonet, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah*, 2nd ed. Bible and Literature Series, 8 (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 77.

<sup>5</sup>See the discussions by Hiebert and Magonet. Theodore Hiebert, “Joel, Book of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 878-79. Jonathan Magonet, “Jonah, Book of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 940-41.

particular verses.<sup>6</sup> While there are many interpreters who argue that the text of Jonah is dependent upon Joel,<sup>7</sup> many other interpreters argue the reverse.<sup>8</sup> The difficulty in assigning priority to either text, by means of textual dating or other criteria, has led some scholars to remain neutral,<sup>9</sup> if only until further research can shed greater light on these texts.

Interpretations of the intertextuality that exists between Joel and Jonah suffer when based solely on a methodology that requires the interpreter to attempt a reconstruction of the literary history of these two texts; the matter is too uncertain to produce any confident or hermeneutically significant results. Since “debate has focused primarily around tradition-historical issues to determine which book is prior,” Dozeman argues that “the function of these inner-biblical quotations within their present canonical context has for the most part been left unexplained.”<sup>10</sup> If a methodology unsympathetic to ambiguous data does not promote the interpretive enterprise, then a methodology must be pursued that can interact with uncertainty and still bring clarity to the text. Lyle Eslinger suggests that in a case such as this, “we are

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<sup>6</sup>See Thomas Dozeman’s comparison of Fishbane and Magonet’s criteria for determining literary dependency. Dozeman, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation,” 216 n. 23.

<sup>7</sup>Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 288; E. J. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 41; Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 345-6; Lane, “Exodus 34:6-7: A Canonical Analysis,” 115-7; James Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 218 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 273; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, trans. Waldemar Janzen, S. Dean McBride, Jr., and Charles A. Muenchow. Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 49.

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Achtemeier, “The Book of Joel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume VII: Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, Daniel, The Twelve Prophets*. Ed. By Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 319; Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined*, JSOT Supp. 236 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 169-72; Magonet, *Form and Meaning*, 77-9; John Strazicich, *Joel’s Use of Scripture and the Scripture’s Use of Joel: Appropriation and Resignification in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*. Biblical Interpretation Series, vol. 82. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 147-51.

<sup>9</sup>James L. Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible, vol. 24C (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 137; Dozeman, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation,” 216 n. 23; Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretations*. The Anchor Bible, vol. 24B (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 282-3; Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*. Word Biblical Commentary, 31. (Waco: Word Books: 1987), 503.

<sup>10</sup>Dozeman, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation,” 208.

compelled to read the literary connections as they appear: atemporally and without assumptions about vectors of dependence.”<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Joel and Jonah, there is no textual feature dictating the direction in which the reader must read these texts; the reader *could* approach either text as an inner-biblical interpretation of the other text.<sup>12</sup> Dozeman demonstrates this in his article by reading Jonah 3:1-4:11 as an inner-biblical interpretation of Joel 2:1-17 and then illustrating one way in which the order might be read in reverse.<sup>13</sup>

One goal of this paper is to provide a more thorough reading of Joel 1:1-2:17 as an inner-biblical interpretation of Jonah 3:1-4:11.<sup>14</sup> It will not be assumed that Joel is dependent on Jonah; rather, this paper will explore how a reader is invited to interpret Joel’s use of the unique text-form of Exodus 34:6 as an interpretation of Jonah’s use of it in 4:2, an invitation made possible by the final literary form of the text. The paper will begin by exploring Jonah 1:1; 3-4, focusing on parallels a reader is liable to make with other Biblical texts or traditions. This section will be followed by another section wherein Joel 1-2 is explored as an interpretation of Jonah 3-4. The paper will conclude by examining what role the context of Jonah and Joel had on their reading of Exodus 34:6-7, and how the context of modern readers can further shape their reading of Exodus

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<sup>11</sup>Lyle Eslinger, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Question of Category," *Vetus Testamentum* 42 no 1 (1992): 56. Benjamin Sommer critiques some of Eslinger’s claims but eventually affirms that in certain cases, “Eslinger’s suggestion that biblical scholars pay greater attention to questions of intertextuality is warranted and promises to be productive.” The intertextuality that exists between Joel and Jonah meets Sommer’s criteria for such a study. Benjamin D. Sommer, "Exegesis, Allusion and Intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible: A Response to Lyle Eslinger," *Vetus Testamentum* 46 no 4 (1996): 488.

<sup>12</sup>The question of the role of canonical order in the book of the Twelve may yet speak to the way in which the final form of the text invites the reader to encounter the texts. Christopher Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). The assumption within this paper is that this issue will not ultimately preclude a reading of the texts of Joel and Jonah that reverses canonical order.

<sup>13</sup>Dozeman, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation,” 209-18.

<sup>14</sup>While Dozeman provides a few keen insights when reading Joel as an inner-biblical interpretation of Jonah, insights which this paper does not ignore, Dozeman disregards some key features in the text of Jonah, not the least of which being an additional intertextual reference to Exodus, and as a result he under-interprets the movement from Jonah to Joel. This paper will attempt to complement Dozeman’s fine observations with greater attention to the interpretive complexities and possibilities of the text.

and their reading of Jonah and Joel.

### Jonah: Is YHWH Really Faithful?

When the book of Jonah begins, the reader is introduced to a major character in the story. “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1, ESV). This character is not unfamiliar to the reader of the Hebrew Bible as a prophet from Gath-hepher bearing the same name is recorded in 2 Kings 14:25. The reader establishes a connection between these texts and associates the activities of the Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 with the Jonah of our story. Jonah, to whom YHWH’s word has come, is a prophet who has prophesied on behalf of Israel during a time when Israel was ruled by a king who “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” and “made Israel to sin” (2 Kings 14:24). As the reader observes the similarities between Jonah 1:1 with the introductions to various prophetic books (Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1), the reader further identifies the Jonah of our story as an active prophet of YHWH. The significance of this connection will be explored later in the paper.

Aside from his role as a prophet, the introduction provides an interesting picture of Jonah in the presentation of his name. His name is the Hebrew word for “dove.”<sup>15</sup> No significance is immediately attached to this word as there are many different ways this word is used in the Hebrew canon. However, as the story progresses, the reader is drawn to a particular instance of the word. In Hosea 7:11, the dove is a symbol for Ephraim whose actions are “silly and without sense” because of his flighty character—trusting in Egypt, then trusting in Assyria. How can Jonah, who claims to fear YHWH “the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land,” believe that he can flee from YHWH (Hosea 7:12)? Jonah, like Ephraim, is “out of his mind”

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<sup>15</sup>Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, CD-ROM Edition, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson. (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

(לֹא יֵז לְב) Furthermore, Jonah's patronym associates him with the faithfulness of YHWH.<sup>16</sup> No details explain to the reader how they can associate Jonah with the faithfulness of YHWH. In fact, his actions quickly lead the reader to question what association, if any, exists between Jonah and YHWH's faithfulness. This question will also be revisited later in this paper.

Beginning in chapter 3, YHWH commands Jonah a second time to travel to Nineveh and "call out against it the message that I tell you" (Jonah 3:2). This time Jonah obeys the commission to travel to Nineveh, and, upon arriving, he proclaims a message of doom to Nineveh: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The reader quickly encounters the mass-repentance of Nineveh, beginning with the people and culminating in the king. The king reacts to Jonah's message by decreeing a fast of both food and water and that "everyone [should] turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands" (Jonah 3:8). The king's reaction is paradoxical. On the one hand, the king knows nothing of the deity who has sent Jonah. Jonah's short message did not even include the deity's name. On the other hand the king seems familiar with the character of YHWH; he presumes that Nineveh's repentance might move YHWH to relent from his disaster.<sup>17</sup> His assumptions are correct, and God does relent from the disaster he planned to do.

All of this sets the stage for Jonah's prayer in which he reveals his motive for attempting to flee from YHWH's presence. Up to this point in the story the reader has not been informed as to why Jonah initially refused to follow YHWH's commission to go and call out against the city

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<sup>16</sup>Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung*, Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament III vol. 10, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928; reprint, Hildensheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 162.

<sup>17</sup>This familiarity is not necessarily with Exodus 34:6, unless he anticipates Jonah's particular articulation of this verse. More likely, his reaction reflects the image of YHWH as it is understood in Jeremiah 18:1-8. However, it is interesting that in Jonah 3:9 the king of Nineveh echoes the words of David after the loss of his son with Bathsheba. "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'" (2 Sam 12:22) In this text, the possibility that God might relent is based on David's conviction that God is "gracious" (רַחֲמִים), one of the divine characteristics listed in Exodus 34:6 and repeated in Jonah 4:2.

of Nineveh. Jonah's prayer reveals that it was his knowledge of the character of YHWH that motivated his flight. The reader establishes three connections between Jonah's prayer and Exodus which play an important role in how the reader understands the actions (and inactions) of Jonah. The first two connections relate to Jonah's description of YHWH's character, the third relates to the words which frame the description.

The reader recognizes Jonah's description of the character of God as a reference to Exodus 34:6. Of the five characteristics attributed to YHWH in the passage, four of them are reiterated by Jonah with only a slight variation in order. In place of the fifth characteristic, Jonah describes God as "relenting from disaster" (וַיִּגַּדְם עַל־הַרְעָה) While this phrase is not original to Exodus 34:6, the reader recognizes this as part of the same story. In Exodus 32:12, Moses implores YHWH not to destroy Israel saying, "Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster (וַיִּגַּדְם עַל־הַרְעָה) against your people." A shift in the mood of the verb, from a niphil imperative to a niphil participle, accounts for the only textual difference between Exodus 32:12 and Jonah 4:2. That YHWH did relent in Exodus, and that he is found two chapters later describing his gracious and compassionate character demonstrate that Jonah's understanding of YHWH's character is informed by his willingness to relent.

The reader is pressed to consider the absence of the fifth characteristic from Exodus 34:6—"faithfulness" (אֱמֻנָה)—and the presence of "relenting from disaster" in its place. Can the omission of "faithfulness" be a mere oversight on Jonah's part? The reader might find little significance in this omission were it not for the fact that Jonah is known as the son of YHWH's faithfulness. The text is shaped in such a way that the interpreter should not ignore the absence of this divine attribute. Indeed, Jonah has not carelessly omitted the one divine attribute for which he is known; he has intentionally amended the creed. From Jonah's perspective, YHWH has

subverted his own faithfulness through his willingness to relent from the evil he had intended for Nineveh. Jonah's emendation accuses YHWH of acting unfaithfully toward his people Israel. Apart from this understanding, the reader can make little sense of Jonah's use of Exodus 34:6 as an accusation. If Jonah were strictly upset about the divine attributes in Exodus 34:6, neither Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 nor the background information of Jonah's prophetic ministry found in 2 Kings 14:23-27 would fit the story. Jonah will assert "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (2:9) when Israel or one of its inhabitants is on the receiving end of YHWH's salvation. Jonah's prophetic ministry is characterized by declaring YHWH's faithfulness to Israel, *even in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness* (2 Kings 14:23-27). Jonah is indeed familiar with the gracious and compassionate character of YHWH and has a favorable attitude towards it *when it results in YHWH's solidarity to Israel*. Jonah takes issue with this character only when it leads YHWH to act in a way Jonah would characterize as unfaithful. That YHWH would relent from any evil he had intended to do to Nineveh is an act of unfaithfulness in the eyes of Jonah. To establish the validity of this assertion, it is necessary to explore the third connection between Jonah's prayer and Exodus.

Framing Jonah's reference to Exodus 34:6 and 32:12 is a reference to Exodus 14:12.

Jonah echoes the words of Israel when they were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's army.

Exodus 14:12

הֲלֹא־זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ בְּמִצְרַיִם . . . כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבֹד אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מִמָּוֶתנוּ בַּיַּד בְּהַרְגוֹתֵנוּ  
 "Is not this what we said to you in Egypt. . . . For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Jonah 4:2-3

אָנָּה יְהוָה הֲלֹא־זֶה דְּבָרִי עֲרִהְיֹתִי עַל־אֶרֶץ מִתְּיָי . . . כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי  
 "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? . . . For it is better for me to die than to live."

Both texts begin with an assertion regarding a word (רָבָר with pronominal suffix, preceded by

הַלְלוּ־אֶת־יְהוָה) previously spoken which is followed by the location in which that word was spoken. Each text then summarizes the content of that previously spoken word and concludes with a “better...than” (כִּי טוֹב . . . מִן) phrase. By echoing the words of Israel during the Exodus, Jonah reveals his function in the story. Jonah is not merely a representative from Israel; Jonah represents Israel. The fact that Israel’s words have been placed in his mouth indicates to the reader that this story is not about YHWH and Jonah; it is about YHWH and Israel.

Jonah’s use of Exodus 14:12 does more than reveal his function in the book as representing Israel, it reveals something about the attitude of Israel that motivated the composition of the book.<sup>18</sup> In Exodus 14:12, Israel fears death and prefers to live under the oppressive reign of Pharaoh. Jonah’s request presents a reversal of this attitude; Israel now fears life and prefers death. This is best explained in light of YHWH’s willingness to relent from his planned disaster upon Nineveh. “Jonah, who had announced the greatness of Israel’s future (2 Kings 14:25), was now being called upon to offer a future to the very country that had put an end to that glorious vision of Jonah’s (see 2 Kings 17).”<sup>19</sup> Neither Jonah nor Israel can face the reality of what lies ahead; to continue to go on living means to live under the rule of a foreign nation.<sup>20</sup> That YHWH would extend his grace and compassion to Nineveh and that they would

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<sup>18</sup>“Those for whom the narrative was conceived in the first place, namely, the ideologists of Jerusalem, must have been perfectly attuned to Jonah’s reaction. The *grandeur* of Jonah lies in the fact that such a stance, although rejected by the author, is not subjected to wholesale ridicule.” André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 144 n. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah: A Theological Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 23.

<sup>20</sup>Assuming the historicity of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, this begs the question of whether Jonah was aware of Assyria’s immanent role in Israel’s destruction. Marvin Sweeney claims that “Jonah as a prophet is expected to know that Assyria will destroy his homeland Israel.” Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1. Berit Olam (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 329. But why is Jonah “expected” to possess this knowledge? Perhaps this is a presumption on the part of the reader. However, it is equally presumptuous to assume that Jonah is ignorant of Assyria’s role in YHWH’s future plans for Israel. Jonah was clearly privy to YHWH’s plans regarding Nineveh (Jonah 1:2). As a prophet of Israel, it is possible that YHWH has informed him what lies in store for Israel if they do not repent. Ultimately, it is presumptuous to assume that a conclusion either way can be arrived at with absolute certainty. Even if Jonah was ignorant of Assyria’s immanent destruction of Israel, the reader is not. The reader, aware of Assyria’s role in the history of Israel, brings this knowledge to the text. The ancient rabbis make use of this knowledge when they place the following thoughts into the mind of Jonah: “I will go outside the land,

thus be allowed to conquer Israel is the ultimate affront to YHWH's faithfulness in the eyes of his people. This perception of YHWH's unfaithfulness leads Jonah to recapitulate Israel's rejection of YHWH in the wilderness; only this time, the rejection is meant to be permanent. If it comes down to serving YHWH under the rule of a foreign nation or non-existence, Israel would rather cease to exist. Jonah's death wish demonstrates an increase in Israel's rebellion; Israel has completely rejected YHWH's rule.

This study has already demonstrated how omissions can play an important role in interpreting biblical intertextuality. In light of the arguments above, it is worth exploring the significance of the absence of the latter portion of the Exodus creed. In its original context, the creed's construction provides balance between YHWH's grace and his wrath. Jonah does not seem to grasp that Israel, as much as Nineveh, is susceptible to both the gracious *and* the wrathful aspects of God's character. The absence of Exodus 34:7b is not a careless oversight on Jonah's part; it is a calculated omission. Jonah dares not implicate YHWH's people and thereby vindicate YHWH for allowing Assyria to conquer Israel. Jonah's accusation requires that he only be conversant with the first half of the creed.<sup>21</sup>

The conclusion of the book of Jonah is anything but a conclusion. Nineveh, unaware of YHWH's decision to relent from his evil, will starve themselves to death over the next forty days in hopes of achieving what has already been achieved; their salvation could become their own destruction. Jonah watches on in anticipation. During this time, YHWH attempts to help Jonah understand his own desire to show compassion on Nineveh by creating a scenario in

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where the Shekinah does not reveal itself. For since the Gentiles are more inclined to repent, I might be causing Israel to be condemned." *Mekilta, Pisha* 1:80-82. Unless Jonah were to have been written within the short fifty year time span between Jonah's prophetic ministry and the destruction of the northern kingdom, it is reasonable to assume that this information is expected to be a part of the reader's hermeneutical framework.

<sup>21</sup>Reed Lessing observes that Jonah also excludes "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:7). "Jonah exhibits the habit of confessing his sin only partially; he never fully lays his guilt before God." R Reed Lessing, *Jonah*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 370. All of this illustrates an unwillingness on the part of God's people to recognize their own guilt.

which Jonah pities a plant. YHWH compares his compassion for Nineveh to Jonah's compassion for the plant. He asks Jonah, in light of his own pity for the plant, if Jonah can explain why YHWH shouldn't pity Nineveh. Jonah's silence suggests that he is unmoved by YHWH's question. But this is where the book ends, and the reader is left wondering what, if anything, will convince Jonah that YHWH's compassion is justified and that YHWH is indeed faithful.

### Joel: Compassion in the Final Hour

Joel's use of Exodus 34:6 offers the same grace extended to Nineveh to YHWH's people in the wake of a violent attack with still a greater threat—the day of YHWH—looming on the horizon. Dozeman proposes that “when read inner-biblically Joel's call for Judah to seek Yahweh's grace picks up where Jonah ends, with the prophet himself now becoming the object of Joel's oracle.”<sup>22</sup> Jonah has yet to respond to YHWH's final question (Jonah 4:11), and YHWH now demands an answer. Jonah/Judah's rebellion against YHWH now leads YHWH to plan a new evil, this time against Judah.<sup>23</sup>

Joel paints an ominous picture in 2:1-11. The army of YHWH has assembled and the day of YHWH is near. Where before Jonah threatened Nineveh with YHWH's destruction, now YHWH threatens Judah with destruction brought about by Assyria.<sup>24</sup> After describing in great detail the immanent danger Judah faces, Joel calls Judah to imitate the actions of Nineveh when they received their own oracle of doom. In similar fashion to the king of Nineveh, Joel has called for Judah to don sack cloth and cry out in lamentation to God (1:13-14); no one is to be

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<sup>22</sup>Dozeman, *Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, 217.

<sup>23</sup>In the previous section it was argued that Jonah represents Israel. This connection was made as a result of an intertextual connection observed between Jonah's words and those of Israel's as they were on their exodus journey. At that point in Israel's history there was no distinction between Israel and Judah. Thus Jonah's role in representing Israel could be understood holistically, including both the northern tribes of Israel *and* the southern tribe of Judah, even though this division existed during the days of Jonah.

<sup>24</sup>Though Babylon eventually carries out YHWH's destruction of Judah, Assyria is the initial threat following Jonah's prophetic ministry (see 2 Kings 18).

excluded (2:15-16). Just as the beasts of Nineveh were not to feed nor drink water because of Nineveh's great evil (Jonah 3:7), the beasts of Judah are to thirst and hunger for the sins of their owners (Joel 1:18, 20).

Having painted an utterly hopeless situation, one strikingly similar to Nineveh following Jonah's oracle of doom, Joel echoes the very word that Jonah despised. Only now, YHWH's wrath is not being declared by Jonah; it is being declared to him and his people. When presented to Judah, this word cannot offend; it can only save. This is what Dozeman calls the "eleventh-hour quest to secure life and renewal for the covenant community."<sup>25</sup> Joel presumes upon YHWH's character that Judah's repentance can result in YHWH's salvation "yet even now" (2:12). If YHWH desires to pity Nineveh, how much more should he not desire to pity Judah (2:17)?

When read inner-biblically, Joel's understanding of YHWH's character demonstrates that Jonah's anger over Nineveh's salvation is unnecessary. That YHWH would relent from his evil for Nineveh does not solidify his resolve to bring an evil against his own people. The future is still open regarding Judah; YHWH has not arrived at a verdict he would not be willing to recant. It is possible that Judah may find itself on the receiving end of YHWH's grace (2:14), even in the eleventh-hour.

Jonah refused to acknowledge YHWH's faithfulness because he believed Nineveh's salvation secured the verdict for his own people. Indeed, Israel did experience God's wrath at the hands of the Assyrians. But when Assyria threatened Judah, YHWH responded to the cries of Hezekiah by saving Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 19). YHWH ultimately demonstrates faithfulness, not by saving a people who refuse to recognize their own sin, but by his willingness to respond when they demonstrate repentance (Joel 2:18-27). The very thing Jonah believed subverted the

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<sup>25</sup>Dozeman, *Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, 217.

faithfulness of YHWH becomes the very thing which offers hope to YHWH's people. In the end, YHWH's faithfulness needs no vindication; the prophet calls YHWH's people to recognize that they, not YHWH, have been unfaithful.

### Conclusion

The book of Jonah teaches that the character of God is not nationalistically conditioned; YHWH will act on his character toward any nation. The book of Joel helps Israel see YHWH's faithfulness during a time in which it appears that YHWH is unfaithful. Together, the books serve to demonstrate YHWH's character revealed in Exodus 34:6-7 and how this can best be understood. Their mutual interrelationship demonstrates a serious struggle on the part of YHWH's people to understand YHWH and themselves in light of YHWH's grace toward the nations and wrath toward his own people. While Israel's preference is to focus on the first half of the Exodus creed, these texts demonstrate that YHWH will not allow Israel to forget the seriousness of the second half.<sup>26</sup>

The biblical intertextuality between Joel and Jonah is a difficult issue. This paper has attempted to interpret the text without assuming that interpreters possess a vector of dependence upon which they can conclusively base their interpretation. In other words, the interpretations set forth in this paper are sometimes a result of the reader's perception of the text and not of its historical development. In comparison to the particular reading of the texts in this paper, Dozeman makes different connections and draws different conclusions based on the direction in which he reads these texts. Does allowing the reader to choose the direction in which he reads these texts concede too much hermeneutical ground to the reader? The more

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<sup>26</sup>Most references to Exodus 34:6-7 in the Hebrew canon do not balance YHWH's grace with his wrath. The second portion of the creed is often, though not always, excluded in Israel's literature.

pressing question to be asked is if these texts, as they exist canonically, were even meant to be read in a particular order. If, given the sophistication of modern critical methods of interpretation, scholarship cannot definitively conclude the appropriate historical order in which these texts were originally produced, and given the absence of any other literary clues, is it not reasonable to conclude that ancient interpreters were not expected to either?<sup>27</sup> Even if more sophisticated methods of interpretation in the future are able to shed new light on this ancient interpretive puzzle, is it not reasonable to expect such “enlightenment” to have been unavailable to those responsible for the final editing and arranging of the canonical form of these texts? Assuming the validity of an affirmative answer to these questions, the question of hermeneutical freedom when determining how these texts are to be read is no longer an option, but rather a necessary component to their interpretation.

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<sup>27</sup> Other, non-historical concerns may have played a role in ancient hermeneutics. See above, note 12.

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